Chapter 10

Uncertainties Revisited: ANT to Explore the Relations Between Uncertainties and the Quality of Participation

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors use actor-network theory (ANT) to explore the relations between uncertainties in co-design processes and the quality of participation. To do so, the authors investigate Latour’s discussion uncertainties in relation to social processes: the nature of actors, actions, objects, facts/matters of concern, and the study of the social. To engage with the discussion on uncertainties in co-design and, more specific in infrastructuring, this chapter clusters the diversity of articulations of the role and place of uncertainty in co-design into four uncertainty models: (1) the neoliberal, (2) the management, (3) the disruptive, and (4) the open uncertainty model. To deepen the reflections on the latter, the authors evaluate the relations between the role and place of uncertainty in two infrastructuring processes in the domain of healthcare and the quality of these processes. In the final reflections, the authors elaborate on how ANT supported in developing a “lens” to assess how uncertainties hinder or contribute to the quality of participation.

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Uncertainties Revisited

INTRODUCTION

Co-design is the process of guiding collective creativity between actors throughout the design process (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). This collective action can have various motivations (Saad-Sulonen, 2014; Arnstein, 1969). Within the field of Participatory Design (PD) in the 1970s, co-design allowed workers to participate in the design and use of workplace computer applications (Ehn & Kyng, 1987). Today, co-design still often supports this political goal of democratising technology by giving users more control in the design of technologies or processes (Vines, Clarke, Wright, McCarthy & Olivier, 2013; Bratteteig & Wagner, 2012). PD also actively explores the technical or structural advantages of co-design activities, setting up design processes in participatory ways so that participants can contribute to their improvement (Ehn & Badham, 2002). Furthermore, collective action can be set up as a cultural critique, which is generally the rationale in Design Activist contexts, demanding the reconfiguration of power relations (Schäfer, 2010). Finally, co-design can support economic goals and has been integrated in the neoliberal market (Florida, 2012).

These different motivations for collective action are often related to different views on how uncertainties in co-design processes hinder or contribute to the quality of participation. Since there exist some controversies on this issue (see e.g. the work by Storni, 2011), this study will look further into uncertainties in relation to the quality of participation. Clement & Van den Besselaar (1993) distinguish five ingredients that shape the nature and quality of participation (Frauenberger, Good, Fitzpatrick & Iversen, 2015), which the authors complement with four recent strategies formulated by Vines et al (2013). This results in the following aspects, shaping the quality of participation:

1. The participants can make sense of and take independent positions on issues.
2. Information is made transparent for all participants, including documentation of all aspects of participatory processes and the participants’ voices and assumptions.
3. The participants are included in the decision-making.
4. The appropriate participatory methods, tools and techniques are available and participants are given a share in defining them in order to explore different forms and degrees of sharing control.
5. There is room for alternative technical and/or organisational arrangements.

This research can be framed within Science and Technology Studies (STS), a field that investigates mutual interactions between science and its wider social, political and cultural contexts (Jasanoff, Markle, Peterson & Pinch, 2001). STS
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