Smuggling ideologies? Inquiring into the underlying ideas embedded in design for public governance and policy-making

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Figure 1 Smuggling Ideologies: Inquiring into the underlying ideas embedded in design for public governance and policy-making

This Conversation asked participants to inquire about the underlying ideas on the use of design approaches within the public sector, specifically when contributing towards the development of public policies and governance. The aim was set on discussing the potential ideological co-optation of the design approaches currently in use. Likewise, it was intended to bring together practitioners and researchers to debate the political implications of using design methods and tools in the public sphere.
The session consisted of an initial provocation, followed by a discussion and questions for further development. Participants were asked to exchange their thoughts, firstly in groups and finally in a plenary discussion. Groups were organised around three ways in which design approaches are introduced into the public sector: discourses, techniques and artefacts. These three groups, each focussing around one way, exchanged their thoughts from different perspectives before feeding back into the overall Conversation. By the end of the session, participants and convenors reflected on the main arguments and offered questions for further discussion. All participants agreed upon continuing the Conversation by other means after DRS Conference. Convenors organised and distributed the conversation’s outputs to foster the post-conference discussion.

**Keywords:** governance; policy-making; ideology; design

1 **Organising question(s) or provocations**

The proposed research questions aimed at unearthing underlying ideas which shape the tools and promote expanding ‘not noticeable’ ideologies when introducing and applying design approaches into the public sector:

- What are the ideologies design tools and approaches used in government/policy are carrying with them?
- What are the limitations when designing to produce a change in society from a public-sector perspective?

Whereas the first question led the Conversation during the group discussion, the second one was proposed as a follow-up to the plenary discussion. The two were proposed after presenting an example providing insights on a government introducing a social policy. The example based on the Uruguayan government showed, on the one hand, the idea of co-creation through an innovation lab, and on the other, a successful public policy which was not conceived using such approaches. This example was given to problematise the discourse around design—and innovation—in the public sector, and that of traditional policymaking posing also questions regarding the current trend of co-participation as the hegemonic approach to conceiving public policies. The policy example, it was argued, would not have been possible to be implemented by those means in the timeframe and conditions it was. Furthermore, the example and the discussion were framed in terms of three ways in which design approaches can be introduced into the public sector (see Figure 2), offering a framework for their understanding whilst facilitating a discussion of the underlying ideas within them.
2 The Conversation

2.1 Conversation Set-up

With the aim of incorporating and documenting the contributions of the delegates, the session was structured in three stages: introduction and provocation, discussion, and questions for further development. Likewise, the room was set-up to foster group discussions around the three ways in which design approaches can be introduced to the public sector, namely through its discourses, techniques, and artefacts. For this, the room was organised in three areas and material including pictures, reports’ excerpts, manifestos, and web-site screenshots were provided for each of theme (See Figure 3).

The material consisted of a range of elements from organisations which, at different levels and with different aims, utilise design discourses, techniques (methods), and artefacts in their public-sphere related activities. The utilised material belongs to the following organisations:

- AGESIC Social Innovation Lab for Digital Government – Uruguay
- CISNA -Colombia
- City of Helsinki Lab - Finland
This selection made to facilitate the illustration of concepts and ideas was based on the condition of material familiar to the convenors and easily accessible to the delegates after the Conversation.

Throughout the session, both convenors shared equal responsibilities, presenting the Conversation and framing the discussion at each stage. In practice that implied they joined all three groups during their focused discussions and accompanied the plenary discussion by moderating it as well as commenting on specific points. This allowed for note-taking to keep a record of the ideas exchanged.

### 2.2 What took place

#### 2.2.1 Provocation - 15 min

The session started with a brief introduction of the convenors followed by an introduction to the issues prompting the Conversation topic. Sparking a tone for the Conversation, the convenors presented a quote from Opazo et al (2017), in which the role of tools as conditioning political artefacts is highlighted as central in understanding how design and politics are becoming increasingly intertwined:

> Arguing that the conventional boundaries that separated design from politics have begun to dissolve, Winner says we should better understand tools and instruments as the political artefacts that strongly condition the shared experience of power, authority, order, and freedom in modern society (Opazo et al., 2017, p.75)

This also allowed the convenors to more seamlessly introduce the proposed framework of discourses, techniques, and artefacts as a means of studying the ideas embedded in the design approaches utilised within the public sector. Furthermore, and in order to avoid a reductionist perception of the framework, an example was presented and dissected using the framework as to help in the understanding of the systemic view it can provide.

The example was two-fold: Firstly, it presented AGESIC Lab, a ‘Laboratory of Social Innovation in Digital Government’ created within Uruguay’s government to introduce co-creation approaches in a governmental agency. AGESIC, the Uruguayan government agency pursuing open and e-government, started operating in 2005 and works on transparency and digitisation of public services. In 2015, it implemented a social innovation lab to start including the users in the processes of changing governmental bureaucracies. The lab had received training from the Danish Mindlab (Totorica et al., 2016), and technical and financial support from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) (Acevedo & Dassen, 2016).
Following the introduced framework we identified:

- **Discourses**: transparency and innovation in the public sector, through flexibilisation, experimentation, and co-creation with users
- **Techniques**: co-creation, participation, human-centred design
- **Artefacts**: persona creation, user journey map, empathy map

Secondly, it presented the delegates with a sound case of a public policy which functioned as Uruguay’s local implementation of Nicholas Negroponte’s One Laptop Per Child project (One Laptop per Child, 2011). This has locally been called Plan Ceibal (see Figure 3) and since its introduction in 2007, it has delivered circa 450,000 laptops to every student and teacher in primary education level (Ceibal.edu.uy, n.d.). Applying the framework to the case we identified:

- **Artefact**: free XO Laptops for students and teachers in the public primary education system.
- **Techniques**: programming, robotics, and English language lessons.
- **Discourse**: introduce Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in an effort to bridge the digital divide whilst increasing the digital literacy of future generations.
intended to assist in carrying a counterfactual exercise, in which the delegates could debate on the limitations of design’s co-participatory approaches to public policy-making based on the example.

2.2.2 Discussion in groups - 40 min
After having introduced the framing for the discussion, delegates were separated into three groups to discuss the question “what are the ideologies design tools and approaches used in government/policy are carrying with them?” The triadic framework discourses-techniques-artefacts was used to approach the question from three different perspectives, one by each group. Interestingly, each group made use of the provided material in different ways and therefore built their arguments in a different fashion. Whereas the group working on design artefacts (see Figure 5) picked one artefact (City of Helsinki Lab’s Participation Game) and analysed it as to elicit ideologies embedded in it, the group addressing the question from the perspective of the design discourses gathered around the material’s table and standing shared their views. Somewhere in between, the group discussing the design techniques brought all the material to their table and developed a concept map drawing on their ideas.

![Figure 5 Design artefacts' discussion table](image)

2.2.3 Discussion in plenary - 25 min
The third and last part of the Conversation focused on each group presenting their thoughts on the question from their lens of the framework. While one group shared their ideas the other two offered feedback and comments from their perspective. Although most of the time allocated for this activity was spent on the groups’ presentations of their insights, the convenors introduced the second question: What are the limitations design as an approach has when producing a change in society from a public-sector perspective?
This question was implicitly suggested during the introduction of the example in the first part of the Conversation. However, the convenors’ aim was to allow the discussion in terms of the underlying ideologies during the group phase, to later link it to the limitations those ideologies – and propagation – may pose.

2.3 Outcomes
The Conversation produced a multiplicity of new questions ranging from the interrogation of design tools as means of introducing designerly ways in other realms (such as public policymaking), to the questioning of design in the public sector as a cover-up for the reduction of public expenditure. In the broader sense, the Conversation’s outcomes do not refer to definite answers to the questions posed (though, these were not expected), but to the development of more sophisticated ones which could ultimately define a research agenda on the issues of design in the public sector.

Perhaps one of the most salient insights for the convenors was the realisation that the Conversation delegates were not only deeply concerned about the issues presented but that they also brought with themselves profound arguments both from the academic and the professional world (see Figure 6). This should not surprise anybody in the setting of an academic conference, however, the issues addressed during the Conversation are not commonly touched upon in the policy design literature and they do not represent archetypical problems discussed on design education either. In any case, this shows a disciplinary concern with a critical understanding of the role design plays in shaping society.

2.4 Reflections and further steps
The Conversation enabled to begin a discussion amongst design scholars and practitioners, about the ideological implications of introducing design in the public realm. Design has entered
government in a fast-paced manner and there is a need to reflect on the worldviews it carries. During the Conversation, delegates were eager to start discussing from the very beginning, introducing some modifications in the Conversation’s agenda. Combined with the session’s limited time-frame, it did not allow for developing a shared vision of future research on the discussed issues, as it was originally intended. However, the delegates’ interest in continuing the discussion allowed the convenors to move the Conversation beyond the conference. To date, a number of follow-up Conversations between delegates and convenors had been taking place after the conference and it is expected that the dissemination of the Conversation’s material will evolve into further discussions.

It is important to note that prior to the Conversation taking place, the convenors aimed to foster the delegates’ engagement through the Disqus Forum. Although this proved to be an ineffective way of generating momentum, the Keynote Debate earlier on the Conversation’s day did. This helped in setting the stage for the convenors to move quickly through the theoretical framing of the issues to address. It also became clear that Prof Ramia Mazé and Dr. Andrea Siodmok’s debate on the “Social and Public” fuelled the delegates’ ideas, whilst framing the Conversation itself by bringing the insight from both the academic and the practitioner’s perspectives. Moreover, having the keynote debate’s moderator, participating in the Conversation also helped in following up from some of the issues addressed during the debate.

3 References


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