e-Participation

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While feeling very honored and proud to be asked to take part in the eParticipation Summit in Stockholm 2012, I do struggle with the assignment I have been given: to answer how-questions, to give causal explanations, to give predictions, and to give recommendations. Being a scholar in critical studies of digital technology and societal change/critical digital design these are all very much out of my radar. Simply because my training and experience are devoted to quite the opposite; to go behind prescriptions, to rethink causal explanations, to question predictions and to never give monologue recommendations. The aim of critical studies is to question the taken for granted, to constantly be aware of power relations in any situation and to enter often avoided dialogues. So, instead of trying to do something others definitely will perform better, I will try to address the same areas but stay true to my area of expertise. Giving this short introduction I also think that I have partly answered the b-question linked to the three main questions already: "If you are basing the analysis on specific political and cultural contexts, please make this clear" i.e. the context and fundamentals of my analysis and arguments. Adding to the background information of my reasoning are of course also that I am a white quite well educated woman in northern Europe and my studies are performed in a country with certain prerequisites (relatively rich, secularized, modern, and digitized). All of the above definitely influence my way of reasoning; some of the bias I will be able to acknowledge and partly deal with, but others remain and as such escape my own analysis. When more specific context descriptions are needed I will of course give the necessary background information that I am aware of and I will also try to stay to the questions I have been given, even though I sometime might try to twist them around into more workable questions from my point of view.

1. How does ICT provide innovative ways for citizens to interact, get involved and become empowered and how do these relate to more traditional approaches?

The first question immediately attracts my attention. Mainly because it is a widespread desire often touched upon; to, *based* on new technology, *predict* the future and in a *certain* direction. I will though try to contribute to the above in a constructive way and not dismiss the thought because of how it is framed; I do understand the objectives of doing so in this specific context.

It is an interesting statement that deserves attention and analysis in order to enhance the understanding of how it travels and how it works, and also, I would argue, in order to make it more realizable. I will therefore divide my answer into three different subsets; new technology, in this case ICT (information and communication technology):

(i)   Is put in a position of "providing" something,

(ii)   In addition it provides "innovative ways",

(iii)   For citizens to "interact, get involved and become empowered"

The first and second part of the statement is almost as old as the thought of technology itself. Technology (techne) is the definition of "the best way of doing something", a technique, a sequence of actions, it sometimes involves artifacts and sometimes not, but the main argument being that the aim is to improve restraining conditions. The inner character of technology (or rather the inner character of our reasoning of technology) is therefore that it by its nature will provide better ways of doing". If it does not, if the result of technology will provide a worse situation than before, we therefore have a tendency to detach the results from technology (Ellul, 1964; Karlsson, 2005). The reason for poor performance is to be found elsewhere.

In addition to the expectation that new technology in *itself* will provide something (otherwise it is not technology) is the expectation that what technology provides are "innovative". Technology is closely linked to understandings of modernity (Berg, 1998). The opposite of the modern, the new, the innovative, i.e. the out of date, the old and the old fashioned are seldom conjoined with technology. As with the first part of the statement, what happens is that we detach the happenings from technology because it threatens our understanding of technology.

The last part of the statement is though a bit more novel, it turned up in relation to Gutenberg and the type printing in 1430-50's. The technology of type printing is often claimed to have played a key role in the development of the Renaissance, Reformation, the Age of Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution and we talk about the Printing Revolution and its relation to modern knowledge-based economy, the spread of learning to the masses and its importance to the concept of modernity. In the same way, new technologies of today (ICTs) are expected to change power relations and increase empowerment, it is however important to be aware of how we expect this is to be done (which I will return to later).

However, the above is not said in order to claim (i) that the existence of ICTs are not affecting our way of life , (ii) that ICTs are not new in relation to what we have been experienced before or (iii) that ICTs are not related to power relations, on the contrary! What is interesting is rather to gain deeper understanding of the relation between new ways of living and new technologies and this understanding is rewarding in order to answer the question we are asked to answer, after twisting it a bit into three questions: - Is it new technologies that provide innovative ways of citizens to interact, get involved and become empowered? Are new technologies always innovative? Will new technologies automatically lead to better interaction, more involvement and empowerment?

Starting with a common trick in Academia, creating a dichotomy: if all necessary technology exists will we then without human intervention interact, involve ourselves and become empowered? – if no technology exists but we are used to interact and to involve ourselves are our empowered threatened? In the relation between these two statements some interesting reflections occur, and

they are also highly related to the practical undertakings we are witnessing today. I will give an example.

For a couple of years I have been studying the thought of eParticipation in practical settings (being it linked to democracy, design or consumerism [choosing between one product and another]), analyzing how the idea of eParticipation travels from policy documents to enactment in practice. What often happens is that in practice the relation between the two nodes of the dichotomy brought to the fore in real choices for professionals in their doings (Gidlund K L, 2011). Are they to choose between placing their trust and finances in a technological solution or are they to focus on the value-system of the organization and use the resources on the personnel. Of course, the easy answer is to do both, you know it and I know it. But that is seldom the case, as Bolman and Deal (1997) so nicely shows, organizational change and leadership is delimited in resources and negotiations are necessary. We could take the example of citizen dialogue as a concrete case, how many nicely designed dialogue platforms we ever produce there will be no dialogue if the politicians from several reasons are afraid of participating, which is stressed by many scholars (see e.g. Macintosch 2009). It is a often major challenge to get elected representatives involved in eParticipation processes (ibid.). So, is the answer then to not invest in citizen dialogue platforms? To not use new technology to challenge traditional communication channels? No, close, empirical and critical studies would on the contrary make this relation more visible, not staying content with the finding of x number of comments in the dialogue platform but also tracing them further, analyzing their relation to institutional structures. Maybe the citizens are beginning to enter dialogue with each other in lack of dialogue with their representatives, and this interaction challenges the position of their representatives if they outnumber the percentage of representation; showing a gap that needs attention, a gap that might have existed there for a long period of time, but made visible with the help of new technologies. As such, there is interplay between new ways of acting with the help of new technologies and old challenges that used to be in disguise. But the innovation, interaction, involvement and empowerment might not look the way we think at first glance.

Secondly, addressing the issue whether new technologies always are innovative there are many instances to be found when so called new technology are only bottling old wine in new bottles (Ilshammar et. al. 2005) so we need to be aware of the difference and careful about how we make our investments. New technologies can hold potential, even unforeseen potential, for new ways of doing things but if we start off with the expectations that they *always do* we lose several possibilities of healthy questioning. This touches upon the sub-clause in the question we have been given; how do these relate to more traditional approaches? because often the investments made are not related to old approaches in the analytical phases and therefore unintentionally strengthens them. A short example here is participatory design actions in developing 'new government' with low awareness of who actually participates (I have seen several where the participants are the same guys always being heard).

Last, will new technologies automatically lead to better interaction, more involvement and empowerment? One way of explaining technology is that technologies are scripts (structures, values and expectations inscribed in codes, programs, systems, physical expression etc.) (see for e.g. Akrich), we ascribe into technological solutions what we carry with us (consciously or unconsciously)

while creating new technology. It is therefore important to create tools for enhancing our awareness of what we ascribe (for example Reflexive design methods, Lindblad-Gidlund, 2010). We could otherwise end up in a situation where we unintentionally have been afraid of interaction and only on a superficial level dares to address interaction leading to putting up dialogue forums in local municipalities where very few threads are actually answered in a professional way or threads are locked or closed down.

All the above is actually said from a very pro-technological stance, potential in digital technologies are from a design perspective endless, in many ways it is the material without defined characteristics (see e.g. Stolterman, 2008). But that is exactly why we need to be even more aware of what we attach to it. Opposite to industrial technology, which could be said to be more tangible and obvious, digital technology could be said to me more opaque and the discursive level therefore comes to the fore. Sensitivity of how we *talk about* digital technology affects what technology ends up doing (Gidlund, 2012, under publication).

2. How do different actors interact in an e-society: for example: government, local authorities, grass-root movements, civil society organizations, companies, individuals? What are their respective roles, powers, benefits and threats?

As I started off explaining in the introduction I am not a scientist performing large longitudinal surveys on changes in actor behavior and I could therefore not answer question number two in a general descriptive way stating that government acts like this, local authorities on the other hand acts like that and grass-root movements in yet another way, or maybe civil society and companies starting to act in a similar way? Neither could I state their respective roles, powers, benefits and threats (besides the formal roles, power, and benefits that are given to them by law, letter of regulation and profession). What is interesting is though that question number two adds "e-society" into the game, suggesting that there is a difference between lines of actions in a society without, and a society with, the prefix e-. We therefore need to closely compare actions before the e- with actions after the introduction of the e- and be careful of what we are comparing, and show that we are able to isolate the e- as the independent variable.

However, in my view on knowledge this is almost impossible, it all comes down to how we formulate our questions and our studies. So, what remains? Is there no way we could approach the question? Of course there is; these large representative studies provide interesting indications (which is also why they are so attractive, we do believe that we could get hold of "how it is") and they should be treated as such. Indications of something that points us in a certain direction, like a trail that we would like to follow to see what we will experience down the road.

But we still need to keep a close eye on what kind of questions we formulate in the beginning and especially *why* we formulate them. Why do we need to know how different actors behave in an e-society? Do we expect them to behave differently from before, do we expect these differences to hold good or bad news, do we need to create action strategies in order to deal with bad news and promote good news? These are from my point of view very interesting questions and the kind of

questions I would like to find answers to, and when analyzing policies in order to gain a deeper understanding of how ideas travel and become enacted on the different levels where these kinds of questions emerge. When they emerge it is equally important to use different analytical frameworks to go behind the obvious and to approach the hidden.

Again, let me give an example. For a year and a half I have been studying the claimed shift in focus in public sector in Sweden to become more customer oriented and demand driven in their development paths (often talked about as "citizen driven development"). Of course my studies have involved how practitioners translate and enact the idea of demand driven development but I have also focused on how these translations are done before turning up on the practitioners' desks i.e. looking more closely on the institutional entrepreneurs (Di Maggio, 1988), i.e. organized actors holding both sufficient resources and opportunity to realize their interest, or the Mr Manybody's (Latour, 1987), i.e. actors who has a numerous of allies and followers i.e. their interpretation is more likely to be accepted as truth. I have used "defamiliarization" (Dunne, 2005) as an analytical method since it offers a means of criticizing presuppositionless representations and filters out subjective contaminants in order to enter into a dialogue with them. As such, it consists of different techniques for unveiling hidden structures, and enables a conversation about their concealed symbolic logic. This is in line with what Ceces-Kecmanovic calls 'demystifying technological imperatives' in order to expose hidden structures and reveal interests of privileged groups (Ceces-Kecmanovic et al, 2008). The results show that ideas like this travels quite unquestioned, they are quickly given the status of taken for granted (from various reasons) and as such they continue their journey without given close consideration until they are supposed to be implemented (Gidlund, 2012).

To parallel the above with statements on the expected change of action strategies in e-society; if we expect all the above (government, local authorities, grass-root movements, civil society organizations, companies, individuals) to behave differently, how does that effect our own actions? Do we forget old questions? Do we creation new ones based on our expectations instead of our observations? Are potential new behavior related to the e- or is it related to our expectations of the future (i.e. a self-fulfilling prophesy)? Again, to place our understandings of the digital (the e-) at the intersection of what becomes and what we expect to become creates opportunities for analyses on the role our understandings play in the creation of what happens when e- exists.

In addition to the above, I would like to add yet another way of responding to the question with a counter-question: *when and how do we become a 'participant'?*

First, since the idea of a 'participant' automatically holds a power dimension since the participants are identified by someone in the design process i.e. the participant is as such not an active subject in the selection process. They are being categorized and defined by someone and consequently run the risk of becoming passive in the construction. But, the participator has reached an almost indisputable position in the design of e-society, e-government etc., and it is often claimed that the involvement of appropriate and representative users is critical to the success of a system (already in 1984 Ives & Olson made a literature review touching upon user involvement and indicators of system success, and since then many others have followed; Kappelman & McLean, 1991; Hartwick & Barki, 1994: Iivari & Igbaria, 1997, among others). The quest of finding "the right user" to participate is built upon

the anticipation that participants will be able to provide insights about requirements that need to be addressed which in turn will guarantee that the technology is suitable and becomes frequently used (Mackay et al., 2000). With the concept "the right user" Mackay touches upon an interesting distinction related to user participation; is everybody's insights equally welcome or does it exist preconceived ideas about what kind of user should be given opportunity to formulate requirements, and who decides who should be listened to. The notion of a participating user as such is though seldom questioned.

One reason might be that by doing so you run the risk of being perceived as an old-fashioned elitist, claiming that the user/participant knows too little about the technological potentials to know what he or she might actually need of in the future. Another reason might be that it appears so useful in practice to hold on to the thought of balancing the designer and producer (and the responsibility following on these roles) with a representative and participative user (and as such move some of the responsibility to the users since they "have had their say") that by problematizing it, a too difficult to handle, complexity evolves. Several aspects come into play and we are still too short of answers.

> "…we should be careful not to replace a technological determinist view by a romantic voluntarism which celebrates the agency of users" (Oudshoorn et al. 2004:55)

In celebrating the agency of users and making them equivalent to designers, producers, hardware engineers, product engineers, project managers, salespersons, technical support, purchasing, finance and control, legal personnel (to use the list Woolgar, 1991, provided) we run the risk of foreseeing what Woolgar and Akrich initiated and Oudshoorn and Pinch reopens: that the positions are not exclusively equal, there exist power relations and complexities in relation to the concept of a representative participating user that needs to be addressed and analyzed to avoid the pitfall of "romantic voluntarism" as Oudshoorn and Pinch puts it.

So, returning to questioning the notion of a participating representative user; recognizing the tensions and the unequal power relations might hold explanatory value to the understanding of practical experiences of complicated design processes and systems not meeting needs and expectations. Acknowledging that the user (however active in the design process) is chosen by someone also directs attention to how these inequalities are distributed and formalized

A parallel discussion, using the notion of "good or bad usage", is found in Rose & Blume regarding citizens, the state and technological use. Rose & Blume claim that resisting "the configuring, and disciplining, effects of this and other technologies may be to protest the social policies implicated by the technologies them-selves" (Rose & Blume, 2003:106) and "individuals not only become inappropriate users of technologies, they also fail in their civic responsibilities to use them, or to use them appropriately; that is they become "bad" citizens" if not using the by the state promoted technology (Rose & Blume, 2003:109).

3. What practical and achievable recommendations would you make to governments, and particularly local authorities, about how to optimize the impact of e-participation in short and longer term?

This is where it heats up, are critical studies regressive, passive and contra-productive, only providing questions and never ending up in good suggestions, or do they hold opportunities often eluded?

The critical tradition in terms of questioning existing forms of production of knowledge and especially hegemonic discourses, the taken for granted character, and its embodiment in different processes, gives the concept of 'false consciousness' a central position. As such, the critical stance focus on the taken-for-granted assumptions and the objective becomes to expose deep-seated structures (Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991) and put emphasis on construction and enactment, and historical and cultural contingencies (Walsham, 2005). The reason for this slight shift in focus is the risky endeavor of talking about values and ethics (such as emancipation, freedom and justice) as being fixed and general. Contrary to this position, that taken here is that every construct (even the constructs of values) is an accepted target for critical analysis. It is a process of knowledge production in itself and should, as such, also be questioned. It also touches upon power and position since many of these values are formulated from above, with good intentions, but it is also rather complicated to formulate values for others. Individual emancipation is about facilitating the realization of human potential to critical self reflection and that individuals should not be subordinated to a fixed set of value (this in line with Alvesson and Wilmott, 1992). The important position to take is rather that of guarding emancipator *enabling processes* in order for individuals to be critical and self reflective.

So, no recommendations given here, but definitely suggestions of areas for entering dialogue. First of all I would like to ask some questions in order for us *to rethink the participating subject*. In my studies I have noticed a blur of the notion of participation (Gidlund, 2011) where practitioners struggle with what kind of participation we expect them to perform, and this blur is also to be found in policies on European level. I will use the figure below to illustrate my observation:
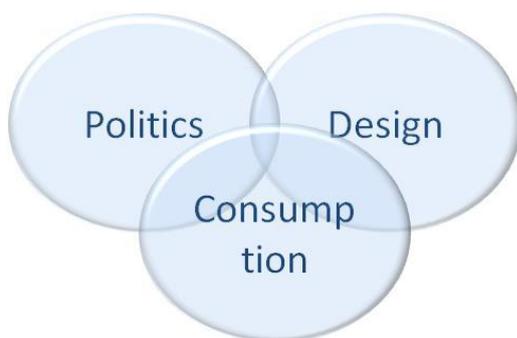

Figure 1: The participating subject (Gidlund, K., L., 2012)

The participating subject is sometimes referred to in (a) e-Democracy terms as acting as an informed citizen with enlarged opportunities to participate in trends toward more deliberative democracy due to technological innovations, and sometimes in (b) participatory design terms as acting as an actor

involved in the design process as an upgraded participator due to the knowledge he or she holds on his or her needs, or as in (c) a more powerful consumer being able to pick and chose in between different alternatives in a much more informed and emancipated way. However, what is interesting is when these three different roles are mixed both for the participator and the practitioner in public sector and the communication in between them becomes complex. Are we acting as customers consuming public services or are we acting as semi-designers giving advice on how the work should be better performed or are we citizens participating in democratic processes?

In the following I will give an example on demand driven development of public e-services:

In 2010 IDC Government Insight published a study [1] which describes IT spending and market-sizing forecast for the Western Europe government sector for 2008–2013 for hardware, software, and IT services in Western Europe will increase from $56.6 billion in 2008 to $68.5 billion in 2013. At the same time Europe is struggling with low usage of what is actually developed; "the majority of EU citizens are reluctant to use them [the public e-services]" [2 p. 3] and the European eGovernment Action Plan 2011-2015 stress, as several earlier documents have, the imperative of "involving users actively in design and production of eGovernment services" [2 p.7] as an important path to deal with this relation. 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" [2 p. 3]. So, the logic being that 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) at all 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" [2 p.3]. The relation between these two statements and their interdependent logic; citizens would use the e-services if part of their creation and e-services would enhance service delivery and drive down costs, is though not further problematised.

The solution to this dilemma is though expressed as making the development of public e-services demand driven, based on the thought of ensuring the usage by let-ting the users-to-be to state what services they want, need and will use (even though these three elements not always corresponds) which is the starting point of this paper; the idea of demand driven development as the knight in shining armor solving many of the challenges eGovernment is facing today.

If we scrutinize the above it is apparent that the documents blend the role of the semi-designer and the consumer (and even the citizen) and on top of that the e- is given a status of taken for granted, e-needs to be done (even though nobody use it). Rethinking participation involves keeping institutional formations in mind; do we wish for them to be reproduced or do we wish for them to be challenged and are we aware of the difference in relation to our actions? In development theory participation from the beginning (in 1940-50s) was and obligation of citizenship, changing in the 1960s as both an obligation and a right of citizenship challenging subordination and marginalization and in 1980s turning into professional participation in projects rather than broader political communities (Hickey

et al., 2004). Are we witnessing something alike in public sector transformation? Is citizenship becoming projects for citizens to run as professional designers and consumers of a combination of democracy, public services and the design of our life situations (quality of life)? And if so, are we creating e-solutions to support such a future or is it an unintended consequence of technological development?

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❑ Is it possible to, based on new technology, predict the future and in a certain direction?

    ❑ ICTs is put in a position of "providing" something

    ❑ ICTs is thought of as providing "innovative ways"

    ❑ ICTs will make citizens "interact, get involved and become empowered"

❑ The idea of technology (rational and modern otherwise not technology), the idea of innovation (never the opposite and by itself?), and the idea of interaction (is it interaction that we perform?)

❑ Digital technologies (opaque, endless possibilities) highlighting *the discursive level* i.e. what we ascribe to it!

❑ The above is NOT just a play with words, it has consequences…

❏ Ideas travels and are enacted – therefore important to critically analyze presuppositionless representations and filter subjective contaminants in order to enter dialogue with them

❏ When and how do we become a "participant"?
  ❏ someone somewhere defines the participant
  ❏ how to find "the right participant"
  ❏ replacing technological determinism with romantic voluntarism (The participant as Unicorn)
  ❏ configuring good citizenship/participants

❏ "We are all civil servants now"
❏ "Who is it that talks about participation?"

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❑ Rethinking the participating subject

Politics

Design

Consumption