Position paper

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Participatory design in its classical form was about taking a stance for and with somebody, some group of users/workers/people, at the cost of other groups, whether these were recognized or not. In the 1990s in particular participatory design became "good" in itself, no matter with whom researchers and designers collaborated, and the arguments for doing participatory design were to be found in the quality of the products and their usefulness to particular users as such. In a somewhat similar process I find that 'communities' have moved to a place where they are considered "good." As researchers/designers we can find a community to work with and that is good. We can support the communication and interaction, and we can even help people build communities with technologies. To some extent we can even invent communities through the design of our technologies.

In the same way, as I am skeptical of the development of participatory design, I'm concerned with this kind of do-good perspective on communities. I think we need to step out of it somewhat and look at its negations. Not only perhaps to consider communities that are not all just good, be they simply subversive, or even harmful to others. We also need to consider such things as oppressed voices and marginalization, and not least find theoretical framings that help us in this.

In a recent booklet, the philosopher Mikkel Thorup (2013) points towards the relationship between friends and enemies and concludes that creativity and innovation happens in communities that are under pressure at their boundaries, whereas peace at large leads to laziness and laissez-faire.

Björkvinsson et al. (2012), rather than community, mention Dewey's idea of public as a frame for conflicts and heterogeneity. Basically there is no public without something to be against. LeDantec &DiSalvo (2013) move on from Dewey to thinking about power structures and marginalization. Björkvinsson et al. (ibid.) similarly point towards Star's extensive work on boundaries and marginalization by standardized networks or infrastructures.

Between these concepts, it seems important to ask:
1. **when** are communities? (to paraphrase Engeström),
2. when are we dealing with other sorts of configurations of groups and individuals?
3. and when are these actually interesting for our studies?

I don't suggest that we go all in for publics, but rather that we study the formation of communities, publics, networks, and how these formations change.

Bødker et al. (2003) use Barth's notion of boundaries:
- to focus on contexts and situations in which *boundaries are generated*.

- boundaries that define the group rather than the cultural core.
- boundaries that outline the identity of the community and are marked because *communities interact with entities from which they are, or wish to be, distinguished*.

Mouffe, as well as Bakhtin have been used in the literature to address communities and publics from the point of view of multiple voices with adversarial viewpoints. Björkvinsson et al. (2012): "As Mouffe argues, the goal of democratic politics is to empower a multiplicity of voices in the struggle for hegemony and to find "constitutions" that help transform antagonism into agonism, moving from conflict between enemies to constructive controversies among "adversaries"—those who have opposing matters of concern but who also accept other views as "legitimate.""

All of these writings in my perspective point towards a view on communities as not just good. We need to understand the dynamics of communities. We need to study and address more systematically:
1. Who the enemies are, and what to be against?
2. Who gets marginalized and what happens on the boundaries?
3. How to use technology to bring forth multiple voices in in constructive controversies.

In addition to multiple voices and boundaries we are facing the challenge that to a large extent the kind of communities, we are interested in, seem to be *in the making.* They are not well-established communities of practice that can be studied and understood prior to the design of the technology. To the contrary, we are working with communities that are constantly moving and changing, and we are introducing new ways of communicating and engaging that did not exist before the technology. In Bødker & Christiansen (2004) we found inspiration from Grudin (2002) in suggesting that new ways of using technologies to probe these emerging practices need to be found for this kind of research and design: "We have found very few discussions and very little literature reporting on design experiments concerned with the background maintenance of a social (perhaps virtual) community. As seen from the point-of-view of design, the ephemerality and prototypicality of social encounters are not addressed, let alone embodied in ways productive to the design process." I do not see that this has changed much since the paper was written, which simply emphasizes the need for
1. longitudinal studies of the emerging practices and/or development of technology mediated communities,
2. new ways for designers/researchers to engage with communities,
3. methodological thinking that considers how to design for practices yet to develop, in particular communities-in-the-making.

In summary, I call for a more critical approach to communities and technologies!

References

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