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Designing Participation: Establishing Political Legitimacy Through Design Toolkits

Abstract

In this paper I discuss the increasing rhetorical salience design has in contemporary US politics. Set against a background of increasing political disillusionment, public participation today is frequently framed by design practices which are, given their increasing prevalence, on the verge of becoming widely accepted mechanisms for public action. Design as a market-based practice is struggling to find legitimacy in the public sphere and as a result has produced a number of design toolkits which aim at establishing a human and discursive infrastructure on which legitimacy can be established and maintained. This paper is organized into three sections. In the first section I will discuss the necessity for participation in contemporary democratic nations. The second section will discuss design and its legitimation problem which I will demonstrate on the example of design toolkits, performative technologies published to advertise HCD. The final section will further problematize design toolkits as part of a larger infrastructure project aimed at producing public legitimacy.

Keywords: Design, Participation, Toolkits, Infrastructures, Democracy

Introduction

In August of 2008 the New York Times published a story titled: "How Design can Save Democracy" (Grefé and Hewitt 2008). The premise of the article, that ballot sheets were improperly designed and thus a cause of counting inaccuracy in a crucial election year, supported an understanding of design as an aesthetic configuring practice whose legitimacy was not limited to market-based material goods production. The problem seemed to be a technical one, threatening the accuracy and effectiveness of an instrumentalized voting process[1], a crucial mechanism for legitimizing representative democracy, central during a change of administration. At the time, to suggest that design could aid democracy, even limited to this technical scope, was strange and new, and likely was not entirely disconnected from political discontent after the economic crisis when trust in the governing elites was at ranock-bottom and people started to look elsewhere for better practices. The drop in voter participation, experienced not only in the US but also in many other democratically organized countries, is here exemplified in the desire to reconfigure the physical artifacts – the ballot sheets – ensuring the accuracy of this process. While design's role here seems marginal, the underlying problem of political participation is nonetheless apparent and has since become the target for a large number of design consultancies,

[1] Design was meant improve the effectiveness of traditional paper ballots that were contrasted by their electronic counterpart which were perceived to be comparatively more precise and less prone to deliberate or accidental miscounting of votes. Ballot design was perceived as an important factor concerning legibility with impacted the intelligibility of the election process as a whole.

labs[2], and research institutions all built on the premise that direct public participation in governance is necessary to 21st century democracy. Since 2008, design has increased in centrality within the public sector far beyond its legacy of aesthetic embellishment, finding application in service design, technology design, and many interdisciplinary design endeavors all aimed at making democracy function better and creating a stronger link between citizens and the practice of government[3]. Its meaning in public discourse today is constantly expanding beyond that of pure material configuration towards opening up spaces for the very process of democratic participation to be reconceptualized. Despite the term's ambiguity, my analysis of design in this paper will focus on practice, specifically the practice of Human Centered Design (HCD). That is, I am focusing on the deliberately organized dynamic modality of action within specifically circumscribed spaces – cognitive and physical – and relying on specific discursive and human infrastructure that allow this practice to become legible and intelligible as design. HCD is of particular import here because it highlights participatory aspects in all steps of the design process and, while finding much application in commercial ventures, also forms the basis of much of social, developmental, and public sector design. Participation is grounded in an understanding of

[2] The tendency to create design labs within organizations that historically have nothing to do with design is becoming increasingly pervasive. Such labs open up the possibility of experimentation within a self-contained site, one that allows for failure without threatening the whole existence of the organization. In the case that design is successful in improving the operability, the lab is already situated within the organizational structure of the public office and thus it becomes easier for the new practices to become established at a broader level. Such labs are often run like businesses, as they require a greater mobility to operate on similar principles. Lab@OPM, the US government's cross sector design lab located in the Office of Personnel Management, is geared toward disseminating human centered design throughout the US government. As their position as one of the only two cross sector offices in the US they are perfectly positioned for achieving their stated goal, to raise awareness of the benefit of HCD in all government bureaus.

[3] This is demonstrated in the rise of government design labs many countries. Those countries are not limited to the Global North but are also becoming attractive to some in the Global South, although the reasons may be specific for each country. Among those who have implemented labs are the US, Canada, the UK, Denmark, France, Belgium, The Netherlands, Finland, Sweden, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Australia, Mexico, Uganda, Kenya, Sudan, Burundi, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, South Korea, Colombia, Brazil, Uruguay, Afghanistan, UAE, Lebanon, Israel, Georgia, and Serbia. (Nesta.org)

social change as social innovation, a term which alludes to an economic understanding of social relations. Both participation and social innovation are performative categories through which legitimacy if effected. HCD's rhetorical appeal to public issues is its apparent social and political neutrality, a factor that is implicit in much of public sector design discourse. While political legitimacy is by no means a given, this is mitigated by consultancies, design labs, and similar organizations invested in the promotion of design for public action, through the production of a discursive and organizational infrastructure aimed at generating a self-validating discourse around design. Part of this infrastructure are design toolkits, a collection of short publications which purport to teach the design process to the un-initiated through short explanations of methods, often in the form of prompts, tips, or suggestions.

1. The problem of political participation

Design's incorporation into a political process may seem entirely circumstantial but I want to argue that it is indicative of a larger issue. When investigated against the background of declining popular participation in politics, HCD seems at best a response to disgruntlement with traditional political processes and at worst an economic practice parasitic upon the need for political participation which may ultimately even exacerbate the situation. It will therefore not suffice to dismiss design as an exclusively contemporary phenomenon that may disappear again as quickly as it came. The origin of the recent embedding of design practices in public sector discourse and policymaking has its origin in the political transformations of the last 30 odd years, a problem expounded in Peter Mair's (2013) last work *Ruling the Void*. According to him, the overarching problem of citizen disengagement, the decline in electoral participation, and the

inability of representative political organizations to articulate popular interest constitutes a serious problem for democratic systems. Mair's claim that the relationship between government leadership and the people is being decoupled, that both voters and political elite are retreating into mutually inaccessible spaces, constitutes the basis of design's rise to political acclaim. In light of increasing electoral volatility, citizen and elite disengagement from representative politics, and the challenge to traditional accountability measures imbedded in party politics, today's social interventions are often initiated by non-majoritarian organizations - that is, non-elected organizations - cutting across traditional boundaries of government, private and public, and for- and non-profit organizations.

Many arguments that aim at embedding participatory design practices within governments proper, whether local or federal, or which try to reimagine public services, build on the belief that government is not running efficiently and therefore is not serving the population well enough. While design practices do not have a history of political legitimacy, distributive governance practices do. Theoretical conceptions of governing practices that encompass non-government bodies are contingent upon an understanding of government as a continuum of management (Alagappa 2004). The changes in governance associated with the neoliberal bent in public management concepts of the last 30 to 40 years (Mair 2013, Elyachar 2003, Clarke 2008) have produced a network of governing bodies, not limited to centralized state government. In this network NGOs, CSOs, public design labs, and private organizations are all important actors in managing and serving different publics. In these newer modes of governance, through which individuals and communities are coproduced (often as consumers or self-entrepreneurs) with the services through which they are managed, the focus is on distribution of governance in an

assemblage of governing bodies (Elyachar 2003, Sending and Neumann 2006, Junge 2012, Banks and Hulme 2012). How can such a system be accountable if the governing actors have not been elected through majority vote? How can non-elected governing bodies ensure proper representation of important issues of society? And how can people participate in such often confusing and complex networks? The governance networks function not so much on addressing people as citizens of a nation state, but instead every person becomes "an individual in a universal humanity" (Elyachar 2003), in which active citizenship[4] is an engagement within but also outside of the realm of civil society (Chatterjee 2002).

The rise of non-majoritarian government networks and new management paradigms have spurred discussions around the meaning of citizen participation in politics. With an increase in political rhetoric around participatory democracy in which "the idea of making democracy more mass-user friendly does not seem to be a frequently favoured answer." (Mair 2013: 9) Instead the emphasis seems to be more on stakeholder involvement in service delivery and creation than on electoral participation, leading Mair to the conclusion that what is ultimately at issue is the very definition of democracy, "a kind of democracy without the demos at its centre." (ibid.) In a democracy without popular sovereignty in which electoral representation is no longer the main form of public political engagement more emphasis is on direct citizen involvement in the structuring of policy and the practices of governance. Unsurprisingly then, the rhetoric of popular and non-electoral participation presented by design practices, be it from private or public design organizations, falls on fertile political soil.

[4] The discourse of active citizenship and participation has long since moved from grassroots and local organizations to an appropriation by big business and even neoliberal bastions like the World Bank (Junge 2012). The difference however emerges in the stated goals of often market-driven development instead of citizenship.

The idea of participatory governance, a concept that understands citizens not only as voters but as actively engaged participants in policymaking and the processes of governance, is rhetorically powerful in a political system in which citizens typically feel disenfranchised from political elites. Ideals of participatory democracy thus also have the crucial function of offering a form of political opposition that is no longer held by the traditional party-system. The larger underlying issue is less a question of epistemological differences between elites and society than it is a fundamental ontological problem. As held by Brian Wynne, the question of participation as a byproduct of a technopolitical project in which technoscientific expertise[5] is antagonistic to lay and experiential knowledge, illuminates the problem of non-majoritarian actors (governing bodies that were not elected by a majority) in political decision-making processes. This argument is particularly salient in cases in which large-scale decisions are made by unelected expert panels without the involvement of the larger public. Wynne writes that "science has in its epistemic-cultural practices both reflected and performed imagined publics" (Wynne 2008: 22) At issue is the pivotal position of expertise[6] in political decision making and the inability for the lay public to articulate and participate in policy creation determining important questions of public life. If culturally shared experiential meaning is pitted against institutionalized expertise that has emerged as hegemonic both as a result of contingent historical processes and control by

[5] While both critical modernity theorists, like Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse as well as a platoon of science and technology scholars have long since debunked the objective and rational aspects of expertise as a myth, its persistence in public rhetoric proves nonetheless its political appeal. Yaron Ezrahi reminds us that "liberal-democratic instrumentalism has tended […] to encourage political actors to choose actions which are rationally and publicly justifiable in technical terms, or at least to present them as such." (Ezrahi 1990: 34) This has the advantage that "to externalize the invisible, inward domain of motives in a visible domain of observable, knowable, rationally reconstructible actions" (Ezrahi 1990: 38) makes those actions accountable. This enables a public process of accountability built on the technoscientific rationality of actions.

[6] Such questions today range from environmental to economic, problems that ordinary people have little to add to. While there is a gradation of expertise (Collins and Evans 2007) some of which can be achieved without studying one field for many years, the problem remains. The general population will by nature of the question have little to add to the finding of the solution, as their of access to specialized epistemic communities is found lacking.

larger and powerful actors, then there exists a fundamental rift between the governing elite and those they are supposed to govern. As long as participation in formulating society's most central problems is limited to expert status, there will be large groups of people who are simply excluded from making any decision or even asking relevant public questions[7]. Wynne contends that "we cannot approach the challenge of 'understanding publics' in a relation to science without at the same time addressing the ambiguous questions on 'science' too, as an empirical, theoretical, and normative matter." (Wynne 2008: 22)[8].

Public participation as Wynne and other discuss it (Le Dantec and DiSalvo 2013, Staszowski 2014), frames public involvement not as will-formation but issue-formation, an important difference which highlights the pragmatist foundation of such arguments[9]. Participatory design seems to have precisely the potential of crystallizing publics around those issues most central to society. It is this factor that constitutes the ideological bedrock of design's political rhetoric. Participation alone however, cannot be the answer as it raises important questions about accountability and legitimacy in regards to larger interest groups which may or may not be represented sufficiently. While arguments supporting design practices in public sectors are frequently grounded in perceived inefficiencies of bureaucracy, it is important to note

[7] It has to be noted at this point that participation can also present a problem. Scientific matters of fact (Latour 2004) are not merely positivistic statements of absolute truth, but they are political tools to establish accountability. It is then not only dangerous to be critical about the rhetoric of technosciences, because they provide crucial political arguments, the strength of which we should not underestimate. On the other hand, it is also dangerous let the technoscientific institutions handle the oversight of arguments precisely because they themselves are historically constructed (dare I say designed?), and therefore can also be redesigned. We should not operate on the assumption that the technoscientific apparatus is there forever, nor should we take the primacy of economic institutions over political ones as a given (Rottenburg 2015). It is not at all clear that design can achieve engaging in such systemic problems, but perhaps it is time to find a forum in which this becomes possible.

[8] In design discourses problem framing and the issues arising from non-particpatory design has been elaborated under the term 'wicked problems', a set of problems that act essentially as an infinite regress of taken for granted assumptions cause products to fail in unexpected and disastrous ways which are neither expected nor easily solved (Simon, 1996, Buchanan 1992, Rittel, 1973).

[9] John Dewey's view of public formation on the basis of shared issues is frequently cited here (Dewey 1954).

that bureaucratic instrumentalism is still a crucial means for ensuring accountability within public offices and policymaking.

The prominence of critical arguments against bureaucratic instrumentalism illustrates a transition from instrumentalism to the politics of symbolic equilibrium, as Yaron Ezrahi writes. This "shift from action to gesture" (Ezrahi 1990: 259) has made space for other ways of 'doing politics' and legitimizing public action outside of what Ezrahi calls "attestive visual norms". Because the focus now is "on acting as an aspect of realizing identities and confirming commitments rather than on acting 'for' the advancement of certain material goals," (Ezrahi 1990: 253) it is more important for design-enthusiasts to establish an infrastructure that upholds an identity for social innovation than to objectively prove that HCD is a valid tool for public action. The relevance of persuasion and performance as mechanisms that have short-term currency producing instantaneous emotional results, is grounded in, as Ezrahi puts it, "the increasing status of the person both as an individual and as a source of political values." (Ezrahi 1990: 255) In political rhetoric it is the small and instantaneous personal narrative demonstrating uniqueness of each citizen that has political purchase and no longer the historical epic played out on a societal scale. With politicians whose aim is winning governing mandates over truly representing their constituency, instantaneous results and short term effects are of higher value for the modern political stagecraft. The actual effectiveness of one method over another is of lesser importance than its rhetorical value. With design's ability to deliver an appealing protocolistic framework *as well as* an aesthetically pleasing presentation thereof, it is indeed perfectly positioned to perform a publicly potent method of political action. The source of its legitimacy is not located in the claim to objective facts and publicly verifiable knowledge but

originates from a simultaneous and symbolic construction of public identity. Social innovation in such an environment is then more an expression of identity than a will to implement important changes. Legitimating processes that allow HCD to become intelligible as valid mechanism for public action draw from the performativity of the categories participation and social innovation. In practice what we are dealing with often manifests in what can only be called design evangelism in which HCD enthusiasts lobby for the validity and effectiveness of the practice, a kind of *legitimacy by enthusiasm*.

While design discourses sometimes suggest utter novelty, participatory approaches within governance models are by no means new[10]. An example of a lateral participatory public action model preceding the introduction of participatory design is multistakeholderism. Originally introduced into the NGO context in the 1980s, multistakeholder participation initially promised a way to solve the problem of the paternalistic and melioristic NGO operations. While concerns of corporate social responsibilities' focus primarily on uncritical engagement in policymaking, the question for participation and democratic legitimacy is one of regulation and politico-legal accountability. In many cases, non-majoritarian agents can exert influence on the process resulting in power-increase of whoever has the best lobbying position or provides the most funding sometimes without having a genuine investment in achieving the best outcome for everybody (Bendell 2005, O'Rourke 2003, Sutherland 2014, Roloff 2007, Mele and Schepers 2013). The main problem in most multistakeholder systems is that often there is no way of knowing who is representing whom and thus declarations of interest have to be taken at face

[10] What may be new, however, is that these methodologies are now circumscribed and limited by a structured design framework, that organizes action into a system of behavioral-operational categories which determine both the direction to take and the temporal limitations

value (Sutherland 2014). In the absence of an Archimedean point from which to critique the proceedings and hold all governing actors accountable, what is at issue is the realistic chance of finding new forms of governance that are able to accommodate multiple positions without reproducing older power struggles.

We are thus faced with two large complications in participatory democratic models. On the one hand, Wynne contends that there is great need for participation in contemporary public action. Increased participation is not only important but necessary in order to keep democracy legitimate if we are not content to merely redefine its meaning and accept the ever-widening rift between governing elites and the governed, as Mair discusses. Exclusive technocratic expert government is clearly not the answer, as its emphasis on an epistemological worldview in which scientifically produced facts are the basis of legitimate government has no way of incorporating experience as an equally valid source of knowledge. On the other hand, most participatory models of public action do not have sufficiently instrumental accountability systems in place as the multistakeholder example demonstrates and thus we cannot be assured that policies are in the best interest of society. HCD as an example of an participatory alternative that can bring about social innovation, is not only proposing participatory modes of service provision, but is often implicitly promoting the marketization of social assistance in that it privileges dynamic organizational structures able to navigate the constant changes of the market while remaining competitive and financially sustainable. Public sector design may be a new paradigm for addressing and circumscribing publics, but nonetheless it has to identify its object first, that is, it has to make sense of a public as a specifically constituted group of individuals. In the case of

HCD, this public is imagined as both users and consumers of a service or object and as participants in determining its configuration.

2. Participatory frameworks in design toolkits

Given the political salience of contemporary social innovation identities, it makes sense for service or technical designers to publicly perform the desire to bring about social change. While performative, often the desire is genuine but in many cases is framed by market-based solutions. In many cases, designers understand social change in terms of social innovation within a clearly economic framework that is skewed toward a more neoliberal understanding of social transformation. One of the most prominent design consultancies to advocate HCD as a system of best practices for social innovation is IDEO, a global design consultancy that among other prominent clients also served the US government. Nonetheless, mere performance does not suffice to permanently establish HCD as a practice that can legitimately be employed as a mechanism for accountable public action. What is needed is an infrastructure which maintains the constant reproduction of relevance and legitimacy. Given the lingering importance of bureaucratic instrumentalism – even if just to uphold an accountability theatre – the questions is how design practices and their methodology can possibly appeal to this system?

Introducing design toolkits one has to keep in mind that they are not what they claim to be. That is, they are not toolkits in the traditional sense. In the case of IDEO's Human Centered Design Toolkit, one gets the sense of having stumbled upon an illustrated expedition book to predominantly rural developmental countries, complete with a roadmap towards modernization. Its contemporary layout in which design methods are presented alongside data visualization

techniques, does not so much evoke a kit of technical tools than a marketing brochure. The term toolkit, by comparison, in current American English refers to a selection of pre-packaged specialized implements with which some operation is performed, a definition Peter Redfield draws from in his discussion of a humanitarian kit as "a mobile repository of potentially useful implements," (Redfield 2008: 148) packaged for extreme mobility. Humanitarian kits are often made for use by experts or quasi experts, while design toolkits are not. They address anyone from teachers, NGO's, private businesses, governments, to just regular people without any prior exposure to design. The term toolkit here refers purely to the use of a variety of methods to produce, visualize, and work with data in order to create a product, service, or system. Tools are cognitive, processual, and protocolistic, techniques and methods encoding best practices for innovation, and guiding the reader through a step-by-step articulation of the of design process. HCD is typically described as a three-stage process, divided into a research phase, a co-design phase, and prototyping and implementation phase. Although this model has become widely popular, the phases may vary depending on the project.

A brief look at the history of design protocols reveals their link to technoscientific instrumentalism. For decades, design was based on aesthetically intuitive models, which were neither particularly teachable, easily rationalizable, nor legitimate for anything but the decorative arts and fashion-based cultural goods production (Andrews 2009, Simon 1996). These existed mainly outside of political instrumentalism that dominated US politics in the early to mid 20th century. Within design toolkits on the other hand, techniques are highly structured and brought into an easily comprehensive protocol of action. The idea that design is protocolizable can be

traced back to Herbert Simon's[11] *The Science of the Artificial* (Simon 1996). Before Simon, design was "intellectually soft, intuitive, informal, and cook-booky" (Simon 1996: 112) However, Simon's 1969 Compton lectures at MIT claimed that "in terms of the prevailing norms, academic respectability calls for subject matter that is intellectually tough, analytic, formalizable, and teachable, " (Simon 1996: 112) an important step in transforming design into a legitimate mechanism for public action. Recasting design as analytic and formalizable, as a rational means to ends seemed to render it partially transparent to public scrutiny, a crucial instrumentalist assumption. Ezrahi maintains that this relationship between visual attestive norms of accountability and externalizable motives "furnishes the means to transform loaded rhetoric and dramaturgy of moral, political, and personal confrontations into the cooler rhetoric of techniques used in the human struggle to conquer a world of facts and objective constraints." (Ezrahi 1990: 35) The benefit of reframing design in this manner was not only economic, opening up possibilities of design as a creative practice fostering innovation within businesses, but it also presented the practice as a new tool for management, which gained traction politically within the New Public Management paradigm popular in the 1980s (Julier 2010). Such alignment with technoscientific rationality provided design practice with the necessary rhetorical appeal to travel into other domains such as business management, policy creation, but also developmental contexts[12].

[11] Simon was an economist and computer theorist who worked on organizational decision making, for which he received the Nobel prize in economics. He first introduced design within this context of decision making as an organizational mechanism suitable for business. The claim of scientific legitimacy justified design beyond material productivity but also validated it as an important economic mechanism. During the Thatcher Reagan era, design, especially in the UK became increasingly politicized over its relevance for economics, business organization (Julier 2014).

[12] Truthfully though, within many of these disciplines, the methodologies suggested by design toolkits were not all that novel. Indeed, many aspects of design seem like little more than a rebranding of already existing techniques, a consolidation of methods from a variety of fields under the umbrella of Human Centered Design.

The salience of rationally teachable transparent protocols represents the basis of design toolkits. They offer extremely abbreviated descriptions of organizational, ethnographic, or creative techniques (i.e. interviewing, various types of data visualization) imported from other domains of human knowledge[13]. Their appropriation to design practices suggests neutrality and objectivity. While often formal and rational, these techniques typically require a substantial amount of study and practice. Neutral tools[14] are presented as stand-alone things that can be decontextualized and introduced into almost any other framework. In IDEO's toolkits in particular, each tool or technique is assigned a timeframe in which it can be successfully completed. Normative temporal constraints add to the air of objectivity and externality to the social context. Tools help discover objectively knowable facts and solutions; they do not construct them. This presentation has the advantage of allowing HCD to be easily adapted to almost all domains of human interaction, as the framework appears as free of political baggage.

Design toolkits exist as part of the intellectual property of the organization whose design methods they are meant to encode. They function either as independent educational technologies or embedded into a design curriculum offered by the consultancy[15]. Often, toolkits are addressing first-time users, such as the Service Design Toolkit which claims that "[t]his toolkit is an introduction to the methodology of service design. With a simple step-by-step plan we offer you a practical do-it-yourself guide." (SDT online) Within such contexts, design toolkits seem

[13] The methodological tools – such as Venn or tree diagrams, role playing, storyboarding, ethnographic observation, or interviewing – are in most cases appropriated from other disciplines such as anthropology, economics, or filmmaking.
[14] Examples form Luma's *Taxonomy of Innovation* are problem tree analyses, stakeholder mapping, or affinity clustering. Ostensibly, these tools are meant to enable the emergence of key insights both in the testing phase but also earlier in the process, however, it is never made clear that these tools bias the outcome.
[15] This is the case with the Luma Institute's *Taxonomy of Innovation*. It is meant to support 2 day courses which cost around $1800 for private individuals but are also offered for teams in businesses or for whole organizations.

more like promotional material, educating their customers on the benefits of human-centered design. These artifacts aim at reproducing a sense of relevance and relatedness of design methods to the creation of policy and public services, but also an urgency in addressing these issues, framed by the view that "[p]roblems are just opportunities for design in disguise." (IDEO, *Design Thinking for Educators* toolkit) This view normalizes social ills and reduces the complexity of systemic challenges to social interventions, a problem that affects the possibility of real lasting change and that can cause social designers to dramatically misjudge the effect of their practice.

IDEO's HCD toolkit explicitly sets itself apart from ideas of exclusivity of expert knowledge and suggests instead that "the people are the experts. They are the ones who know what the right solutions are." (IDEO *Human Centered Design Toolkit*: 5) Instead of offering solutions wholesale, the toolkit promises "techniques, methods, tips, and worksheets to guide you through a process that gives voice to communities and allows their desires to guide the creation and implementation of solutions." (*ibid*.) Their usefulness seems to result to no small degree from the feeling of political neutrality they portray. They are not teaching democracy nor are they grounding the their belief in participatory design projects in the necessity of public politicization. Instead, their appeal is grounded in their desire to offer help outside of political motivations, a task for which their tools are suitably presented as devoid of inscribed political norms and normative beliefs of designers and facilitators are elided. Politics is something located in the community and not the design framework or the practice of design.

While design toolkits are meant to work for novices even without prior design education, in actuality it is highly unlikely that anyone would be able to use the methodology advertised

simply by picking up a toolkit[16]. While this design protocol is able to generate an algorithmic step-by-step model of the human centered design process, it ultimately leaves out the other half of design practices, intuition, experiential and embodied knowledge, which by its very definition is individually variable and difficult to teach, what Simon called "intellectually soft, intuitive, informal and cook-booky" (Simon 1996: 112). However, for those who have acquired enough experience to use the human-centered design process intuitively, there is little need for the 'toolkit'. In other words, once everybody has tacit knowledge of design and how best to use it, such toolkits will no longer be necessary. They offer merely short introductory summaries of complex methods, which are neither unique to the human centered design process nor particularly useful without a context within which to use them correctly. In all examples, the HCD Toolkit offers timeframes within which each task should be completed satisfactorily. These timeframes are very small considering the complexity of social systems, ranging from twenty minutes to 30 days. Such limited timeframes are dictated by budgetary constraints and make the toolkit's claim for best-practices for social innovation questionable on the grounds of a heavy focus on economic accountability to project donors rather than the served community[17].

[16] IDEO's HCD Toolkit includes a set of worksheets, some of which are so obscure that there is no hope to actually work with these without more extensive instruction.

[17] Despite the emphasis on horizontal participation and non-hierarchical development processes, when it comes to identifying the design challenge NGOs, CSOs, or social enterprises get primacy. Implicit in this is the assumption that, it is the development actors who have the best perspective on what does or does not need to be achieved. This threatens to merely reproduce earlier problems within the NGO and CSO communities and limits the scope of participation. It does however, also enable accountability measures that locate the responsibility within the organization and not the community, a crucial factor in international development as it ideally allows for legal and political measures to be take in the case of failure. While theoretically this seems like a good idea, practically it often does not work out quite so easily, because the various state or non-state actors supposed to enforce accountability (i.e. public or private auditing companies operating on a national or international level) often have their own agenda and need to be in turn democratically accountable (Bendell 2005). In a system of voluntary accountability, this necessarily has to raise the question whether in a participatory system promoting equality, some actors are more equal than others. (Mele and Schepers 2013).

Participation is typically highly dependent on both temporal and methodological frames. Cultural or local specificity of participation is often ignored in favor of predetermined forms intrinsic to the HCD framework. It is therefore not generalized or universal engagement that can take any shape and may take a significantly longer time to come to a fruition, but instead the participatory aspects have to fit a concrete methodological framework and are often limited by physical props around which sessions are organized (like cameras for documentation, post-its for idea proposal and visualization, or predetermined roles in role-playing exercises, or storyboards). Despite superficial similarities, what becomes clear in these toolkits is that participatory design practices do not follow the multistakeholder model. Instead, participation is limited to fit the project, either in terms of participant selection or modality of participation, or even in regard to the formulation of initial design questions. Multistakeholder systems allow for much more generalized participation whereas in HCD participants in a project are often assembled by the design team or their partners and thus cannot act on a representative basis. In other words, participation according to design toolkits has to fit the methodological framework rather than the specificities of the community.

Instead of construing design toolkits as kits of useful implements it makes more sense then to understand them as performative technologies through which design consultancies effectively formalize and codify parts of their practices[18] and make them appear transparent and neutral. Not only does this aim at making design attractive to toolkit users but it also establishes

[18] Even the structure of many toolkits is performative as it does not truly reflect reality. Many practitioners find it hard to draw a sharp line between the three phases of HCD and will admit that tools always have to be adapted dynamically and creatively to the specific project-frame and cannot be applied unequivocally. However, this structure goes a long way when it is written in a book or presented on a chart and in public sector projects promotes an air of methodological accountability that may hail back to the days of techno-scientific instrumentalism.

a discursive foundation for design's inherent qualities, which in this case draw on democratic notions of participation[19]. In other words, such toolkits present HCD as a framework that is able to tackle anything presentable as a design challenge. Such an inflationary view of design seems to be geared more toward promoting an idea of what design is and what it can do, an identity that is at once believable and hopeful, that has the power to advance careers and win mandates. Therefore, design toolkits seem to be to no small degree a proselytizing technology, a marketing technology, and an educational technology, that all perform an identity of social innovation.

This system of "best practices", as IDEO calls it, for the engagement with social and managerial problems without promoting a political agenda relies as much on the performativity of professional practitioners[20] as it does on positive phrasing and anecdotal success stories in the toolkits proper, drawing on language of efficacy as much as on efficiency, effectiveness, and financial sustainability. Thus creating a brand image of HCD[21] is clearly profitable for design consultancies, those who have an investment in the perpetuation of design practices[22]. It

[19] In the case of IDEO's HCD toolkit which is aimed at NGO's, participation has particular salience as it is often absent from technocratized and managerial NGO methods (Junge 2012)

[20] Design practitioners have a tendency to be self-congratulatory on the success of their projects but also about the use of design as a great and innovative tool for the job. When pressed, most designers are unable to identify what precisely even makes their process or product a work of design and frequently in these cases refer to their own status as trained professionals as the reason for this classification.

[21] In today's business world, Lucy Suchman suggests, it is not longer strictly speaking and only the product that matters. Instead, brand building in an age of mass production and competitive marketing is the manufacture of difference, based less in products than in the packaging of products and their association with recognizable images." (Suchman 2007: 8) While her concern is with anthropology as a branded discipline, mine is with designing social assistance. In that HCD within the emerging public service design field is trying gain legitimacy, the rise of design toolkit culture may very well be connected to this phenomenon.

[22] Consultancies like IDEO and Luma clearly have an investment in opening up more domains for design. The Luma Institute is not only a design consultancy but also a design educational organization, offering classes, workshops and online help to individual and companies, within corporate or unofficial settings. Here, their *Taxonomy of Innovation* accompanies classes and reifies design methodology after the end of the class.

produces more people who believe in the inherent worth of HCD and who practice legitimization by enthusiasm.

3. Legitimizing Design Participation

What is unusual about these toolkits is not that they are ineffectual as actual toolkits but that they are constitutive of the creation of an infrastructure around participatory design. They both aim at establishing a standard protocol for participation but also reflect the voice of organizations and associations that frame the design practice. In other words, they standardize practices that are proprietary and organization-specific. This idea of design and design toolkits leans on the definition of infrastructure given by Susan Leigh Star (1999) and Geoffrey Bowker et.al (2010). Bowker et at. suggest to include in the term infrastructure not only the traditional tubes and wires but also "more abstract entities such as protocols (human and computer), standards, and memory" (Bowker et al. 2010: 97) and beyond that even the individuals who create, use, and administer infrastructural systems. Thus, infrastructures can include people, knowledge, discourses, practices and rules that bound and direct the infrastructural systems.

In framing participation in HCD by very specific methods which are embedded in a seemingly static protocol, the toolkits standardize participation[23], an important step to building an

[23] One of the main methodologies for capturing and visualizing information and one that is most effective at standardization is the Post-Its system, which has gained quite some notoriety. Jamer Hunt (2010) criticizes its ubiquity not only in design studios but also increasingly in boardrooms, where design thinking has become another measure of creative capital. Hunt ascribes this to the fact that "designers themselves are producing increasingly immaterial – and un- pictureable – things," (Hunt 2010) rendering the design process itself more and more intangible. As a result, writes Hunt, the post-it system becomes an inadequate and incomplete substitution for the design process in toto. Nonetheless, the post-it technique has a number of advantages which may contribute its success. It allows designers and other participants to quickly get out and thereby reify ideas, problems, or questions and systematize them visually by categorizing, ordering, or clustering them on a wall, chalk or whiteboard. This

infrastructure that can perpetuate HCD as a proper tool for public action. As Star and Bowker write, "standardization and classification are essential to the development of working infrastructures." (Star and Bowker 2006, 234) While it takes effort to popularize new standards of any kind, once these standards gain traction, they will self-perpetuate (Star and Bowker 2006, Gibbon and Henriksen 2012). Standardizing participation as a form of public action synonymous with design, which has to be managed and framed by specific design organizations, sets a baseline for political engagement that is outside of traditional political institutions and mechanisms. In democracies hollowed out from their political constituencies this standardization behavior may even be geared at standardizing any political engagement as participatory design, although that has to remain speculative at the moment. The problem with both standardization of participation and discursive, human, and institutional infrastructures is that while it legitimizes design practices as best practices for social innovation, it implicitly aims at delegitimizing other forms of public actions. Thus it creates an exclusive system in which those with access to design infrastructure are the only ones who get to dictate and direct what gets done and in what way. In most cases, this knowledge is located within private consultancies and labs, and not with regular citizens, whose efforts to self-organize may still be read as public dissent and political opposition but not as legitimate and effective ways to find solutions.

Design infrastructure is not limited to their standardization practices but spans the very projects designer are involved in. In that these projects do not make sense as stand-alone phenomena, isolated from the social system they address but rather are part of these systems, design is able to critically alter the setting in which it is embedded. By focusing on a future state

method relies on the assumption that ideas can be quantified (a Post-It as the smallest particle or quant) and then systematized rationally according to relevance and similarity of these quants to each other.

of affairs in that any social innovation design project is geared towards improving what is to come, as Christopher Le Dantec and Carl DiSalvo argue, design is creating scenarios for future use and thus it also affects the future formation and endurance of certain publics. This understanding of design "entails a shift from treating designed systems as fixed products to treating them as ongoing infrastructure" (Le Dantec & DiSalvo 2013, 247) that has the power to dramatically alter social systems.

In order to establish their own, design toolkits draw much from pre-existing infrastructures to popularize HCD in the public sector as an objectified image of the realities contemporary design institutions produce. In order for immaterial concepts like HCD to become effective in creating design infrastructures they have to become objectified. "We watch ideas become quasi-objects," (Czarniawska, Joerges 1996: 23) write Czarniawska and Joerges, a process that necessitates a dematerialization of material content (i.e. embodied practices that make use of their material environment), in other words the creation of a blueprint. More than that however, this toolkit becomes a token of HCD as a whole, in that it is "an element of an ontological, epistemic, normative or material order" (Behrends, Park, Rottenburg 2014: 3). In other words, as an artifact, the toolkit is not synonymous with the practice but instead becomes symbolic of it[24]. It codifies a very particular version of HCD as it is aimed at a special interest group and configured to fit their needs.

[24] The three chapters of IDEO's toolkit follow precisely the company's Venn diagram for innovation: desirability, feasibility, and viability, three terms which are introduced in the sampler as lenses functioning as the frame-setters for each chapter. In contrast, *Taxonomy for Innovation* is visualized in a tree-diagram showing alternative and tool-variations for each step of the process. As a technology that is meant to work within a variety of economic, social, and cultural contexts, the samplers have to offer more than merely an established structure. They are legitimized not only through the performance of their author-company, but also through case studies which are an important part both for photographic visualization of and written examples of IDEO's sampler. These perform the role of demonstrating the validity and effectiveness of tried-and-true best practices.

This process of objectification involves reducing and abstracting lessons-learned from application of the HCD paradigm and codifying these lessons into a number of separate steps that can work together but also allow organizations to "pick and choose which techniques work best" (IDEO HCD: 5) for them. "By completing thousands of innovation and design challenges, IDEO has learned a few rules for creating an environment to facilitate innovation." (IDEO HCD: 12) While most design toolkits also rely heavily on images, text as a 'quasi-object' necessitates interpretation and depends on preexisting knowledge and understanding of the world[25]. In order to be translated, such a blueprint relies on existing meta-codes that allow for sense-making of the packaged information. "Ideas left in books left on shelves do not travel, and no amount of satiation will help to diffuse ideas from closed libraries." (Czarniawska and Joerges 1996: 23) They have to be picked up, used, and made available[26]. Language and image use in IDEO's design toolkit[27], made to work together through modern layout, signal the contemporaneity of the

[25] The language in IDEO's toolkit more narrativistic, illustrated with many full-page images and short episodic case studies. All images display developing contexts, often showing rural people at work carrying water, on their heads, stripped to ancient bicycles, or sitting on woven straw mats (or engaged in the process of weaving them) on the ground, hanging laundry between concrete walls, or interacting with 'designers' dressed in local attire.

[26] The Toolkit was published under the Creative Commons license, an addition to regular copyright law that allows the creator to share the work as open source. Instead of an all-rights- reserved policy they allow for a some-rights-reserved approach. The licenses are modeled on conventional copyright and are also called copyleft. "Creative Commons licenses are not an alternative to copyright. They work alongside copyright and enable you to modify your copyright terms to best suit your needs." (www.creativecommons.org/about) The organization has since been established in multiple countries and offers six types of licenses ranging from moderate restriction to allowing content to be used free and openly for almost any purpose as long as the original author is accredited. Making the Toolkit available under these licenses allows for easier dissemination of the content and also IDEO's primacy as major actor in both the design world as also in the development sector.

[27] By contrast, Luma's taxonomy seems more removed. The cards' structure is always the same: the name of the tool (e.g interviewing), a quick guide with a bullet list of the main elements, and a shorter bullet list of helpful hints. The tools described are without exception used in other fields and are not typically related to design at all. Among them are such examples as interviewing, journaling, stakeholder mapping, problem tree analysis, story-boarding, and schematic diagramming. The difference is that these tools appear entirely decontextualized as purely neutral tools that can be integrated at will into any type of design process thereby making them design tools. In a feature in *Harvard Business Review* "Bill Lucas, Luma's cofounder and director of curriculum, recommends that at least one method from at least two categories be applied during each round of innovation activity." (*Harvard Business Review*: 30)

practice. In other words, the use of stylish graphics signals the fashionability of these practices, a factor that Czarniawska and Joerges consider a crucial step in the adoption of new practices before their institutionalization (Czarniawska and Joerges 1996).

In focusing on standardizing the protocols constituting best practices for innovation, toolkits typically tend to de-emphasize discussing the protocols in use. In actual practice, designers and design labs adhere only generally to this protocol. For instance, the three project phases – research, co-design, prototyping and implementation – are by no means always easily distinguishable. The ambiguity of tools in use, but also in how products move from one phase to the next would impair the salience of instrumentalist elements in HCD. The toolkits entirely gloss over this very dynamic character of design practices and focus on their more instrumental, more rhetorically powerful aspects.

Conclusion

It seems then that the term toolkit in this context is thoroughly inappropriate. We are neither dealing with a set of specialized implements nor with a kit that is meant for a very specific purpose. Instead, content is geared towards greatest possible generality. Perhaps then the term *sampler* may be more appropriate than toolkit. The Oxford English Dictionary describes a sampler as "an example to be imitated, a model, pattern, an archetype, the original from which a copy is or may be taken or that which contains a sample or representative selection." In commercial fields, a sampler is often an assortment of test-sized products that provide an overview of the selection offered by the particular brand. It is a method for companies to convince potential customers to buy their products in that they promote an idea of utility or

necessity. Design toolkits then function more like samplers by establishing HCD methodology as objectively better than other means of participation. There is no doubt that the techniques presented in some design toolkits may be extraordinarily useful in contexts in which proper training is not always immediately available, such as crisis situations. However, it is questionable whether methods from design toolkits even need the label of design or if they are simply useful methods which can function without such a framing device. Calling the application of pre-established methodology design again only serves the purpose of publicly legitimizing the practice.

My intention in this paper is not to dismiss participatory design wholesale, but to highlight some often ignored risks that come with the increasing corporatization of the field. If design toolkits are no more than samplers, then perhaps one should bring a healthy amount of skepticism to the study of design practices as a whole. It is true that participatory design can offer ways to of raising important issues and ultimately can even contribute to public formation and politicization, a valuable contribution to politics. By the same token, it seems reasonable, as Le Dantec and DiSavo argue, that "participatory design can reveal power structures" (Le Dantec and DiSavo 2013, 255) and tensions which may otherwise remain invisible and thus are able to act as issue-forming processes. However, as in any multistakeholder system there are also risks which have to be acknowledged. Many of these may very well be systemic and contingent, depending on the type of stakeholders involved, the political currency of the projects, and capital investment by donors. Nonetheless, design is not the golden bullet it is often made out to be. Especially when it comes to social and developmental design, caution is essential. Because most design methods are framed by and embedded in an economic system that understands social

change as innovation circumscribed by values such as efficiency, effectiveness, competition, and privatization, one should be very careful when enlisting designers, design labs, or consultancies in projects that aim at solving poverty or education. Understanding social change in terms of social innovation, the meaning of which is often opaque and left undefined, presents its own problems in that it casts any transformation in economic terms. Building on a Schumpeterian definition according to which innovation is a larger shift in industry and economy initiated by a new production function (Schumpeter 1939), Ezio Manzini, the designer strategist who coined the term *Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability* defines it as "a process of change emerging from the creative re-combination of existing assets (from social capital to historical heritage, from traditional craftsmanship to accessible advanced technology), the aim of which is to achieve socially recognized goals in a new way." (Manzini 2013, 57) Because innovation is often not qualified, it can implicitly reproduce neoliberal values that understand problems as opportunities, existing phenomena as assets, and social bonds and networks in terms of social capital all of which construe human reality as intelligible in predominantly economic terms accessible through the largely economic mechanism of design. This presents us with a serious problem. If for design, as Le Dantec and DiSalvo write, "innovation arises out of social interactions" (Le Dantec and DiSalvo 2013, 247) then the rules framing social interaction and participation are standardized toward producing solutions that are framed by efficiency, effectiveness, competition, and privatization.

To be sure, some designers acknowledge the danger that HCD has the potential of construing participation as a pacifier of public discontent and a mechanism of dispersing attention without actually changing all that much. However, getting out of this participatory

quagmire often remains overly hopeful and lacking a sufficiently critical perspective. Especially if participation is standardized and directed by actors of whom nobody truly knows their interest hope alone will not do. Certainly, standardization is not always negative. It provides a means of assuring that two parties are functioning on the same level and use the same system of reference and can in case of failure hold those accountable who are not using the standard. In many cases, standards make public action function better and more reliably. However, if HCD or participatory design in general becomes a household name for participation much like BAND-AID®, Post-it®, or Xerox®, and other forms of participation become implicitly less valuable, then democratic participation may be in even deeper trouble than it is today.

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