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# The Design of Pseudo-Participation

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## ABSTRACT

Participation is key to building an equitable, realistic and democratic future. Yet a lack of agency in decision making and agenda-setting is a growing phenomenon in the design of digital public services. We call this pseudo-participation by and in design. The configuration of digital artifacts and/or processes can provide an illusion of participation but lack supportive processes and affordances to allow meaningful participation to happen. This exploratory paper examines the realm of pseudo-participation in the design of public digital services through two concepts: 1) pseudo-participation *by* design, digital interfaces, and tools that provide the illusion of participation to the people, 2) pseudo-participation *in* design, processes in which those affected by the design decisions are marginalized and not given any agency. We contribute to the re-imagination of participatory design in modern societies where the role of politics has become ubiquitous and is yet to be critically scrutinized by designers.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Applied computing** → **E-government**; • **Human-centered computing** → **Interaction design process and methods**.

## KEYWORDS

digital services, technocratic clientelism, pseudo-participation by design, pseudo-participation in design, user configuration

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Participatory design has always sought to embrace "change by design" [13]. In these works, change by design often occurs through

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promoting democratic ideals, improving life for everyone and encouraging positive change [16]. After all, participatory design is rooted in concerns for accountabilities in technology design and power-sharing structures, which traditionally were studied at workplaces [56]. As we are living in the era of participatory culture [12, 20], participatory models have been proposed as a way to address many design issues, ranging from workplace information systems and city planning to environment and social policy issues [1, 32, 54]. Today, participation is often mediated through digital tools, many of which have been designed and/or studied using participatory design lenses [4, 5, 47]. Therefore, the goal of participatory design has been to empower the user both as a designer and as a user of technical artifacts (see Fig 1). However, often these digital services are aimed at consultation and instrumentation as the only forms of participation [37].

	participatory	pseudo-participatory
Participants...		
in ... design	shape the artifacts	have no agency to influence design decisions
by ... design	are empowered by the artifact	have a role that is configured by the artifact

Figure 1: The role of participants in (pseudo-) PD

In the area of digital tools, the importance of participatory design is well understood. The scholarship has shown that values and decisions from positions of power are always embedded into the artifacts [39, 58]. These concerns are also present when we discuss platforms and tools which are designed to support participation. Therefore, to ensure that the aims of accountability and power-sharing are met, it becomes imperative to talk about the power dynamics involved in the creation of civic platforms. For example, municipal websites in Norway have been reported to mostly configure<sup>1</sup> their users as consumers or clients of municipal services—not

<sup>1</sup>User configuration refers to the way technologies define/limit people's behaviors

as active citizens with political interests [26]. Through the design and implementation of the website, city officials embedded assumptions about the expected roles of the inhabitants of the city as part of the codebase.

In certain cases, the empowering goals of participatory design are not achieved through its processes. We illustrate such cases in the right-side column of Fig 1. First, it is possible that even when participation is the aim, the role of participants becomes limited throughout the design process. A process can be pre-set by an external agenda and not offer any meaningful power to the people, thus leading to participation without agency. Second, it is possible that a tool that is developed through participatory design processes does not empower its users to exercise meaningful and relevant participation.

Pseudo-participation is used here to refer to *participation without agency* either configured by a designed artifact or within the design process itself.

## 2 PARTICIPATION, PSEUDO-PARTICIPATION AND DIGITAL POLITICS

Democratic societies strive to embed participation in the direction and operation of political systems in different ways. However, participation has always been a complex concept in practice. Famous examples like the Ladder of Citizen Participation [2], the separation of informative, consultative and discursive interaction [9], different knowledge levels (e.g., [21]), and other typologies of participation and democracy (among many others [15, 22, 27, 36, 46]), show versatility of participation. A participatory initiative may have several aims, not all of which focus on engaging with people. Rather, sometimes the aim is to start a process to only give an impression of real engagement. This is known as technocratic clientelism ("*state-led regime with clientelistic mediation between the state and society*" [19, p.17]) and it is characterized by an appearance of political effectiveness by the creation of participatory processes, where both popular control and people's agency are virtually non-existent [3, 18, 19].

Technocratic clientelism is part of a larger phenomenon of pseudo-participation. Midgley [31] refers to pseudo-participation to define participation aimed at the ratification of decisions already made by external bodies. In participatory budgeting settings, participation might occur without an influence on the outcomes [24, 42]. Pseudo-participation is also a term described in management studies as a mechanism to cultivate an impression of openness but carefully retain decision-making [40]. A similar phenomenon has been documented in social contexts as "*tokenism*", where the goal is to involve a minority representative to portray an impression of social inclusiveness (e.g. racial diversity) [8].

Research across online deliberation, social media, and politics, as well as social computing scholarship, is actively engaged in the study of ICT-enabled tools that may support democracies [51]. Given the digital nature of these tools, there is a body of research that has addressed both the (1) technical aspects of the digital interfaces (e.g. [14, 61]) as well as (2) social practices which emerge when people interact through digital interfaces (e.g., [17, 48]). However, this type of work often overlooks the well-documented fact that digital interfaces embody particular values, norms, and assumptions [39, 58].

### 2.1 Pseudo-participation by Design

Academic research and journalism have highlighted the value-laden nature of digital tools and their construction, for example by exposing algorithmic biases [6, 7, 41] and demonstrating how people can find themselves exposed as a result of media malinformation, misinformation, disinformation, and polarization [11, 38, 44]. For example, during the 2019 elections in Finland, a public debate emerged about an algorithm implemented in a voting advice application. This demonstrated the increased public attention to the construction of digital interfaces and their politics [28].

Pseudo-participation by design emerges through the interaction with a configured artifact (i.e. digital service) that creates an impression of affecting change through digital interaction. In reality, these artifact's affordances have been pre-set by an agenda and do not offer any meaningful power to the people. They configure the role of the user (e.g. information consumer) and limit the ways they can interact with the tools. Enabling digital participation without giving any real agency. This augments an existing lack of transparency in institutionalized participatory processes. In them the main focus is to collect as many opinions as possible as opposed to opening-up the mechanisms in play during all decision making stages.

Power relates to the opportunity to reconfigure users' roles in digital services. Pseudo-participation by design hurts the willingness to participate, reduces trust in government, and diminishes the ability to create social capital. Through the design and implementation of an artifact (e.g. a website), city officials can embed assumptions about what are the expected roles of the inhabitants of the city [26]. Some instances of pseudo-participation by design are:

2.1.1 *Pre-set agendas.* can be observed in online consultations (e.g. web surveys) where residents are involved in a consultative manner only at the last stages of decision making. For instance, a city launches a survey to ask residents to choose a color for the new buses in their city without giving the opportunity to deliberate on whether there should be new routes or other approaches to solving their traffic issues [52]. However, this type of pseudo-participation by design can also be observed by pre-set options in questionnaires. For example, in a city survey, people are given the option to choose which is the most important area to improve in their city from three pre-selected options (see table 1).

Which of the following do you think is most important in developing the municipality of ...?

- 1) Independent municipality: zoning, new construction sites, development of downtown and villages.
- 2) Business development: bioenergy, local food, tourism
- 3) Culture and Nature as Promoters of Well-Being: A Cultural City, Developing a Culture of Well-Being

**Table 1: Exemplary of survey of city priorities (source [33])**

## 2.2 Pseudo-participation in Design

Participatory design from its start has sought to democratize technology creation by opening up design and computing to those who will be affected by the artifacts [25]. However, this promise can sometimes fall short. Participatory design processes can result in limited involvement by those who will be affected by design decisions. Most typically, this manifests as introducing people's participation purely as an instrument - for example, incentivizing residents to report potholes in the city through a city website - and constraining other forms of participation. This phenomenon is what we call pseudo-participation in design.

The power of making decisions about technologies for public use manifests also in the processes of design. Although many claim to be using participatory approaches such as participatory design or co-creation when designing digital services, but in reality, often those affected by the design decisions are marginalized and not involved in the design decisions loop [19]. The quality of popular control in pseudo participatory processes is very low [19]. Some instances of pseudo-participation in the design are:

**2.2.1 Participatory budgeting.** has become a popular approach to involve people in the process of deciding how an allocated part of the public budget is spent. Since the 1980s when Porto Alegre implemented participatory budgeting [30, p.24], hundreds of cities across the planet have also implemented it. Currently, Portugal is aiming to scale it nationally for the first time in history. Cities like Paris have complemented participatory budgeting platforms with coordinated offline meet-ups with people to reduce the digital divide effects of the platform. Indeed, participatory budgeting is a process, not a product [29]. However, some implementations of participatory budgeting have become forms of pseudo-participation by design, when these processes are used as a way to legitimize budget cuts or to exclude certain groups [43, 50, 57]. For example, Bodin [19] documented how in Santa Cruz, Bolivia their participatory budgeting process gives no genuine control to the people. Technical experts control major decisions and political operatives control minor street-level decisions. People have little agency or control over the decisions. Only non-budgetary issues are subject to popular control, for example, the question where projects decreed from above should go. Indigenous populations and regime opposition are systematically excluded from the process. Furthermore, they are counted as supporters/non-supporters on the initiatives regardless of whether this is true or not. Despite these issues, the local government has managed to create an appearance of institutional effectiveness: the city's budgetary execution rate has been amongst the highest in Bolivia, yet the link between popular demands and city actions is quite limited and often non-existent.

**2.2.2 Naming competitions.** became quite popular during the last decade. The idea is simple: A public consultation over the name of something is open, and everyone can submit an idea. The idea with the most votes wins. This was seen as a way to give power to people over something small. Often, people would use these platforms to have fun and submit imaginative names. It is telling that in instances where the citizens' choices are not considered "appropriate" by those in power, even these little pockets of choice are dismissed after the fact. Most famously perhaps, the British

natural environment research council launched an online poll to name a major research vessel in 2016. The public overwhelmingly voted for "Boaty McBoatface". But the results of the vote were not followed, and the ship ultimately received another name [23].

**2.2.3 Smart cities.** are built with data, often crowdsourced by the residents. In the mainstream discourse on smart cities, data are often upheld as a neutral authority and not scrutinized, when in reality, they are highly contextual, collected with a purpose, and almost never guaranteed to be unbiased [10]. More and more cities across the world are prioritizing data capture and analysis as a means of informing policy development [35]. These models of technocratic governance claim to empower people through open, transparent information [34, 35]. However, in this model, governments treat people as instruments for data collection that provide information about something (e.g. potholes) in the hope of gaining better city services in the future. Cities make policies based on the data collected through this type of process.

When people aim to take a position and create datasets that reflect their lived experiences, and these counter the city's representation, the data is often regarded as flawed and limited and may even be disregarded entirely from the policymaking process [49]. Yet, any dataset is inherently biased. For instance, Shelton describes a case where a neighborhood in the US launched a community mapping initiative. Their goal was to map vacant properties using pen, papers and on-the-ground deployments to dispute the city's records and a basis for policy. The initiative gathered more contextual data than the city had available, including immediate spatial context, third party liens, and ownership. City policies would not allow counter data to be used in decision making.

## 3 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Whether in the design process or through the designed artifact, the nature of participation in design is bounded by the materiality and socio-technical contexts of the participation approach. Many concerns about participation are familiar to those working on participatory designs. Focusing the attention on the concept of pseudo-participation may create a productive space for a critical analysis of participation in a variety of contexts. We, therefore, suggest to ask:

**3.0.1 How does technology configure participants?** There is a long tradition of examining technology and politics [39, 58], as well as concerns about how users are configured through technologies [59]. However, we have not engaged the question of how specific kinds of configurations take place through participatory technology. For example, if participants' role is to respond exclusively to multiple-choice questions about predefined issues, and not to deliberate, then they can be described as a data source in the participatory process, not an active designer choosing how the data is used (see Fig 2).

**3.0.2 To pseudo-participate or not to participate?** Why do people take part in pseudo-participation? Even though from a narrow utilitarian viewpoint, voters have little incentive to vote since their vote on its own has minimal impact, people do in fact vote [45]. Riker explains that there is some level of civic duty that people seek to fulfill when they vote. Similarly, in the case of pseudo-participation, it may be that those participating acknowledge their

participants are...	in PD	in pseudo-PD
in design	designer	data source
by design	decision maker	data collector

**Figure 2: Configuration of participant roles in pseudo-participation vs real participation**

limited abilities to influence formal decision-making process. People who create petitions in the UK acknowledge that those are not likely to change government policy [60] but seek to participate through this channel anyway. A research agenda in pseudo-participation could be to understand the experience of pseudo-participation and potential benefits emerging from those experiences.

**3.0.3 Pseudo-participation in a wider socio-cultural system.** Pseudo-participation highlights how important exploring participation not only through tools but in a wider context is. It is not sufficient that a tool supports participation, but rather they need a supportive process as well [55]. The case of Boaty McBoatface shows how even when technology allows detailed participation, the process might fail. We highlight how technology solutions created in a participatory process should not only enable people’s participation in design but should be co-owned by everyone, hence the benefits should be equitable [53]. The breadth of this concept is yet to be explored in light of social, geopolitical and economic factors. These aspects may significantly influence ways in which pseudo-participation is embedded in socio-technical systems.

This paper explores the concept of pseudo-participation and illustrated it with examples that showed how pseudo-participation manifests. We distinguish two forms: (1) pseudo-participation *in design* configures participants’ agency in the design process in a way that relegates them to the role of a data source without decision power. (2) Pseudo-participation *by design* manifests through systems that facilitate a specific form of participation in which participants are configured into narrow roles of data collectors. Recognizing these narrowing visions of participation can be a starting point to initiate a conversation about emancipation and empowerment in the service of truly participatory design approaches and services.

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