

# DESIGNERLY INFLUENCE ON POLITICS AND THE PRESS: CHANGING A DEADLOCKED RELATIONSHIP

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, political communication and political television debates have become farcical because of the professionalization of political communication. This has resulted in a deadlock between politicians, journalists and citizens, who appear to have fundamentally different goals. Consequently, television debates have become predictable, less focused on political argument, and far removed from their consequences in the daily lives of citizens. Drawing on empirical data from a workshop attended by a diverse set of stakeholders - journalists, producers, politicians, and media students - this paper presents the initial findings on how co-design and design games can take part directly in the 'heat' of democracy and make room for mutual understanding. In addition, the paper argues for new perspectives on design game research by demonstrating how prioritization, selection, and 'reversal of perspectives' can be incorporated into design games.

## DESIGNERLY INFLUENCE ON POLITICS AND THE PRESS

What role could design play in politics and policy-making? How might designers act as political agents in such situations? To investigate these broad questions, we decided to take an approach that differs from what we consider the most obvious ones at present – critical

design and design fiction. Instead, we wondered how co-design and design games could be part of the highly explosive political field, where power relations, opinions and 'serious' decision-making are explicit parts of daily life in politics and media. Having previously worked with participatory business innovation, we do not think that for instance policy-making situations are radically different from those seen in companies. However, process and decision-making might take on a different look, and it remains to be seen whether the stakeholders share any goals.

At present, political communication is characterised by high-profile politicians that keep a group of spin-doctors in order to steer communication in the direction they want. As this movement of professionalised communication has entered politics, journalists have found it more difficult to ask critical questions that provide new information on any issue. Therefore, one can observe an increased focus from the press on political processes and the private side of the politician instead of the strengths and weaknesses of a specific political argument. Politicians occasionally even admit that before a political debate, they know exactly what to say and in what manner, thus turning such debates into predictable television.

Comments by citizens and viewers have shown that they are displeased by politicians' use of rhetorical tricks (trash-talk, numbers without substance and so on), as well as by the journalists' tendency to ask the same 'critical' question again and again, even though they do not receive a new answer (Lakoff 2008; Kock 2011). A comment often made by citizens is that both politicians and journalists act as if they were in a 'kindergarten'. With the rise of social media and the general effects of the Internet revolution, a larger proportion of citizens want to have direct influence; otherwise, they could not care less. When citizens lose interest in politics, television companies have fewer viewers, and politicians can act without considering the consequences of their policies, which potentially could lead to a bigger problem – less democracy.

Instead of approaching politicians or political parties, we suggested to the Danish national television company

that before the forthcoming Danish parliamentary election, we collaborate to initiate a design process using design games as the main tool. This project could partially address the question of how to change the current and unfortunate relationship among journalists, politicians and citizens. In addition, we could design concrete televised national election programs with interactive/participatory angles, which could focus on several issues, such as the unpredictability of political debates and the visibility of good political arguments instead of persons. In so doing, the debates and political themes could also relate more closely to issues in the everyday situations of citizens.

## RESEARCH METHOD

We planned an initial, minor workshop for various stakeholders, such as journalists, producers, a few (former) politicians, and media students. The attendees were divided into two groups. This workshop will be followed by a larger workshop in 2015, which will be attended by 30 to 40 stakeholders. In the subsequent, larger workshop we will deal more with the second question, regarding concrete suggestions to new program concepts.

This paper concerns the first workshop, in which we experimented with process tools and techniques and discussed how to deal with the current, unfortunate situation of stakeholder relationships. We consider this the first intervention experiment in a series of three experiments in this project, which will be conducted before evaluating the programs during the period of the election. Design-based action research was used, in which the participants experimented with new collaborative methods and intervention experiments (Schön 1983, 1987) were central. Furthermore, the approach relates to the concept of research-through-design, in which the knowledge gained lies not only in the resulting designs but also within the design actions, choices and reflections experienced during the process (Frayling 1993; Zimmerman et al. 2007; Koskinen et al. 2011). The empirical analysis was based on video recordings of the workshop, as well as observations, notes and the evaluations conducted at the end of the workshop. The video recordings were transcribed and then analysed using interaction analysis (Jordan & Henderson 1995). Excerpts from the data are used throughout the paper to illustrate and understand the incidents.

## CO-DESIGN AND DESIGN GAMES

In recent years co-design and the subfield of design games, has moved from being a specialised profession to representing a specific kind of practise and approach, as well as becoming a part of a larger agenda of innovation (Buur & Matthews 2008). Promoters of this movement have argued that designers need to understand the specific terminology used in the profession, as well as the mechanism at work between the stakeholders in these situations, such as power

relations between employees and management and positive conflicts because of crossing interests (Buur & Larsen; Gudiksen 2012; Brandt et al. 2014).

In the past, design games, as a subfield of co-design, have been used as a particularly beneficial medium in bringing about mutual learning, shared communication, explorative scenarios, reframing and design moves in collaborative settings. This field of study has evolved from the initial focus on system development and workers to an innovation agenda that, for instance, addresses collaboratively the design of services, business models and organisational change (Ehn & Sjögren 1991; Roos et al. 2004; Brandt 2006; Gudiksen 2015).

In the workshop in this research, design games were used to shed light on the current understanding of the relationships among journalists, media producers, politicians and citizens (or viewers). Design games were also used to establish design criteria and to generate ideas about possible program themes and angles. The participants were divided into two groups. One group focused on the media content of a channel that delivers programs for people between 15 and 35 years (characterised by programs with concrete actions). The other group focused on debate-related media content of a channel that offered viewers good debates. Two consecutive activities were part of the day:

(1) The Stakeholder Grid Game. The purpose was to explore, establish and prioritise design criteria, as well as to discuss relationships between the criteria from the perspectives of the various stakeholders.

(2) Program concept cards. Program concepts from the past and the present were gathered and each was described with bullet points on an A5-sized sheet of cardboard. They were used to start idea generation on new election-oriented program suggestions.

## THE STAKEHOLDER GRID GAME

The first game used a simple game board with squares, each of which represented a design criterion (fig. 1). By design criteria we both mean perspectives from each stakeholder group that would lead to their participation and contribution, and design criterion that concepts can be evaluated up against and judged upon. Writeable, transparent bricks were used, so the criteria could be easily moved around. The procedures were as follows: first, the groups were told to think only about criteria related to each of the four stakeholder categories: citizen (blue), producer (yellow), politician (red) and journalist (green). Second, the groups then discussed the criteria and placed them according to the importance attributed to them. Hence, the game was also a prioritizing activity. The inner square illustrated the most important criteria for each stakeholder, if they were to participate in a positive manner.

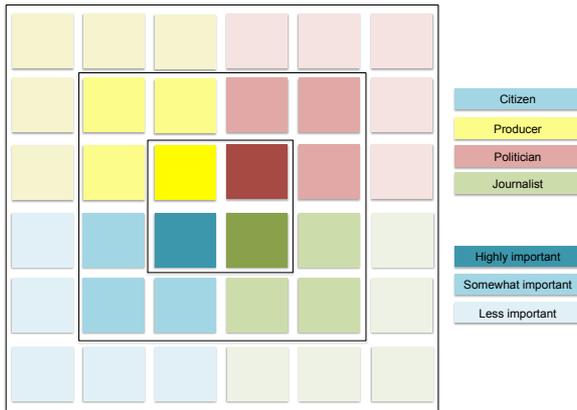


Figure 1: The Stakeholder Grid game. Each colour represents a stakeholder group. The criteria closer to the middle are considered the most important.

The participants began by suggesting various criteria. Some wrote them on the bricks and placed them on the board. Others suggested criteria before they placed them. In many incidents the stakeholders challenged each others' viewpoints:

*Media student A:* Now, we come with the focus on interactive digital media and we would like to have viewer participation – so that you don't sit back passively as a viewer...

*Media student B:* It's maybe part of this one (points at the criterion 'relevance' see fig.2 blue corner) – presence and that you partake.

*Producer:* But that's something you suppose..but yes  
*Media student A:* Yes, but instead of a panel discussion being steered by the journalist it could be viewers or spectators that if not steered, then influenced the program.

In this case there is disagreement about what the viewers or citizens actually wants; that is how and how much they want to partake in the debate.

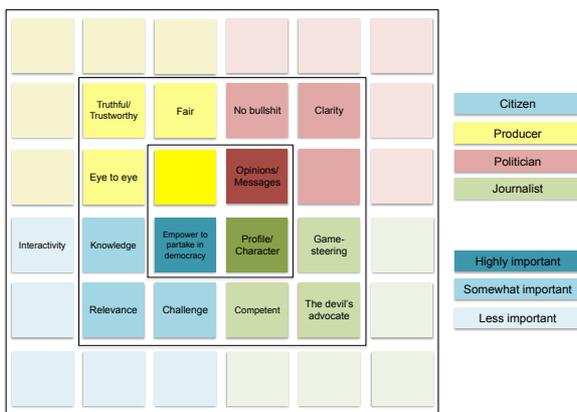


Figure 2: The Stakeholder Grid game. The edition made by the group, with a focus on debate-related programs

It is one of those positive conflicts (Buur & Larsen 2010) that lead to the stakeholders being more aware of

the various viewpoints and possibilities there might be. After the groups had each completed an edition of the grid game, they compared them and eventually created a shared edition (see fig. 4). However, without reaching complete agreement. They also discuss the 'match' between the four inner criteria: something at stake (producer), challenge (politicians), what's in it for me (citizen), and 'turned off camera' (journalist). Especially with the journalist criterion being discussed and at some point the participants tend to agree on the 'character' journalist criterion instead, both in shared group talk and before that (see fig. 3).



Figure 3: The Stakeholder Grid game. The groups made the shared edition during the discussion.

In the two groups there are many differences in the criteria. For example, in the group with a focus on viewers interested in good discussions the most important criteria for the citizen 'empower to partake in democracy' (see fig. 2 blue corner), however this criterion is seriously challenged when talking to the other group. Here they see 'what's in it for me' as the most important criterion for the citizen. Both groups begin to question their own criteria, and the shared edition (fig. 4) is the agreed-upon final model of the day, but both groups also argue that because of the differences in target group focus the criteria should vary.

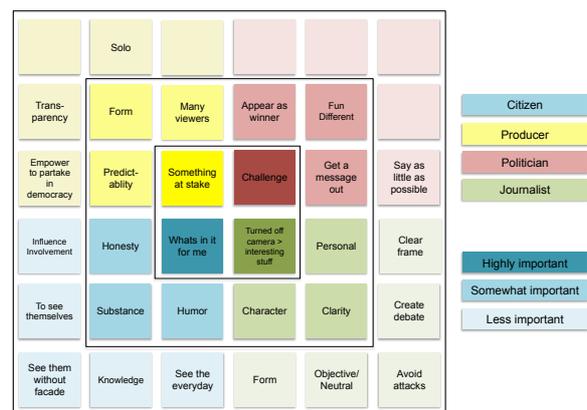


Figure 4: The Stakeholder Grid game. The groups made the shared edition during the discussion.

Because of the less visible perspective of the politician and to some point the citizen viewpoint, the journalist's viewpoint might have dominated the suggested criteria

and the selection of those that were considered the most important. Therefore, the next workshop should ensure that the stakeholders are divided equally, in order to determine whether the results would be significantly different.

### PROGRAM CONCEPT CARDS

In the second part of the workshop, we used descriptions of successful program concepts that were affixed to A5 sized sheets of cardboard. This choice was made because a large variety of useful program concepts exist, except those related to elections, which seem to be static.

We created stacks of two kinds of program concept cards: a stack of popular political, debate-oriented programs and a stack of programs that were unrelated to politics.



Figure 5: The program concept cards spread out

We were not sure which stack would result in the best new ideas, but we hypothesized that the programs unrelated to political debate might provoke more inspiration. The co-design and participatory design literature rarely mentions inspiration derived from radically changing perspectives by using such inspiration cards. Instead, there is a tendency to focus on narrative or scenario-oriented techniques. However, in the field of creative-problem solving, the use of inspiration cards has been mentioned by several authors (see Osborn 1963; Von Oech 2002; Michalko 2006: For instance, Michalko (2006, p. 43) explains that ‘sometimes assumptions seem so basic, so fundamental, that we never think to challenge them’.

The following are two examples of how the non-political program concept card evoked radical ideas. In the first example, a new card is read aloud (see Fig. 5):

(A media student takes a new card with a program called *Station 2*)

*Media student A:* They distinguish themselves by having a little bit of viewer interactivity before and after the program. You can be part of solving something (ed. the crime).

*Program editor:* There you can take the angle that the viewers should be part of solving something.

*Media student B:* A political mystery?

*Program editor:* Yes, a political mystery. How to solve a specific political or everyday problem.

*Journalist:* What does Helle-Thorning actually mean... Going through the archive and see what they have said earlier on. Relate it to concrete issues.

*Program editor:* Arh yes, that’s kind of funny.



Figure 6: The media student takes a new non-political programme concept card. The idea of pairing the example of an entrepreneur with a social democrat eventually appears linked to this card.

The discussion continues, but this is one of the interesting ideas that the participants remember. In a similar case, the same thing happens again:

(A new card is brought into the discussion – *DR2 uden*)

*Program editor:* It’s a little bit (takes the card) where they (ed. participants) have to live without CO2 and so on. And how to deal with that, but it’s also a little bit....

*Journalist:* No no, it’s all about placing them in a different setting than they are used to.

*Program editor:* Yes, but that one is interesting (points toward card) if we could create it somehow.

*Journalist:* But it is the point about not just saying it but also living it.

In the above example, the complete dialogue ends with the idea of pairing a politician with a citizen that is far from their target group, such as a social democrat with a company operator or entrepreneur.

We observed many such incidents in both groups. The ideas that were inspired by the non-political program cards were the ones that the participants supported the most in the debriefing. However, throughout the activity, the cards representing political program concepts were used as references to talk about what could be done differently:

(A new card is used from the stack of political program cards – *Jersild & Spin*)

*Program editor:* Then we have returned to this one (points and takes the card). Only talks about political processes—goes behind them.

*Journalist:* But our point of departure is how we can move around all this tomfoolery that the politicians have prepared already before they enter the studio. They have been prepped.

The card is put away and the discussion moves in another direction.

The use of the program concept cards demonstrated that we needed to support the activity with both templates and game boards that could gather several ideas and categorise them. It was hard for the participants to keep track of the ideas. We had to rely on memory or video data for the interaction analysis that we conducted a couple of days after the activity. However, the ideas that emerged from the flow of dialogue regarding a non-political card were useful. It was decided that these ideas should be included as examples or point of departure in the next workshop.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

By the end of the first day of the initial workshop, the participants had explored, established and prioritized stakeholder design criteria and stakeholder positions, using the design game interventions. This activity had two concrete but very different outcomes. The participants discussed the reasons they were so different from each other. Because of the fruitful dialogues and the concrete outcomes of the activity, the journalists and producers agreed that each group in the next workshop should make a quick review of the initial Stakeholder Grid results and change them if needed, as well as use the criteria as evaluation tool for program concepts that have been developed by the end of day.

Establishing and prioritizing design criteria and stakeholder positions are underexplored in the participatory design game literature (e.g. Ehn & Sjögren; Buur & Søndergaard 2000; Brandt 2006; Vaajakallio 2012). Moreover, the current concepts of design and the contemporary design literature generally view the design process as shifting continuously between divergent and convergent modes of thought (e.g. Design Council 2005; Brown 2008). However, the convergent mode seems non-existent in previous game design and is perhaps undervalued in most design research. The convergent mode, which is can be defined as the act of prioritizing, selecting and evaluating is sometimes called 'qualified guesses' (Dorst 2011) or referred to as a specific kind of 'judgment' based on insights that have been abstracted from experiences and reflections (Nelson & Stolterman 2003).

The Stakeholder Grid initially showed that the convergent mode of thinking could be incorporated naturally and concretely into design games, without losing the opportunities to shift to the divergent mode if necessary. We therefore suggest that a key area of future research on design games concerns how to incorporate into design games the ability to make qualitative judgments, which Nelson and Stolterman (2003) argue is a daily challenge for design teams. The key difference is that design games might have to be stronger in the convergent mode because of the various stakeholders involved typically involved in co-design.

By the end of the workshop, the participants had initiated idea generation and explored various foundational opportunities, without developing fully

fleshed concepts on that day. The results of the interaction analysis of the video and the 'talk-actions' shows that the ideas that differed from the others and were highly appreciated by the other participants were directly linked to the concept cards representing non-political programs.

Based on the results of the interaction analysis of the video and the reflections-in-action and reflections-on-action, we plan to do the following in the upcoming larger workshop.

- (1) Gather a diverse set of stakeholders, including citizens and current politicians. This will allow us to have perspectives from both sides and enable us to deal with the positive conflicts (Buur & Larsen 2010) that we suspect will emerge. This would be the first step towards changing conflicting relationships and viewpoints. The games described below will be used to accomplish this goal.
- (2) Begin the day by having the stakeholder grid game played at each table and then holding a debriefing where the boards and criteria are compared before moving on. Furthermore, we will use the game as part of the evaluation and selection process at the end of the day. A game card describing the rules and procedures will support the players. Otherwise, the game functioned better than we hoped, so at this point there is no reason to change it radically.
- (3) Start idea generation and turn ideas into initial descriptions of program concepts. In this workshop, we will use mainly inspiration cards related to program concepts that are unrelated to political debate programs. These cards could be supported by storyboards or other kinds of narrative techniques used to evoke ideas and develop them. However, we will continue to use the concept cards because the interaction analysis indicated that because they break habitual thinking patterns, they help to develop radically different ideas.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTION

This paper has presented the first intervention and initial findings, and we need to count more incidents both in this material and in the empirical data from the next workshop, however the promising results so far points towards two interesting perspectives on political communication and the press that we are going to explore further throughout the rest of the project.

- (1) See what happens when the process of innovating program concepts is opened up to participants beyond those journalists, who understand the press lingo and usually devise programs and television strategies.
- (2) Explore further whether the relationship between the stakeholders can look differently, or they simple have no shared goals from which new and shared understandings can arise. For instance; how can we further consider deal with rhetoric concerns and the spin-doctor actor?

In addition it also seems that the design game findings can bring about principles that can be used as inspiration when considering design games for other situations and cases as well.

By the end of the project we aim at conclusions that indicates if this is a fruitful and alternative way for designers to be part of the political agenda.

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