

Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems

Volume 29 | Issue 2

Article 5

12-31-2017

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Recommended Citation

Hillgren, Per-Anders (2017) "Democratizing the City. Democratic configurations and imagination," *Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems*: Vol. 29 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://aisel.aisnet.org/sjis/vol29/iss2/5>

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Reflection note

Democratizing the City

Democratic configurations and imagination

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1 Introduction

Through the platform Malmö Living Labs I have had the privilege to elaborate on opportunities for how to democratize processes of change and innovation in the urban sphere for more than ten years. Being located at a design school rather than within computer science have provided me with the freedom to drift where I sometimes have focused more explicitly on how digital technology might be part of improving life conditions for citizens, but at other times I have got the ability to engage more in social innovation; e.g.; how new practices, processes or forms of collaborations could increase common value in different neighbourhoods. A crucial aspect of these democratic endeavors has been the idea that democracy needs to be built on plurality, that is, contested and radically different opportunities for change (Mouffe 2000; 2009). I will in this essay argue that this needs to be reflected in our co-design methodology and that we have to build a repertoire of approaches for how we can include diverse groups and their different perspectives in urban development processes. However I will also argue that this is not enough; if we really want to widen our democratic options as well as be able to address some of the more urgent societal challenges, then we also need to expand our capacity for imagination.

2 Democratic configurations

In Malmö Living Labs my colleagues and I have explored how different democratic configurations for change could come into play. The term configuration is here relating both to the

Accepting editor: Magnus Bergquist

specific shape of socio- material networks and the agency and formation of identity that unfold in them (Suchman 2012). These are configurations that in some sense or another either enhance marginalized people's opportunity to influence innovation processes or that more explicitly articulate alternative accounts and a wider repertoire of 'alternative futures' to choose from, or that elaborates on- and suggest new forms of subjects and identities. To a large degree the inspiration for this has come from Science Technology Studies. For example, inspired by the notion of infrastructuring we have paid attention to how we artfully, flexible on a long term basis can interweave contexts, processes and diverse groups of people, their needs and competences (Hillgren et al 2016; Karasti & Syrjanen 2004). Also, from Actor Network Theory (ANT) we have learned to disrespect domain boundaries and challenge what have been black boxed, purified and taken for granted and rather create a better understanding of the intertwined networks of agency in co-design processes (Binder et al 2011; Björgvinsson et al 2010; Emilson et al 2014; Yndigeñ 2016).

On a more practical level these approaches has inspired and guided a lot of design interventions and community engagements including a long term collaboration with a hip-hop collective and a multi ethnic immigrant NGO. With the first group we explored how a wide variety of technology potentially could strengthen their voices in the urban realm. With the latter group we explored how a self-organized NGO (where the majority of the members where unemployed and had limited skills in Swedish) could be seen as a resource for society. Together with them we among other things investigated how they with their skills in Afghan culture and language could support newly arrived immigrant orphans from Afghanistan. We saw these interventions as prototypes for alternative value production in the city and many of them were also successful in the sense that they demonstrated possibilities that were well rooted in concerns and ideas in local neighborhoods and communities. For example regarding the collaboration relating to the immigrant orphans, both the orphans, the members in the NGO and several civil servants agreed that the women group were able to contribute with important values for the refugee orphans compared to what the public and private institutions were able to deliver. However, despite these validated values, the ideas and prototypes that emerged in both this particular case (and in several other cases) failed when we tried to scale or implements them.

I would argue that one reoccurring reason behind the failures described above relates to what Star and Ruhler talk about as infrastructural breakdowns concerning second- and third order issues, that is, communicational breakdowns between contexts or between 'schools of thought' (Star & Ruhler 1996). These situations occur within a configuration of actors situated in different context and/or holding very different worldviews. One common example of breakdown between schools of thoughts that has been highlighted by many civil servants in our work in Malmö Living Lab is the clash between New Public Management¹ (NPM) and more open ended, iterative and designerly approaches. The last five years my colleagues and I have also spent increasingly more time to try to deal with these second- and third order issues. This is a complex, hard and time consuming mission though it deals not only with tricky political questions, but also concerns personal and professional identities in communities of practice, existential issues as well as internalized and taken for granted worldviews. The first steps in this journey has been to broaden our alliances and working even more interdisciplinary with a stronger focus on the public sector and collaborations with policy makers and politicians. One concrete approach has been to run what we have termed Co-Labs²—a seminar series with the aim of supporting ongoing innovation projects, where we ensure that we already from the beginning engage people

that are situated in different contexts and on different levels in the hierarchy. This includes civil servants working on the operational level, but also managers with different mandates and power to make decisions and implement strategies. Together they have got the opportunity to engage in double loop learning (Schön & Argyris 1996), where they move beyond an efficiency focus and rather take a step back and start questioning basic assumptions, norms and values that guide their actions.

3 Expanding the capacity for imagination

I believe that the kind of joint reflective processes discussed above can trigger some smaller changes and address second (and to some degree third) order issues. However, if we would consider to combine our engagements for democratizing urban innovation with the urgency of some of the more pressing societal challenges, things will get more delicate. For example, environmental scientists Gerst, Raskin and Rockström argue that if we really want to limit our pressure on the social-ecological systems and maintain a safe operating space within the planetary boundaries, then it's not enough to continue with what they call conventional development. A development path that supports sustainability through policy reform and traditional technology driven development with continued urbanization and economic growth and that don't consider any significant changes in the basic institutional elements and value systems. Instead they suggest a path of great transition that builds on a fundamental reassessment and change of lifestyle, values, and what is considered to be human well being (Gerst et al. 2013).

This is yet another clash between schools of thought that is even more difficult to address compared to different management approaches, since few people question economic growth, technical development and technical rationality as the basis for human welfare. However, I am not sure that it will be possible to reach a 'great transition' solely with reflections and double loop learning on basic values or through more inclusive configurations. Rather, if we want to pursue such a radical change, I believe that we also need to reconsider, on a more profound level, our language and our way of thinking, but also expand our capacity for imagination.

In the words of Donna Haraway: "It matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledge know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories." (Haraway 2016 p. 35).

Inspired by Marilyn Strathern, Donna Haraway's statement pinpoints the multifaceted pervasive entanglements and situatedness of our understandings of the world. What we can think is dependent on previous thoughts. What we can know is strongly related to established knowledge. Existing relations will determine new ones and so forth. These interlacings makes it incredibly hard to 'break free' and form new connections that in turn can provide new understandings of the world (ibid.). In a similar manner John Law discuss the difficulties of navigating in and finding a way out of what he terms as the 'hinterland', that is, a topography or geography of reality possibilities. Where "some classes of possibilities are made thinkable and real. Some are made less thinkable and less real. And yet others are rendered completely unthinkable and completely unreal." (Law 2004 p. 34). However, according to Law alternative realities could potentially have been able to emerge if the machinery of reality production had been configured

differently. Another problem is that it gets more and more expensive to ‘break free’ due to the accumulated, routinised and taken for granted investments that form the base of the hinterland (ibid.).

Both Haraway and Law bring forward imagination, new metaphors and figurations as an approach to widen our opportunities and Law argue that imagination is needed to foster variety and heterogeneity and that we need to “creating metaphors and images for what is impossible or barely possible, unthinkable or almost unthinkable. Slippery, indistinct, elusive, complex, diffuse, messy” (Law 2004 p. 6). A quite well known example that is used by Deleuze and Guattari (1994) and later Stengers is the metaphor of the ‘idiot’. The idiot resists common sense, slow things down and forces us into alternative forms of problem-awareness (Stengers 2005). The idiot might actually be an increasingly important metaphor today because, as Bruno Latour argue, the actual urgency of the climate crisis also urges us to start reflect slowly (Latour 2013). Today we can also see examples of a more elaborated and creative use of metaphors in the design community such as the design researchers Melisa Duque and Laura Popplow who have built further on the idiot and also brought in the metaphor of the ‘ghost’ as a way to create more rich encounters of their design interventions (Duque and Popplow 2017).

It’s not only new metaphors that are needed, we also have to reconsider what we recognize and acknowledge as rational. One intriguing example that has been illuminated by Helen Verran is how Australian aboriginals understand land tiles. Our western (taken for granted) conception of this is that land ownership best is solved through considering coordinates and rigid facts of quantification. However, for aboriginals, land is seen as a network of interconnected places and land ownership is better understood as something that is continuously performed by contestations of different metaphors. Also, according to aboriginal rationality, ‘the land owns them’ as much as ‘they own the land’ (Verran 1998). These are two very different ways to understand land ownership. What we can learn from this is that there are multiple systems of rationality in the world, that you need to be humble and not impose your own rationality on others, but also that this plurality might be a source of inspiration for how to challenge and widening taken for granted conceptions of ontology and epistemology.

4 Concluding remarks

I have in this essay tried to argue that if we really want to pursue a democratic change and simultaneously be able to deal with the urgent societal challenges that we face in the urban sphere today, then we have to invent and explore a wide repertoire of metaphors and alternative rationalities. In parallel we need to continue to elaborate on different democratic configurations that both include marginalized actors and their situated practices. This would increase our ability to imagine alternative futures and provide a broader democratic base of options to choose from, but it would also build both individual and collective resilience, that is, a capacity to handle unexpected events and be able to bounce forward and welcoming surprises and serendipity in times of crisis (Manyena et al 2011). As I see it, this would also be a very responsible approach, as there only are local, partial and situated perspectives from where we can know the world and be accountable for our knowledge and the importance then is to try to find multiple and diverse

local perspectives to start from (Haraway 1991, Suchman 2002). Some of these could emerge from imagination, metaphors and alternative rationalities and then the slow idiot might be one legitimate perspective to start being accountable from.

Notes

1. NPM is often associated with management approaches imported from the business sector that stress the importance of formulating clear and unambiguous goals that are possible to operationalize within given time frames and a strong command and control system (O'Flynn 2007, Stoker 2006).
2. Co-Lab is a format that is developed in collaboration with Forum for Social Innovation Sweden.

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