

Makers and Shapers or Users and Choosers Participatory Practices in Digitalization of Public Sector

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Abstract. The idea that public e-services are better off being designed with the potential users' needs in focus is today an almost unquestioned truth (user centered design maybe being the most frequent methodological toolbox). The idea that they are even better off being designed with the potential users in an almost equally established understanding (where participatory design could be claimed to be the most prominent methodology). However, in this paper the overall claim is that by a combination of updated design thinking, and development and participatory studies from outside the digital design discipline, a deepened and more nuanced understanding of participatory practices is presented. This is shown by an exploratory study on the design process of a public e-service to make the city accessible for its citizens and visiting tourists.

Keywords: Public e-services · Critical design · Participatory practices · Exploratory study

1 Introduction

For long we have argued for user involvement in IT design, already in 1984 Ives and Olson [1] made a literature review touching upon user involvement and indicators of system success, and since then many others have followed [2–4], among others. This knowledge has spread and merged with knowledge on public administration development and different development strategies of enhanced service delivery for citizens. Moreover, areas such as eParticipation [5, 6] and demand driven development of public e-services surface and sometimes blurs the intersections between democratic participation, customer focus and IS design [7]. The idea of putting the user/citizen/customer in the center seems to be easily shared on a narrative level, however, what it might implicate in practice in the context of public sector (in terms of complexities and methods) is still often left out of the story [7]. What is repeated is the story of a positive correlation between user involvement and quality, such as for example in one of the central policy documents of digitalization of public sector in Europe; The European eGovernment Action Plan 2011–2015 [8]. In the Action plan it is stressed that the imperative of “involving users actively in design and production of eGovernment services” [8: 7] and throughout the document the importance of a user presence is repeated over and over again in different shapes: involvement, empowerment, collaboration, flexible and

personalized, user satisfaction etc. From reasoning it is understood that user participation is perceived as fundamental. The line of thought is expressed as a strong need to “move towards a more open model of design, production and delivery of online services, taking advantage of the possibility offered by collaboration between citizens, entrepreneurs and civil society” [8: 3].

And of course, as this is in line with a lot of IT design research and practice it is both welcomed and appreciated by the community. However, as always when things seems to be going in what we perceive to be in the right direction and we easily can incorporate them in our established thinking there is an extra need for a nuanced and careful reflection; How come this happens now? Are there mechanisms that support this and what are then these mechanisms? And, is this only talk or is it supported in practice? With resources, methods, tools and deepened understanding of what is required in practice in order to not only let it be lip service?

All the questions above are in some way or another guiding the objective of this paper i.e. to dig deeper into the idea of participatory practices and do so with a critical approach. But the articulated aim is to challenge the established mechanisms of participatory approaches to design of public e-services, theoretically by an analytical framework, and in practice by an exploratory study.

The paper is structured as follows; first there is a section contextualizing participation in the design of public e-service by a brief analysis of how the idea is framed in six central policy documents on European and national level. Second, the theoretical framework of a combination of updated design thinking and development and participatory studies from outside the digital design discipline is put forward and argued for as missing pieces for understanding the intersections between democratic participatory ideals, market oriented target group ideals and user centered design orientations. Third, the set up of the exploratory study is presented in line with methodological reflections and the operationalization of the analytical framework. Next, the results of the study (performed in a Swedish municipality) is presented and discussed, followed by concluding remarks and thoughts of contributions.

2 Users, Citizens or Customers – Participatory Practices in Digitalization of Public Sector

As mentioned in the introduction the idea of an active participant in the development of information technology in general is far from new in the IS discipline [1–4] and the idea of an active participant in the development of public e-services is also rather well established in terms of research volume with for example a yearly international conference devoted especially to eParticipation issues and a vast amount of papers written with eParticipation as a key word [5, 6]. What is in focus here is therefore not to argue for, show evidence of, or analyze this area of research. Instead this section will be devoted to make a brief analysis of how this idea shows itself in crucial policy documents in Europe and the national case of Sweden, since the empirical case that will follow takes place in that context. The objective of this section is therefore to underpin and illustrate the statement that there is in fact an enhanced focus on user involvement in public sector digitalization, and also briefly show how it is framed.

Therefore, six texts are chosen, two on a European level and four Swedish policy documents (strategies and action plans) within eGovernment and digitalization of public sector. The texts included (see Table 1 below) are chosen because they are the ‘active’ policy documents at the time this paper is written and a very simple analysis is made in two steps. First, a search for instances of ‘user’ and ‘citizen’ in the document is made, secondly these instances are read through and a full sentence including either ‘user’ or ‘citizen’ is chosen to represent the kernel of how the document are arguing for participatory practices.

Table 1. Participation in eGovernment policy documents and digital agendas

Document	No. of instances	Bottom line
The European eGovernment Action Plan 2011-2015 SEC(2010) 1539 final (Communication from the commission to the European Parliament, the council, the European economic and social committee and the committee of the regions)	Users (15) Citizens (35) Customers(0)	“Public services can gain in efficiency and users in satisfaction by meeting the expectations of users better and being designed around their needs and in collaboration with them whenever possible.” (p. 16)
A Digital Agenda for Europe COM(2010)245 final, (Communication from the commission to the European Parliament, the council, the European economic and social committee and the committee of the regions)	Users (16) Citizens (31) Customers(6)	“European governments are committed to making user-centric, personalized, multi-platform eGovernment services a widespread reality by 2015.” (p. 31)
A Strategy for public agencies’ work on eGovernment (SOU 2009:86), Betänkande av E-delegationen, Stockholm 2009	Users (0) Citizens (52) Customers(2)	“In such a development citizens and entrepreneurs are not only seen as the “taxpayer” or “customers” but as competent citizens - in the same sense as employees or co-producers” (p. 37) “As such, the strategy lays the foundation for a demands-driven e-government.” (p. 38)
As Easy as Possible for as Many as Possible / Så enkelt som möjligt för så många som möjligt(SOU 2010:62)	Users (94) Citizen (69) Customers(148)	E-governance will help to facilitate contact between government and citizens and to be characterized by accessibility and usability.
A Digital Agenda in the Service of Man / En digital agenda i människans tjänst (SOU 2014:13)	Users (28) Citizens (11) Customers(1)	The assessment of the Digital Agenda is that there are good conditions for authors, suppliers of services and materials and end users to take advantage of digitization.
With the citizen in the centre / Med medborgaren i centrum	Users (5) Citizens (20) Customers(1)	“We must put the citizen at the high seat, and together become better at meeting their needs based on the person’s own circumstances. I [the IT-minister] want together with you to build a public service that puts the citizen’s needs and desires at the center.”

The above simple illustration has no intentions of being a deep and discursive analysis; it is only put forward to prove the case that the logic is repeated in similar ways in central documents. Still, it is possible to interpret the overall logic as: the citizens would use the e-services if they could be part of their creation and the underlying reason for the existence of e-services (and government IT spending on the creation of them) is articulated as “[public e-services] help the public sector develop innovative ways of

delivering its services to citizens while unleashing efficiencies and driving down costs” [8, p. 3]. The solution is as such expressed as making the development of public e-services demand driven, based on the thought of ensuring the usage by letting the users-to-be to state what services they want, need and will use (even though these three elements not always corresponds). Moreover, it is stated that “eGovernment, which is intended to simplify contacts with citizens and companies, should always be conducted on the basis of user needs and benefits...” [23, p. 6]. The statement in the remit is regarded as one such instance (among many) where demand driven development is emphasized. Related to this is also a fear that citizens do not use the e-services enough; “the majority of EU citizens are reluctant to use them [the public e-services]” [8, p. 3]. Thus, that the expected savings will not be realized and it is supposed, that if the citizens are somehow involved in the development of these services, they will also be more inclined to use them. And the importance of a user presence is repeated over and over again in different shapes: involvement, empowerment, collaboration, flexible and personalized, user satisfaction etc. [8].

There is however little agreement on what this involvement in the development of public e-services is and on how it will come about (the logic as such leaves a lot of room for further interpretations in the social practices the documents are to be realized in). It seems as if it is wanted by all, but no one knows exactly what it is, there are very few (if any) conceptual analyses resting on a critical stance analyzing how this notion is translated in practical settings (leaving a gap in between for practitioners to solve) [9]. This is of course part of the nature of policy documents, to be enacted and translated in their contextual settings [10]. Nevertheless, a number of actors, such as director generals, systems designers and various employees in public sector organizations, are about to realize the thought on different levels and the field of eGovernment research could contribute to their practices by deconstructing the idea and link it to practical undertakings.

As Gidlund [7] and Sefyrin et al. [11] have shown the question of who participates in participatory practices such as demands driven development, and on what grounds, determines much of the legitimacy for these projects in the wider democratic system. In the Swedish guidelines for demands driven development [12], it is stated that “A difficult question is how to find users who are representative for a target group and whose demands and wishes covers the demands of the whole target group. Additionally asking everybody is too costly. The point of departure should be that it is always better to have asked ‘some’ than not to have asked at all. One does not get a comprehensive image of the demands, but at least some general demands can be found” [12: 20]. Statements as the ones above shows that there is a need for further analysis on in what way the participation takes place and in the next section a combination of updated design knowledge and development and participatory studies is put forward as a rewarding analytical framework to address what is done today and what could be done tomorrow. Some things we are doing today are of course important to keep, while others are equally important to question and further develop if taking the idea of participation seriously.

3 Analytical Toolkit – Prepositions and Roles

In a recent article Sanders and Stappers [13] draws a picture of the design discipline from 1984 to 2044 (including user-centered design, participatory design, co-creation and several others), addressing both the what-question (results of designing), the who-question (the roles and professions), and the why-question (the values that guide design decisions). According to Sanders and Stappers all three questions could be illustrated by three phases. In 1984 we designed products (what), for consumers (who) guided by sales in marketplace (why). In 2014 we design interaction person-product (what), with users (who) to create sales and long-term relations (why). Their forecast is that in 2044 we will design multiple relations between people, products, services and infrastructures (what), by people (who) for multiple values not reducible to a single dimension (why). This of course raises questions on design thinking and design knowledge and the need for a new set of skills for digital designers. In this paper their use of three different prepositions (for, with and by) are used to shed some light on the ideas of participatory practices in the digitalization of public sector; where one dimension is their use of consumer, user and people (in relation to the use of citizen, consumer and user in the policy texts listed above) and the other dimension is the power position implied by the different terminology. A consumer chooses a certain product among other products, a user is involved in a certain degree in the design of the product whereas design by people implies that it is them themselves that makes and shapes the result of designing.

A similar discussion is put forward in a quite different setting, that of development and participatory studies, by Cornwall and Gaventa [14] and Cornwall [15] talking about “from users and choosers to makers and shapers”. Even though development and participatory studies are not especially focused on digital de-sign but on societal development in general and in most often in development region and countries [16] it holds several interesting reflections due to a longer time span of reflection. In the beginning, around 1940’s and 1950s development theory was mostly influence by colonial efforts and participation was seen as an obligation of citizenship, in 1960s and 1970s it changed into post-colonial and emancipator efforts stressing participation as both a right and obligation, whereas in the 1980s a focus on more populist efforts where the idea of participation had a more project-oriented logic (development professionals and agencies and some local participants), and finally, late 1990s to present a focus on participatory governance giving that participation is primarily seen as a right (for a more thorough description see Hickey and Mohan [16]). What Cornwall and Gaventa [14] then address is what they talk about as a more actor-oriented approach, going beyond “users and choosers” and instead introduce the idea of “makers and shapers”. Makers and shapers are not only practicing their rights but also social responsibilities exercised through self-action [14]. By repositioning participation “to encompass the multiple dimensions of citizenship – including a focus on agency based on self-action and self-identity, as well as demands for accountability amongst actors” [14: 59]. According to Cornwall and Gaventa, the role and capacity of civil society is growing resulting in an increasing pressure for democratization and new forms of citizen-state interaction.

Cornwall presents four different modes of participation; (1) functional, (2) instrumental, (3) consultative and (4) transformative giving that participants are viewed as; (1) objects, (2) instruments, (3) actors and (4) agents. These different modes of participation hold different motives for inviting and involving participants; (1) to secure compliance, minimize dissent and lend legitimacy, (2) to make projects or interventions run more efficiently, by enlisting contributions and delegating responsibilities, (3) to get in tune with public views and values, to garner good ideas, to diffuse opposition, to enhance responsiveness, and (4) to build political capabilities, critical consciousness and confidence, to enable to demand rights, to enhance accountability.

In this paper it is claimed that these two different disciplines have touched up-on a similar trend that is very topical for the area of participatory practices in digitalization of public sector; the difference between for/with/by and choose and use/make and shape i.e. the difference in between active claims-making critical agents and rather passive customers choosing in between different off-shelf products. The overall claim here is that a similar updating is needed in the realm of participatory practices in eGovernment, not only in practice but conceptually and theoretically. And the above will serve as a lens in order to analyze this with the help of an explorative case. The shift in prepositions (for, with and by) is supported by the shift of roles (users and chooser or makers and shapers) and it also informs design actions in practice. To open up the design space (from functional to transformative) implies that it is important to not narrow the “what” before or without, the “who”. The values that guide design decisions are not to be decided by anyone else than the people who will use what will be designed. In order to touch upon these issues the explorative case is presented together with some critical design notions that have been guiding the performance.

4 The Explorative Case – Methodological Reflections

In recapitulating the dimensions of the explorative study the first one is based on the analytical toolkit above which guided the objective and purpose of the study. But yet another dimension is added, not as a theoretical or analytical tool, but as a practical influence in order to open up the design space in the specific situation of the explorative work shop i.e. critical design. Before describing some of the underpinnings of critical design it is then possible to say that they explorative study, based on the analytical reasoning above, tried to challenge:

- the what
- the who
- the why

However, according to the idea of critical design put forward by Dunne [18] it is crucial to address the ideological and norm reproducing elements of what, who and why which could be described as “the how”. To be able to touch upon how the ideological and norm reproducing elements work Dunne claims that designing starts when the technological artifacts are linked to a certain discourse (guiding values). This gives that the ideological nature of how our everyday social and cultural experiences are mediated by

digital artifacts are in focus. This in order to deconstruct or dematerialize what is proposed, but also to increase the possible interpretations in order to give room for creativity and new approaches, i.e. not delaying the possibility of new translations. If not, we might be “superimposing the known and comfortable into the new and alien” [18: 17].

It is therefore essential to create opportunities for ‘defamiliarizing’ and ‘making strange’ what is linked to the “ideological dimension of everyday technologies” [18: 2]. To defamiliarize is to provoke, making ambiguous, and making strange in order to discuss hidden social meanings. Defamiliarizing could then be used as a methodology to break free of structures, in line with rethinking the assumptions that underlie technology [19, 20]. Making the constructs (discourses) strange provides the opportunity to actively reflect on existing politics and culture, and develop new alternatives for design [21] i.e. to remove objects from the automatism of perception; “it seeks to explore the ways in which our categories of thought reduce our freedom by occluding recognition of what could be” [22: xviii]. Questioning the naturalized assumptions inherent in the design opens up design spaces, and is a critical endeavor for two reasons: it (i) questions the taken for grantedness and (ii) reveals possibilities for transformative redefinition. And to make the familiar strange Dunne proposes the idea of gentle provocation [18], i.e. a way of provoking complex and meaningful reflection. To gently provoke, disturb and make uneasy means to gently make the line of thought more reflective, to struggle with uneasiness. Therefore, what is challenged by the explorative case study is also:

- the how

The four challenges (what, who, why, how) are then used to intentionally provoke and create a situation where these four issues could be addressed in an alternative manner. The results of the intervention are then discussed as a back-drop to gain a deeper understanding of, and challenge the existing mechanisms of, participatory practices in the digitalization of public sector.

4.1 A Collaborative Workshop on Making the Digital Story of a Town

The empirical material is multi-faceted and rich and is based on a series of explorative initiatives related to making the digital story of a town. The back-ground is digitalization in general and accessibility in specific and concerns a medium-sized town in Sweden trying to develop a digitally interactive story targeted both to the town’s inhabitants and tourists. When trying to complement printed information and marketing material with what they perceive as modern tools, a discussion on digitalization surfaced. During that discussion a contact with the regional university were established and started as an open-ended discussion between a representative from the municipality and two representatives from the university. The municipal representative was the secretary of cultural affairs at the municipal cultural center (called Kulturmagasinet) and the representatives from the university were two researchers, one from sociology and one from informatics, working within a research group of critical studies of digital technology and societal change.

The project name became ‘Technology in becoming’ and the point of departure were a shared apprehension that digitalization could be more than just making the existing

databases, the established and already at hand stories of the town, accessible in digital form. The aim of the co-work was formulated as; - the digital stories could be more than only doing what is already done. In the town there were already stories made, a lot of material (exhibitions, city walks, interactive performances during open city days and traditional marketing and information material) existed based on established and well known stories of the town. Famous historical inhabitants, well known historical events and historical information about buildings etc. were all part of that. The objective then became to challenge, provoke and co-construct new stories.

The above then led to several steps, the first meeting (attended by the secretary of cultural affairs and the two researchers) circled around if, and if so, how, it was possible to re-create the established stories, and be more inclusive to other stories than the established ones, during the digitalization. And as a result of that discussion the secretary of cultural affairs invited two artists to the discussions as experts on friction and change of perspectives, and also managed to attract internal funding for paying for their participation.

The next step was then to continue the discussion of 'technology in becoming' in the larger group (the initial three participants and the added two artists) and develop a work form in order to, in a more inclusive and alternative way, create the stories that were to be digitalized. After presenting the ideas in the larger groups the two artists continued the discussion separately from an artistic point of view and developed a first suggestion of a work form. There after the larger group met again and discussed the artists' suggestions and collectively decided upon a work flow.

The final idea was to make a fully open event in the cultural center; it was to be both announced in the local newspaper and spread through several mail lists and held in a very architecturally creative studio at the cultural center. The day was chosen to create the opportunity for as many as possible to be able to participate and was therefore decided to be on a Sunday between 14 and 16 pm. In the studio there was a table with a printed three by three meters large map of the town in color and a lot of adhesive dots and stars in a multitude of colors (see picture 1 below) related to the questions the artists were to ask the participants.

The two hours were structured as below:

- 5 min very short introduction (important to not become too long and steer the associations)/by the research leader
- 5 min equally short introduction of some of the work done by the university on mobile applications and visualization (in the same way important not to become too long and give the workshop a technology centered focus)/an invited researcher in computer science
- 5 min short introduction of the project team
- Straight after the above the workshop started with the first quick introductory exercise. The artists asked the participants (also the researchers, the secretary of the cultural affair, and the artists participated) to mark eight places on the map (a place in town that I would show children/show friends from another country/show the prime minister/a forbidden place for children/a place where I get ideas/a very ugly place/a place I avoid/a place dogs like) (20 min)
- A short break and a cup of coffee

- The second exercise. The artists asked the participants to mark four places (the most beautiful place in town, the darkest place in town, the most equal place in town, the hottest place in town). Important to note is that the questions were deliberately a bit fuzzy (20 min)
- The third exercise. The artists asked the participants to mark “the most memorable place in town” (15 min)
- Discussion and reflections

The above exercise gave a map (for one fraction of the map see picture 2 below) with a lot of different dots and stars on the giant map in the center of the studio which the participants could reflect upon, ask each other about, try to understand and also discuss as they were easily accessible and very illustrative. The tangibility of the map in the room with all the markings and the participants moving around in the room bumping in to each other, trying to both put their dots on the map and see where others put their dots, created a movement and atmosphere in the room that encouraged discussion.

5 Results and Analysis – Disrupting Established Stories

There are several interesting reflections made during the six months long project and the final workshop. First of all, it is hard to get funding for these kind of risk taking, nonprofit work with a norm critical approach which needs actors that holds a strong belief that it is important to address these issues even though they are not instantly linked to the step of becoming a realized product. They also need to be very creative to find the small resources that are available. Second, this gives that the project group had to be organically formed, and not to be decided upon from the beginning. The adding of the two artists was central to the final results and that was not at all the initial understanding in the first discussions. But during the discussion the need for competence in disruptive practices surfaced as highly important. Third, the inclusive and open invitation to the de-sign activity (regarding place and time) were crucial. The place is a very well-known place and has also been ranked as “the most open and inclusive place” for a multitude of citizens. The choice of time, a day of week and a time at day when most people could participate without losing income, also showed to be important in order to get a diverse group of participants. Finally, the disruptive stories created by the artists showed to be very useful in order to create provocation, reflection and discussion and get hold of stories outside of the established stories of importance in the already existing archival artifacts.

All the above created could be linked to the four challenges the analytical framework touch upon: the what, the who, the why and the how. In participatory practices ‘the what’ is very often already decided upon, in this exploratory case it was important to keep ‘the what’ an as open question as possible, throughout the initial project meetings and to the end with the final workshop. And ‘the who’ is maybe one of the most interesting questions during this project, to be able to stay in ignorance of who will attend is challenging for several reasons. To stand there at the day of the workshop without any knowledge about who the participants will be was demanding. The project team was a bit nervous

and tried to comfort each other that morning and it was important to have the ability to share the responsibility in between the professions and competencies (IS-researcher, researcher in sociology, secretary of cultural affairs, and artistic skills). This also influenced ‘the why’, it was discussed together with the different participants and there were room for translations and re-translations regarding why it could be of importance to open up a discussion of what story that should be told about the town. Finally, concerning ‘the how’, as shown by the discussion above, to choose these kinds of work forms requires courage and nerves to deal with insecurities- which also proves why we often chose not to. To be as iterative and open as possible while also consciously adding provocations forces us to challenge our own professional positions and legitimacy. The fact that, as researchers and project leaders to some extent, attend the exploratory workshop with on equal terms and use private and personal experiences while trying to add to the co-constructed map and story really brought us out of our comfort zone.

6 Conclusions and Contributions

The overall conclusion of the case discussed in this paper is that the idea of participatory practices in the digitalization of public sector is still an open question from many perspectives. The four challenges used in this paper highlight some of these and especially the perception of ‘participation’. To use development and participatory studies in combination with up-dated design thinking provided tools to analyze ‘participation’ in more detail and also repositioned the idea of participatory subjects. Throughout the empirical case the framework provided a sensibility to the boundaries and legitimacy of who were to make and shape and who were to use and choose and what it actually means to transmit that power to an unknown crowd of participants. The four questions, the what, the who, the why and the how, proved to be practical and useful and it is argued here that they could be part of a new era of design of public e-services. However demanding, they, used to the fullest or not, address aspects of participation that needs to be addressed to avoid empty and almost dishonest promises of participation that in the end fosters frustration and disappointment that could backfire on very well intended digitalization processes. The argument here is not that every digitalization project should be designed as the one above, rather than an awareness of these aspects creates a better take-off in communicating the initiatives in a more truthful manner.

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