

Comparison as a process of translation

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ABSTRACT

As an input to comparative informatics' foundations, this position paper claims a hermeneutic position, suggesting participatory design to unfold as translation, defined by Latour as *neither one actor among many nor a force behind all actors transported through some of them but a connection that transports, so to speak transformations*". Examples from the author's empirical studies, from literature, and from Wodiszko's design work serve as illustrations.

KEYWORDS

Comparative informatics, participatory design, action research, hermeneutics, translation

INTRODUCTION

"Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself."

What is the position, from where a comparison can begin? As alluded to in my opening quote, humans are interwoven. We sit somewhere in a web of life, each and everyone. Four eyes sees more than two, however, and when we want to compare our situation with others', we need more than one pair of eyes. With one pair of eyes we have to embark on a helicopter and try to look at the whole of the web from above. With several pairs of eyes, we can stay put, while we communicate with one another from each our position.

The organizers of the 2nd International Workshop on Comparative Informatics have posed as a key question how to better understand the mutual relations between ICT and culture. They define Comparative Informatics as 'the study of design, development, evaluation, use, and impact of IT across domains, organizations, contexts, cohorts, cultures, and countries.'

My position as a researcher of participatory design, is to try

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to connect as many pairs of eyes as possible in a process of translation. This way we together can form a shared understanding of our differences, which may in turn give rise to new ideas, some of which we may want to explore together through action research. Action research is a fruitful way of working for practitioners of participatory design, who has this agenda: You join a team, who try to find a design solution to some actual practical problem together with someone who seems to have this problem, you take notes of your doings along the way, and when leaving, you start looking at the notes, to see what lesson can be learnt from what happened along the way. Such reflection-on-action is often mentioned in participatory design circles as a mean of improving professional competence – not in solutions, but in ways of engaging as pairs of eyes as possible.

In stipulating a foundation for a comparative informatics, the epistemology of such action research is important. Search for true knowledge by step-by-step exploration of what is, first the practical work back and forth between problem and solution, then the notes and memoires of what took place. This approach runs counter to the intuitive western way of thinking towards generalization. Intuitively 'reflection-on-action' becomes 'reflection-on-problem solving' motivated by how we can learn from one experience to solve similar problems. The thing is, that most design problems seldom come twice, so in design such generalization may be in vein. Moreover, followed by the attempts to generalize comes a tendency to think in terms of cause-and effect relationships, like being in this helicopter, looking down at a pool table where human forces pool cues to move the balls, while applying a model of how humans interact with the world as in Norman's popular description of crossing a divide from intention to execution and back through perception and evaluation [8, p.47].

In comparison as wayfaring, we take reflection-on-action differently. We stay where we are and look around to see if we can connect our understanding to new points in the web. By going through our notes, re-reading and re-reading we may find traces of transformations which can come together in a chain, thereby expanding our connections to a

still larger area, because of discovery of more and more relations of difference. In what follows I am grabbling with portraying such a method for participatory design, its procedures, as well as its epistemology.

HERMENEUTICS AND DESIGN

Hermeneutics was first conceived as an act of asking ‘How is understanding possible?’ and ‘How can understanding lead to more understanding?’. The hermeneutic approach is different from that of scientific disciplines, which strive to formulate theories through generalization and abstraction.

Instead of arriving at a shorthand covering many cases, the hermeneutic approach opens and complicates even the most simple utterance. As we see in the Antonioni’s classic movie ‘Blow up’, you zoom and zoom until you see much more than maybe you can. This quality sits well with design work, where the challenge is to stay ‘close to the ground’ [10], and to spot and work with difference¹. Where the activity theory for example provides useful explanations for cognitive psychologists and engineers, it has difficulty helping designers fulfill what is the hallmark of design: to integrate functional, aesthetic and ethical value into new forms. The source of new design ideas lies fundamentally in finding difference, not in generalizing what seems to be the same.

I have come a long way to this conclusion. In my chapter ‘Tamed by a rose’ [3], I suggested appropriation to stem from a taming process, a matter of spending time nursing the technology as the source of coming to care, and I quoted one of the designers from my case study of ICT-mediated case-handling in police investigation, who said that “*The more you work with the tool, the closer you are to management, the deeper you get into it, the more you will like to work with it and explore its potentials*” – and he continued “*if you are not forced, you do not go really deeply into it .. [but if they] get hit, and get something they can use that way, then they are hooked and then they hang on to learn more*” [3 p. 193]. At that time I put my findings into the activity theory framework, but my argumentation was weak in its bearings on design. I continued studying technical supporters [4] and found the above generalization to hold: gardening and nursing seemed to be what motivated appropriation of ICT.

My resent involvement in a research project “eGov+” (<http://www.egovplus.dk/>) has however brought me to think different. The basic design idea in eGov+ is to merge

¹ This is where computer science system development and design clash since computer systems in most cases are meant to generalize and if possible automate action ‘on the ground’. Hence software engineers are trained to highlight commonalities and look away from differences. Designers, on the contrary, are trained to look away from commonalities and find openings, which lead them to see differences.

interactional habits from social technologies with hypermedia technologies, in that way supporting the complex, and in many ways adversarial collaboration between service professionals and citizens on handling benefit applications, building authorizations, and the like. Again I can apply the activity theory and ‘see’ how sometimes neither service people nor citizens want to appropriate the digital self-service, and move the new possibilities into their portfolio for mastering their life as case-handlers or as citizens. Unlike the technical supporters I have followed, who really care for the computers like babies [4] the case-handlers care for doing a good job living up to certain standards set by law and regulations, and for getting the instant gratification of helping other people, or in police-investigation to solve the case, while citizens more than anything wants ‘to get it over with’ as quick as possible. Self-service web applications are not seen as a way of improving any of these issues. Again, such conclusion does not lead to new design ideas, because my reflections have left the ground.

At some point in the eGov+ project I conducted a workshop with citizen service managers, developers and researchers with the aim of determining which design tools communicate best to all stakeholders in our participatory design activities. My colleague and I brought persona- and scenario-descriptions in, and also selected quotations from a report on a session in a shopping mall, where citizens were brought to react to citizen-self-service possibilities. We printed out on cards sentences like: a middle-aged woman talking about benefit rate: “*It had been a lot easier if I could have contacted them on e-mail. The information was on the web, you could just not use them. But should I send an email I’d need to know whom to write*”. Or a young man about getting filled out a form to get money: “*Maybe then you could have done it over the Internet, but I do not know really how, but it could be nice to do it from home, but then again there are all these laws and regulations ...*”. The reactions from the developers and the managers surprised us. They said that the quotations communicated better than the personas and scenarios, because “*You can imagine the person – I think I know many like him*”, or “*You can see this is a serious problem, really*”. And then they started discussing how different citizens are, and accordingly, how different the forms of service given have to be.

Going from one sentence said by some person to another sentence said by some other person in another context did, at least in this workshop, invoke imagination, ideas and suggestions for solutions in a free floating discussion between people who did not know each other ten minutes ago, while the persona- and scenario descriptions generated discussions about descriptions correctness and representational value, not exceeding the descriptions at hand.

To me, this shows the creative power of projection, which the writer Paul Auster grasps in the novel ‘Moon Palace’, in the paragraph where he describes his main character’s work to satisfy the blind man Effing with descriptions,

while walking him in the streets of New York in a wheelchair: “*What do you see? And if you see, how do you put it into words? ... The important thing to remember was that Effing was blind. My job was not to exhaust him with lengthy catalogues, but to help him see things for himself. In the end, the words didn’t matter. Their task was to enable him to apprehend the objects as quickly as possible, and in order to do that, I had to make them disappear the moment they were pronounced. It took me weeks of hard work to simplify my sentences, to learn how to separate the extraneous from the essential. I discovered that the more air I left a round a thing, the happier the results, for that allowed Effing to do the crucial work on his own: to construct an image on the basis of a few hints, to feel his own mind travelling towards the thing I was describing for him.*” [1 p. 121-23].

Projection is a fictional work of one’s own, where the mind based on a few hints, constructs an image. The process of projection is unfortunately somewhat overlooked in hermeneutics. The texts/images’s invitation to projection is the road to translation, and the translation is the road to seeing difference and seeing difference is the road to new ideas, and it all happens in communication, provided the communication abstain from generalization, but stay eye-to-eye, on the ground.

TRANSLATION AS A WAY TO SEEING DIFFERENCE

Working one’s way through translations free designers from the illusion that they know how users think and opens their eyes to surprises – exactly the way the Norwegian anthropologist Fridrick Barth pointed out for anthropologists: “You want to be surprised”, he said [8]. Designers, too, need surprises – that is their way to new openings, new ideas. When you have two versions instead of one, you have a choice, and choice is what design work is very much about.

Theoretically, this approach has been advocated both in the systemic cybernetic epistemology of mind by Gregory Bateson, and in Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory. Both thinkers emphasize how sense making runs along connecting lines between entities through and across objects that thinks, driven by discovery of difference. Bateson argues that the ecology of mind is an ecology of pattern of differences which makes a difference to someone in a system, and that these patterns are what connects the items of learning for a living being, and that they are embodied in things, in material forms. In discussing whether a computer “thinks”, Bateson maintains: “*What “thinks” or engages in “trial and error” is the man plus the computer plus the environment. And the lines between man, computer, and environment are purely artificial, fictitious lines. They are lines across the pathways along which information or difference is transmitted. They are not boundaries in the thinking system. What thinks is the total systems which engages in trial and error, which is man plus environment*” [2, p 491]. Latour holds a similar position in his account for the actor-network approach, when he calls the process of

transportation of difference through transformations for ‘translation’: “*Without accounts, without trials, without differences, without transformation in some state of affairs, there is no meaningful argument to be made about a given agency, no detectable frame of reference. An invisible agency that makes no difference, produces no transformation, leaves no trace, and enters no account is not an agency.*” [5, p. 53]

TRANSLATION IN PRACTICE, IN PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

The problem of understanding users and giving users a voice is always debated among participatory designers. The risk of framing users as victims and designers as heros, and the technology as a potential solution has been debated [9,5]. Framing the problem of understanding users and giving users a voice as translation, leaves out the possibility of seeing ‘users’ as generalized others, and focus on what is at hand: languages/texts/observable behavior.

Intuitively, we westerners think about problem solving in terms of cause-and effect relationships, a model of how we interact with the world in line with Norman’s popular description of crossing a divide from intention to execution and back through perception and evaluation: We have a problem, and we solve it by interacting with the world [7, p.47]. Working with translations we have to break away from thinking in models and from our Cartesian heritage. We must take the trouble to grasp in our design practice Bateson’s and Latour’s idea of following “*pathways along which information or difference is transmitted*” , which implies a shift from a problem focus to a pattern and pathway-focus.

Latour uses the word ‘translation’ to “*designate this thing which is neither one actor among many nor a force behind all actors transported through some of them but a connection that transports, so to speak transformations*” [6, p. 108]

Reading Wodiszko’s account for how he interacted with homeless people on Manhattan described in his ‘Conversations about a project for a Homeless Vehicle (1988)’ [10] is my loadstar in this paradigm shift. I find a clear illustration of how translation at eye level can move designers from trying to solve a problem they think users have, towards a much more open form-giving approach. I have made a (maybe too) short excerpt, in order to make my point:

W, when demonstrating his prototype to a group of homeless: “*Now, don’t laugh, because after what you told me last time I feel that the basket part design for collecting cans is not that good, but the rest ...*”

...

W: “*This is a little shorter and narrower than a standard bed, because we don’t want to make it too large*”

O: "Right, you've got to be stable to keep it consumption size. If you make it too bulky, the person operating it will have a lot of problems behind it."

W: "Meaning its weight?"

O: "Not the weight, but police, traffic, people in general."

W: "But folded this shape is the minimum size, because the length of the bed, that is, the length of the vehicle unfolded, determined its height, but that's also a good height for sitting up"

O: "Rightthe only complication that you might run into is that you have to make it big enough for collection. The minimum weight that people take is ten cases. You have to be able to hold, say, at least 500 bottles, and cans ..."

W: "500?"

O: 240 is ten cases, so you double 240, you get 480, so 500 bottles and cans. Your weight comes from the bottles, not from cans or plastics. ... "

W: "So do you think that this will be enough space? When I look at your vehicle, I ... Would it be necessary to design separate areas for bottles?" [10, p. 86-87].

For quite a while the dialogue runs smoothly like W & O are in full agreement. The turning point is 500. The amount makes W stop and think. He realizes that what is on O's mind is having a vehicle for transporting cans and bottles, while W has given priority to designing a proper mobile home, centered around the sleeping facility. As this difference sinks in, however, we see how the designer Wodiszko drops his interest in designing a bed for the bed-less, and become a designer for can-transporters. He follows the lead, he got from translating his own idea into something both parties can relate to.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion is that comparison between languages/texts/cultures cannot be a cognitive, analytical activity, should it have any bearings on participatory design. It is way-faring from point to point in a process of translation, which implies transformation. For participatory design practitioners' comparison can be a springboard to generate new ideas. Such method of translation requires, however, a paradigm shift from understanding participatory design as a problem solving activity, to understanding participatory design as a change activity aiming at generating as many links as possible between active translations. Ap-

propriation of ICT then, means opening to possibilities, not accommodation to a fixed end. The clue is to stay 'on the ground': You say tomato, and I say tomato, and we will continue doing so, but looking each other into the eyes, we acknowledge our different pronunciation and their cultural roots, respect it, and through this process we come to share an understanding – of our difference, and can then maybe play with it. This is opposed to try to explain the one with the other, to reduce instead of multiply, which is when misunderstanding arises. Translation at eye level is a matter of opening for projection – and this goes for the process as well as for the product of participatory design.

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