At whos expense the victory ball?

Narratives and soft power in citizen engagement.

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The books are filled with names of kings.

Was it the kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?

And Babylon, so many times destroyed.

Who built the city up each time? In which of Lima's houses,

That city glittering with gold, lived those who built it?

In the evening when the Chinese wall was finished

Where did the masons go? Imperial Rome

- Bertold Brecht "A worker reads history" (1947)

ABSTRACT

This paper considers the narratives that underlie community engagement strategies and citizen engagement. By constructing narratives around inclusion and democracy a branding has taken place, making a project appear more favorable. But to truly engage a community is difficult, as social infrastructures are to a greater or lesser extent conflicting, agonistic, and feral [1].

To construct narratives of democratic inclusion where no such inclusion has taken place is not only technically wrong, it is also a degree of soft power. Soft power, as opposed to hard power, means to get ones' way by co-option rather than coercion. But it is nonetheless an exercise of power.

Scandinavian participatory design has traditionally been dedicated to amplifying marginalized voices. The paper argues that participatory design both stands at a great, ever-present risk of becoming a tool for co-opting participants – but also that the discipline holds strategies for preventing this.

The books are filled with the names of kings

In his poem "A worker reads history" Bertold Brecht recounts events, both historical and legendary, with a focus on the invisible masses. Quite poignantly he asks who toiled to built the grand castles of yore, who suffered in the battlefields - and who lived in the grand halls, who danced at the victory ball? Who are the people that history books omitted?

The following story might not be entirely true, but that does not matter because I have heard it, and so has other people in Malmö, Sweden. The story tells us that there was a grand innovation project, with a generous bit of funding, about a decade or so ago. The project brought together researchers, public sector workers, and engaged citizens around questions of segregation and how to "build the city whole again". The project allegedly ran for three years and during this time the project's ambition fell remarkably. At the end of the project, I have been told, all that the promises of working towards a unified city had boiled down to was a pink markings along a bike path from one part of the city to another. People who dedicated time and energy to the process tell this story with exasperation and annoyance, they feel cheated. There is another side to this story, of course, and there are project reports and newspaper articles that both discuss the shortcomings and the merits of the work. I have not met anyone involved with the project who has deemed it, or attempted to claim it as, a success, but there are those who are more nuanced and perhaps forgiving in their retelling of the events. This paper does not seek to crown a winner, but merely to say that this is something that happens. The grander the narrative, the stronger the counter-narrative. The grander the promise, the bigger the disappointment.

Conducting citizen dialogue is today a very common part of municipal processes [2], particularly within the sectors around city planning and construction [3]. It is encouraged through policy documents, supported through funding bodies who directly or implicitly hold public engagement as a prerequisite [4] [5]. As a consequence, many citizen engagement processes are actualised as an ad-hoc to the actual project, or facilitated by people with limited experience of hosting dialogues. The benefit of having citizen engagement as part of a projects' repertoire is that a narrative can be built

where the project is democratic, anchored within for example a local community. This in turn can be used to validate the project, and produce attraction towards it. In reality, to listen to a group or community takes effort and is often a contradictory experience. The process of democratisation takes work in each step of the way: in the preparations, in the productive stages of the project, and in the evaluation of the project. It is rare that the narratives, such as the one listed above, become the dominant narratives. Instead we construct stories that are partial, and favourable, to the end-results.

So many particulars. So many questions.

Participatory design has a history of grappling with complex, agonistic publics [6]. The notion of infrastructuring [7][8] serves both a descriptive, theoretical tool, and a praxis through which the infrastructures can be handled. In this paper I will argue that one of the most crucial steps forward, to prevent infrastructuring to become an exercise in soft power is to acknowledge the "feral".

Feral infrastructuring [1] suggest an added dimension to infrastructures. While we tend to think of infrastructures as deliberately constructed and often efficient, feral infrastructures suggest that many of the connections are coincidental, that most intersections are messy, that parts of the infrastructure work against each other. This is near inevitable as each actor within a network carries many roles, something that is particularly true when it comes to citizen engagement. A programmer may also be a mother and an active member of the local football team, for example. Or the architect may have just recently moved from one department to another, still close friends with his old colleagues. In whatever form they may take these alliances or commitments inform the participants and facilitators interests and engagement in a project, and it follows that they may want very different things from the same process.

Infrastructuring, as it is understood within Participatory design, means to construct and maintain socio-material infrastructures together with the participants.

> "Democracy is a fluid process; once it stagnates, it dies. Infrastructuring is the labour required to keep the infrastructures democratic, moving, changing and developing. Infrastructuring of workplaces or information systems begs that we keep lifting in those participants who can affect it, those whose perspective has been marginalised" [9]

Understanding the conflicting nature of the infrastructure becomes imperative when seeking to understand soft power. When hierarchies are concealed, or when voices of discontent are silenced, soft power is enacted. Feminist scholar Sara

Ahmed has given the example of how a university board reconstructed narrative after an employee had made a complaint about racism in the workplace, by assembling a new anti-racism board. By creating the board, a narrative could be written that *something was being done*, whilst in reality nothing was being done. Soft power is being actualised in the final narratives of projects, but as in Ahmed's example it also lives in the working process.

It is imperative that we confront soft power in both of these stages, and write narratives unlike those described by Brecht. Narratives that include, narratives that take accountability and narratives that acknowledge at *whos expense the victory ball* was held.

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