Elizabeth Tunstall – The future of politics: Distributed creativity and DIY policy design

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What is the role of design in a complex, distributed world of policy formation and implementation? Why is the model of distributed creativity more appropriate for this domain? This essay will seek to address these questions by proposing a futuristic project for DIY policy design that takes distributed creativity and Web 2.0 as the heart of its methodological approach. This approach seeks to re-imagine the role of design and the designer in the world of government policy.

Defining Design/design

In the context of policy and governance, one must define “design” at two levels. These two levels are what Ric Grefé, executive director of AIGA, referred to at the AIGA 2003 National Meetings as design with a “big D” (i.e. uppercase D) and design with a “little d” design (i.e. with a lowercase d). The first level is the general activity of “…devising courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones” (Simon 1969). The second level is both the process and the resultant artifacts, communications, experiences, and environments that originate from skillful choices about words, images, and forms through the formal elements of point, line, shape, texture, color, harmony, space, typography, pattern, materials, and movement. These two concepts of design enable one to distinguish between Design as a general human activity, and design as the occupational expertise of a class of people who define themselves as professional designers (i.e. people who make their primary livelihood from designing). As I have discussed elsewhere (Tunstall 2007), it also takes into account that design is a term used in the fields of political science, economics, and policy which is separate from how it is used in the fields of design, technical communications, and usability: (Fig. 1).

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Figure 1: Attributes of Design versus design

Design, with an uppercase D, is the processes of abstract, strategic, ideal creation that is open to everyone. In the context of policy, it is often the intellectual domain of the political science and economics. But design, with lowercase d, is its complement – tangible, improvisational, reality creations that is the mostly professionalized and within the intellectual domains of design, communication, and usability.

Policy as Designed/designed and the Designer as Expert

Policy Design (with uppercase D) is a long-standing area of study and practice in the political science, law, and economics. It involves defining the problem and its source, identifying the most effective policy instruments, determining the metrics of measurable
change, and figuring out which instruments and metrics provide solutions to the problem. Policy instruments are the set of activities that policy makers use to solve problems (Tunstall 2007). Policy instruments seek to control the provision of goods and services: from voluntary contributions of families, subsidies, taxes, to regulation and direct provision (Howlett 2005: 39). They can also seek to control membership and group cohesion through information suppression, labeling/recognition, hearings, to direct group creation and institutional reforms. The instruments of goods/services provision and group identification form the strategies by which specific Designed outcomes are planned and implementations are attempted. These strategies are often Designed by experts in the technical languages of law or economics that alienate lay people from the policy formation and implementation processes.

Political scientists Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram argue that these expert policy designs often create unjust and alienating political systems. Expert policy designs create them by constructing deserving and undeserving target populations and privileging expert professional and scientific knowledge over that of citizens. Schneider and Ingram (1997: 2) articulate an understanding of policy design not as juridical and economic abstractions, but rather as “observable elements” that refer to “the content and substance of public policy – the blueprints, architecture, discourses, and aesthetics of policy in both is instrumental and symbolic forms.” On one hand, these designed instrumental and symbol forms come closest to lay people’s own experiences of policy. An individual may not understand the intricacies of health policy law or financing, but they understand the access granted to them by having or not having a medical ID card. On the other hand, design can become another expert language that excludes lay people’s knowledge. For while many designers have embraced a human-centered design ethos, there is still sometimes reluctance to accepting lay people’s knowledge over the designer’s expertise.

On a recent government project of mine, the creative director did not want the team to ask people to evaluate whether the type was too big or too small on a brochure. The argument was that people always say that it is too small and that they don’t understand all the reasons why something may be easy or difficult to read. My counter argument was that while designers are the experts in design, the people are the experts in their experiences with designed artifacts. The desire to not solicit certain types of design feedback from people has to do with the designer’s need to maintain control over the expert domain of design, with lowercase d. I encountered this tension between designer expertise and people’s evaluative experiences throughout my work with AIGA’s Design for Democracy. Ric Grefé has been (mis)quoted as saying both “Design is the intermediary between information and understanding” and that “Designers are the intermediaries between information and understanding.” The first idea speaks to the ideal role of Design/design. It is through the interaction with designed artifacts that people come to understand and articulate their Designs for the future. The second idea is problematic, especially within the policy realm, if designers block direct access between people and their governments (even in the role of advocates). If not guided by human-centeredness, designers can create the same alienating effects that lawyers, policy analysts, and economists have when their expert language gets in the way of lay people’s understanding of how their governments work and how they can change it to work better for them. Do-It-Yourself (DIY) Policy Design is a proposal that accepts design’s intermediary role, but prevents the designer from getting in the way through a distributed creativity ethos and combination of design templates, local know-how, and Web 2.0 tools.

**DIY Policy Design**

The old model of policy design was one of getting a centralized group of smart experts in the room to solve problems. Yet the complexity of globalized politics requires decentralized problem-solving approaches that can operate locally, inexpensively, and be distributed widely across lay knowledge networks. A model for design’s role in generating these networks is Sussam Preja’s Kit-o-Parts developed for the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles. Because the environmental graphics of the LA Olympics was highly distributed across the city, too much for one or two design firms to handle, and did not have a lot of money, Sussam Preja created this Kit-o-Parts that design subcontractors could use and assemble in any way they thought appropriate, yet still result in a unified look and feel for the Olympics. I propose the creation of a Policy Design Kit-o-Parts that lay people could locally adapt, yet still result in a unified visual language to support sharing and comparison of policy problems and solutions.
The first challenge of this future model would be to define the tangible visual symbols that are universally identifiable and relevant to the five aspects of policy design:

1. Social relations/identity mapping parts that are based upon Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram’s (1997) grid of the social constructions of social groups as deserving and undeserving, politically stronger and weaker: (Fig 2).

2. Common experience modeling parts to construct a common experience model, which is a visual representation of processes, which allows one to describe the differences of experiences as a social group/individual goes through that process.

3. Desired outcomes parts consisting of the symbols of the core material and symbolic values that a group holds and how they imagine them leading to desired futures or better experiences.

4. Structural constraints parts made of symbols of the structural constraints that a group experiences regarding their desired futures or experiences.

5. Design artifact/service identification parts that consist of symbols for the types of design artifacts or services typically created to address specific policy issues. The Kit would consists of the parts, paper patterns for creating one’s own parts, and an illustrated guide of how to use the symbols to form and communicate policy.

**Distributed Creativity and Copyleft**
The second challenge is to create a distributed creativity network in which the viral distribution of the DIY Policy Design Kit-o-Parts to local communities would aid in their policy design activities. The distribution model would be based on the Copyleft movement of GNU systems of software development in which the work is made freely available on the condition that all modified and extended versions of the work remain free as well. The distribution of the Policy Design Kit-o-Parts would contain three additional requirements: one must (1) document and share the results of meetings and the local “grammar” of the parts used via You-Tube and Flickr-like sites or mailed; (2) replicate a local version of the Policy Design Kit-o-Parts, and (3) give the original kit to another group to use. In this way, the DIY Policy Design Kit-o-Parts will virally grow in its development, use, documentation, and hopefully, positive social outcomes.

Conclusion

Design/design plays an intermediary role in people’s relationships to government policy. It is the way in which people see, smell, taste, touch, hear, and feel how government affects them materially and symbolically. Design is the stuff of government. Yet, designers should not play an intermediary role between people and their government, at least in democratic society. Distributed creativity has the potential to democratize the process of policy formation from legal, economic, and even design expert systems. The DIY Policy Design Kit-o-Parts is a proposed model for how this can work in the area of policy making, thus politics, because it is adaptable to local lay knowledge, yet can form a common vocabulary for sharing and understanding the scale of socio-political policy implications. In this way, it represents the potential future of both design and politics in general.

References Cited:


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