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Stakeholder Theory; An Extension of the User Concept

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Industrial societies are characterizable by:

- *A linear means-end rationality, the end being an industrial product for example.*
- *Hierarchical forms of organization resulting from line authorities and unequivocal command structures.*
- *A logic that assigns functions to parts of wholes, expressing the contributions each must make to the preservation of a whole.*
- *A pervasive universalism (monologic) which considers the above as a rational standard for everyone, effectively supporting a cultural imperialism, supporting the expansions of mass production for example.*

From these premises would follow that products must be alike to everyone and what happens after their delivery to the privacy of a user is of no-one's concern.

Moreover, meanings are dismissable as subjective and irrational. The kind of subjectivities that an industrial society could not deny became formulated in terms of aesthetics that, consistent with the universalistic premises, had to be couched in objectivist, that is, in culture independent, terms. This happened and our conceptions of design still suffer from this.

In view of this universalism, it is also not surprising that designers came to be concerned with "**THE user**" or "**the END-user.**" Its German equivalent, "**der Benutzer,**" adds to the user concept the utilitarian expectation that economic benefits motivate the use of products. (And not surprisingly either, the rational user was grammatically male.) Inasmuch as everyone was expected to uphold the same rational standards, it made sense for designers to consider just one typical user. And in as much as designers and users participated in the same society, it made also sense to conceptualize the user as merely lacking the kind of expertise designers have. Evidence of this conception can be found in the frequent cry that consumers need to be educated to understand design, that is "good" design, a judgement that expert designers are privileged to make. Evidence of this conception can also be found in the language used by designers, marketing researchers and sales persons. Routinely referring to "the user" as if everyone knew who that is. This is not merely empty talk. It reflects a consensus on universalistic beliefs and attendant actions.

“THE user” is a myth. For designers, it is a self-serving myth as it constructs the superiority of the designer right into the alleged difference. Designers’ concern for the user also reflects a paternalism towards users -- as if users could not speak for themselves and must be spoken for by designers, or as if users could not make sense of their world without instruction.

For me the user concept has been adequately challenged in several well-known ways, without however eliminating the concept:

- (1) Empirical research found consumers to vary along several dimensions, to form distributions. Some user characteristics are more frequent than others are but typical users rarely exist. One is reminded that the typical US family has 2.5 children. This as well as the typical user is no more than a statistical abstraction.
- (2) Already in the 60’s, Bruce Archer noted that users rarely are the only people designers face. There usually are bystanders who influence adoption decisions and direct uses. Bystanders may not have the utilitarian motives of a “Benutzer” in mind when exerting their influence.
- (3) When designing truck cabins, Reinhart Butter observed that truck drivers were not the clients of the manufacturer but the owners or managers of large fleets who made the decisions to buy. Optimizing a design for drivers only may not get the product to them.
- (4) It is the rare exception when a designer’s proposal is accepted and realized by a client as it was presented. Typically, many different co-players are consulted: financial experts, production engineers, marketing researchers, and sales personnel. Objections are communicated, negotiations take place, often calling on designers to alter their proposals so as to accommodate the multiple perspectives of the decision-makers involved. “End-users” reside largely in the conceptions of the decision-makers and surface in the communications among them. Rarely are they actually consulted. These “experts” have interests of their own that often differ radically from those of designers and from those of the users everyone merely talks about.
- (5) In my own experiences, as a design consultant, the most successful way to develop viable proposals is to work with all those that are eventually needed to bring that proposal to fruition, to surrender the credit for a development to the dialogical engagement in which designers, relevant experts, and even those affected by a decision, can have their voices heard. Here designers may become the initiators of changes but must let go of it for it to go on.

These examples speak against the notion of a typical user. They suggest the need to cooperate with many people, including with so-called users. In fact, all those involved could be considered “users” but of vastly different kinds and their inputs must be respected for a design to succeed in the long run.

I am calling these “**stakeholders**” for they

- claim their own stake (interest) in a process of technological development,
- have their own more or less formulated ideas of what a particular technology should do and for whom,
- are knowledgeable and willing to act on their ideas in their own ways, and
- get involved in that process largely on their own accord.

Although some stakeholders may participate because of anticipated economic benefits and others see no choice, their role having been assigned by their employer, money rarely is the only motivation. Stakeholders bring their own personal reasons into their participation, may uphold their own professional standards, or may be motivated by larger political, ethical, ideological or ecological concerns. Designers alone cannot bring a proposal to its fruition. Without providing some inspiration, stakeholders will come forth but may not be recruited into the project of realizing a design. I maintain that the shift in focus of attention from users to stakeholders is necessitated by a healthy breakdown of the old industrialism outlined above.

By contrast to industrial societies, **post-industrial societies** may be characterized by:

- *An active public of multiple rationalities in frequent communication with each other.*
- *Self-directed and self-organizing heterarchical forms of organization supported by vast communication networks.*
- *A logic of compositional possibilities (information), the idea of patterns emerging from voluntary alliances among constituents, fluid and virtual forms.*
- *Multi-versalism (dialogue) regarding the above, tolerating if not thriving on cultural diversity and polyphonies of voices.*

In this emerging context designers can no longer rely on the position of an authority on forms that industry once granted them, nor can their responsibility be restricted to what gets into the hand of an end-user. The fictional user is preceded by processes of realization and succeeded by psychological, sociological, and ecological concerns. To make a difference in people’s lives, designers have to get involved in *the politics of the technology* they seek to bring forth.

What are these stakeholders? How can designers conceptualize what they face?

- (1) *Stakeholders arise in recognized possibilities* of developments or threats to valued courses of actions. Stakeholders assert their interest, claim their stake, or declare their voice to be important to a particular development. Recognized possibilities can bring a vast number of very different players into a field.
- (2) *Stakeholders become sequentially relevant and irrelevant.* In the development of a technology some stakeholders have more to say in the beginning, other voices are arousable only after the implications of a proposal are becoming clear and the shape of a technology is emerging. The traditional linearity: designer ► production engineer ► distributor ► user ► recycler attest to this. Once a technology is in place, design has lost its influence and other stakeholders take over.
- (3) *Stakeholders may be variously motivated.* Economic rewards may be the easiest to measure but perhaps least important in predicting an outcome. Technological

forecasts that exclude their stakeholders have been notoriously wrong. Commitments to certain technologies, pride in one's accomplishments, loyalties to paradigms, institutions, disciplines, or ideologies are effective motivators as well. Without tapping in these resources not much will happen.

- (4) *Stakeholders are not necessarily pushing in the same direction.* With proponents come opponents. Enthusiastic pictures of technological developments may attract their opposite, doom's day scenarios, with which they then have to compete. Actual developments reflect the energies each can muster.
- (5) *Stakeholders differ in the amount and kind of resources* they have access to. Some voices may be louder than others and are more or less able to mobilize the right kind of people, at the right moment in time, with the necessary know-how and the energy willing to spend to make a difference.
- (6) *Stakeholders organize themselves in view of a future.* Although stakeholders may have hindsight as well as foresight, it is informed visions that motivate actions. This does not mean that stakeholders have similar futures in mind. The designers' ideas of what should be done need are rarely shared by those affected by their proposals. Stakeholders would not cooperate unless a design supports their own future.
- (7) *Stakeholders often form groups* with known political interests. There is the ecology movement pushing for the use of biodegradable materials. There are unions trying to protect workers from certain hazards. There are engineering associations upholding ethical principles. There are consumer advocacy groups arguing for safety rules. There are different industries negotiating interface standards among each other. In groups, stakeholders aggregate their resources, become individually more effective not the least because groups are more difficult to deal with. Groups do not talk, individuals do. Groups become stakeholders in the claims of individuals to speak for others.
- (8) *Stakeholders vary in the extent of their stake.* Financiers may have more at stake when a certain development fails and are willing to put up more resources to overcome obstacles than would cultural critics who are interested merely in publicity.
- (9) *Stakeholders operate in open networks of communication.* Such networks are not manageable for there is no top from which they take commands. Networks of communication are flat, dynamic, constantly rearrange themselves around different themes or actions. In such networks, stakeholders clarify their direction, attack opponents or ally themselves with friendly forces. Although such networks have a virtual quality to them, they can mobilize great amounts of energy for actions.
- (10) *Networks of stakeholders have the tendency to preserve themselves.* Interest groups often survive changing memberships, may persist beyond the reason that brought them together, while shifting in values, attention and alliances,
- (11) *Designers always are stakeholders as well.* Probably, design has always had as much to do with politics as it has with societal visions. In a postindustrial society designers have to become explicit about the stake they are claiming, develop methodologies that are compelling, and propose designs that inspire stakeholders to realize them.

What are some implications of **stakeholder theory** for designers?

To replace the concept of a fictional end user by that of a network of stakeholders composed of knowledgeable actors that can understand our proposals, speak out for themselves, and hold the key for whether or not our designs come to fruition.

To supplement our understanding of technology by an understanding of our stakeholders' understanding of that technology and of each other, which may differ from our designers' understanding. The ability of second-order understanding is a prerequisite for product semantics and of design in a post-industrial society.

To fully acknowledge the validity of different stakeholders' worlds. This amounts to an invitation for designers to listen to different voices.

To inspire enough stakeholders to get involved in the realization of a design. To invite different kinds of users into the design process.

To let go of a design once it is developing a life of its own, to let stakeholders assume responsibilities for it.

Some of these recommendations may be difficult for traditional designers to stomach. They challenge outdated privileges and righteous aesthetic judgements. But they also offer perhaps the most human way to design in the post-industrial possibilities that the new technologies are affording us. Design, I would maintain, has always been a political process. I am encouraged by those who have known this all along and do not find much new in the above. But I challenge them to put their intuitive understanding into words and thus become aware of the conceptualizations needed. What we rarely recognize is that *design depends on its communicability to others without whom design would have no consequences*. Let us play our political role with the awareness of our own stake in the process.