Participatory design as ethical practice – concepts, reality and conditions

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide a response to Christiansen’s paper, Ellen Christiansen (2014) “From ‘ethics of the eye’ to ‘ethics of the hand’ by collaborative prototyping”, Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society, Vol. 12 No. 1.

Design/methodology/approach – Reflection and critique of Christiansen’s position.

Findings – The paper raises questions about the conceptual basis, the realisation of participation and the conditions required for participative practice to be more broadly employed.

Originality/value – It is an original response.

Keywords Ethics, Philosophy, Computer ethics

Paper type Viewpoint

In her paper on “From ethics of the eye to ethics of the hand in participatory design and development of digital technologies” Ellen Christiansen suggests that ethics can be found in practice and gains relevance through interaction. Drawing on the idea of mimesis as initially proposed by Aristotle and developed by Ricoeur she argues that participative design allows for the collaborative development of ethical positions.

I am sympathetic to the idea and agree that participative methods may well hold the key to identifying and dealing with many potential ethical consequences of ICT. In this commentary I would nevertheless like to ask the following questions:

- To what degree can this approach address the breadth of issues covered by the term ethics?
- If the claims put forward by Christiansen are correct, then why are participative design practices not more widely established?
- Drawing on an alternative definition of ethics by Ricoeur, I ask which conditions need to be fulfilled for participative design to be successful?

I will draw on the current discussion of responsible research and innovation (RRI) in ICT to argue that participation can only be one aspect of a broader space that will need to be explored to ensure the acceptability and desirability of ICT design and the resulting artefacts.

Participation and the concept of ethics

As indicated above, I share Christiansen’s position that participation is the key to many important aspects of ethics in ICT. Ethical perceptions and positions are often embedded in practices. Understanding such practices can require shared experiences as shown in one of the examples provided by Christiansen. One problem with this position, however,
is that it only partially covers what we understand by the term “ethics”. I have recently suggested (Stahl, 2012) that it may be helpful to distinguish between four different levels of abstraction relating to ethics: moral intuition (what we believe to be right and wrong), explicit morality (clear expression of rules governing right or wrong), ethical reflection (review and justification of moral rules) and meta-ethics (reflection of theoretical ethical positions). These four levels are very different in terms of content and in the way they influence our behaviour. They are nevertheless all important and constitute different aspects of what we mean by ethics.

This classification of aspects of ethics is important with regards to Christiansen’s paper because it points to strengths and weaknesses of participation. Practical participative engagement with stakeholders allows the designer to surface moral positions, for example in terms of the expectations and ambitions participants have. It can even cover ethical reflection by exploring why participants believe in particular moral rights or wrongs. Despite these strengths, a participative approach can have blind spots. Christiansen’s example of the design of vehicles for homeless in New York demonstrates this. The design in this case was motivated by the moral outrage about homelessness. Yet, in the end, the design accepts the socio-economic conditions that cause the outrage. It improves the lot of the homeless somewhat, but fails to address the underlying problem of homelessness in an affluent society. This should not be read as a fundamental critique of the case. There may be good reasons for accepting the status quo. What I am trying say is that even the normativity arising from participative interaction can be questioned and that this may not be possible within the context of participation itself.

Why is participative design not more widely established?

The next question I would like to raise is: if the advantages of participative design are truly as Christiansen suggests, then why is it not more broadly accepted in ICT design. There may be empirical differences between disciplines, industries or cultures in the degree to which they use participative approaches. They are probably more strongly developed in Scandinavian countries where many of these approaches were developed. As far as I can see, however, they remain marginal in commercial design practice.

To make the point I will therefore draw on what may well be the most widely used English-language method of integrating participation into information systems design, namely Mumford’s (1995) ETHICS methodology. ETHICS is an acronym standing for “effective technical and human implementation of computer systems”. Mumford spent most of her working life developing and refining participative methods and applying these to the design and development of computing artefacts (Mumford and Henshall, 1978; Mumford and Ward, 1968; Mumford, 1996, 2003). Mumford suggested similar arguments in favour of her method to the ones employed by Christiansen, namely that it is intrinsically and morally good to listen to stakeholders affected by one’s work and that is functionally good by improving the knowledge base and information flow.

The downsides of ETHICS and any other participative activity include that they cost time and other resources. Maybe more importantly they add to the complexity of the development process. And it may well be that in cases of radical innovation participation is problematic because users, customers and other stakeholders may not be able to relate to a technology that they are completely unfamiliar with.

What this suggests is that there are balancing decisions to be made when deciding whether to employ participatory methods. There will be development processes that
strongly call for participation, but in other cases it may be less appropriate. A full analysis of the reason for the relatively low level of acceptance of participatory practices would likely uncover a complex mix of influencing factors and could be interpreted in many different ways (Elbanna and Newman, 2013). If we return to the idea that participation is an expression of an ethical approach, then the relative paucity of participative work raises the question of whether it would be possible and desirable to broaden its appeal.

Conditions of broadening participative research

Christiansen suggests that Ricoeur’s hermeneutics can provide an appropriate position demonstrating the ethical value of participation. I agree with this in principle but would suggest looking at Ricoeur’s (1990, 1995) explicit discussion of ethics that he developed in detail in his later work. In this work he develops the position that the ethical aim is to aim at the good life which is lived with and for the other in just institutions[1]. This short response does not offer the space to adequately discuss Ricoeur’s position nor the way in which it maps onto Christiansen’s position. The reason for introducing it was to argue that Christiansen’s view on participative design probably fits well in the aspect of living with and for the other. The initial motivation, for example the intention of addressing homelessness, can be read as an expression of the classical aim of living the good life. What Christiansen may be missing, however, is the aspect of just institutions.

For Ricoeur the aspect of just institutions refers to broader societal and democratic structures governing society. The point that I would like to make is that such just institutions may well influence organisational practice. They may be required to provide incentives for desired types of behaviour. In the case of participative design such incentives may be required to counteract prevailing incentives that privilege financial considerations. This may be part of the answer to the question posed in the previous section, namely why there is a relatively low level of take-up of participative approaches and methodologies. If the analysis is correct that in the current socio-economic climate the disadvantages of participation often outweigh the functional and ethical advantages, then the response may be to think about institutions that can change the incentive structure.

I believe that this is one key aspect of the discourse that is currently held under the heading of responsible innovation or RRI. The aim of RRI is to ensure the desirability and acceptability of research processes and products (Owen et al., 2013; Von Schomberg, 2011). It is thus closely related to the older discussion in computer ethics of how ICT resources can be developed and utilised in order to maximise social benefit.

The RRI discourse is currently strongly promoted by the European Commission, which has defined RRI as a cross-cutting theme governing all research under the Horizon 2020 research programme that will run from 2014 to 2020 and have a financial value of over €70 billion. Corresponding activities can be observed in some EU member states but also elsewhere, such as the USA where many of the RRI ideas and principles originated.

At this point it is not settled how exactly RRI will be implemented. The reason for bringing up RRI in this comment is that it provides a broader context in which to reflect about ethics in ICT research and development. Public participation and participative research are recognised as an integral component of RRI, thus mirroring Christiansen’s position. At the same time, RRI shows that there are numerous other
aspects of research and innovation that need to be considered to achieve the goals of acceptability and desirability. And this leads back to Ricoeur’s recognition of the importance of just institutions. In order to achieve Christiansen’s goal of promoting participative research, we not only need to think about participative methods per se, but also about the societal context and the incentive structures required for researchers to engage with it.

In this spirit the present comment will hopefully have contributed to broadening the debate beyond participation and underlined that this will require institutions and social structures, including incentive structures to make it reality. The current discussion on how RRI is to be implemented offers and exciting opportunity to shape such institutions which should help us achieve a more inclusive research process and more desirable products.

Note

References

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