Redesign democratic debates

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As many scholars have stressed throughout history, healthy public debates are key to the revitalisation of democracy. There is currently a genuine cry to steer away from polarized debates and to work towards consensus. Over time philosophers such as Aristotle (384-322 BC), Arendt (1958), and Mouffe (2000, 2005), have convincingly argued that struggle, torment and dispute are an essential part of a healthy democracy, and that there is a need to design rules to enable these conflicts to be retained. How could design offer us the means, tools and spaces to better articulate differences, and to tackle current polarized debates? We will first sketch how public debates have evolved over time, mapping out the rules that were designed to prevent conflicts from getting out of hand. After that we will investigate a case study and based on the insights generated, try to demonstrate how design could offer us meaningful tools for constructive debates.

Keywords: democracy, concensus, dissensus, debate, design

Public debates through the times

Whenever the topic of democratic debates is addressed, the ancient Greek philosophers and their famous agora in Athens are often proposed as the intellectual and physical starting point of our modern democracy. In The Human Condition, Arendt (1958) stresses the importance of conversation in the ancient Greek culture, where well described rules defined who could participate in discussions, and how this should be done in a neutral, non-hierarchical space. Furthermore, according to Arendt (1958), and addressed by many others (Achterhuis & Konings, 2014; Thorpe & Gamman, 2014), the Greeks passion for contest, or agon, (Achterhuis, Konings, 2014, p. 459) was an important aspect of this Greek conversational culture. The focus was not on winning or losing the game, but primarily on the contest itself. A strong respect for the rules, as well as for one’s opponents, was a key factor, as without these rules, a contest couldn’t exist.

Although Greek debating has played a pivotal role in history, research by Foucault (2011), and by Achterhuis and Konings (2014), throws doubt on the claim that free speech, paressia, was an ancient notion, whereas it was, in fact, not entirely free – only those in positions of privilege had the opportunity to speak out against power. Women were also excluded from public conversations. A recent study by Leclercq (2018) points out that Greek rules for the use, function and regulation of their public space, were under constant negotiation, and that our perception of the agora and Greek democracy as a perfectly organised system, requires some nuancing.

Van Hooff (2011) suggests that we look instead to the Middle Ages as the basis of modern democracy. Throughout that historical period, citizens negotiated constantly with the forces of power, and experimented with self-governance. During these Dark Ages, the so-called Rederijkers movement was a strong driving force behind the culture of debate (Van Dixhoorn, 2006), and the public sphere in the Netherlands. The Rederijkers – a group of writers, poets and artists – organised public contests and performances based on topical issues of the time, using theatre as the main forum for public expression. These public activities – with well-defined
rules on performance and orchestration—were a key factor in strengthening group identities and in visualising communication between the elite and the general public.

Although Van Hoof uses coherent arguments to indicate the Middle Ages as a starting point for the development of the public sphere, the late 17th and early 18th centuries have been designated the golden age of conversation (Van Rijn, 2013, Habermas 1962). During this period, in France, citizens congregated in public coffee houses and salons. Habermas speaks in the widely quoted Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit (1962) about these Tischengezellschaften as trailblazers for democracy, as they were a perfect space in between people’s private lives and the spheres of authority. It is from this time onwards that one starts to design civil society (Van Vree, 2000).

Despite the fact that the coffee houses welcomed a wide variety of people, they were not entirely inclusive. All the participants had to be well informed and capable of participating in a rational debate, and, as a study by the Institute for Social Research (Van Dixhoorn, 2006) mentions, common public issues were generally resolved in a ‘mob sphere’. Social and economic discrepancies at the time were somewhat tense due to with the fact that parts of society were excluded from the precipitated public sphere (Van Vree, 2000).

It is important to stress here that the culture of, and activities in, coffee houses throughout Europe varied widely. In England, for example, rivals could work out their differences in the coffee houses, whereas in France, the so-called salons were primarily meeting spaces for writers, artists and intellectuals to practice a culture of eloquence (Van Rijn, 2010).

In order to understand modern democracy and the role of debates, we should not omit to mention Rousseau (1712-1778) who considered public participation to be key for a vital democracy. His ideas about a social contract, co-created by citizens, policy makers and politicians, are still not outdated. Rousseau considered debates to be a perfect means of designing and shaping these rules together (Cohen, 1986), however a real social contract did not come into being at that time.

In the 19th century, debating clubs spring up all over Europe. In England these clubs were very popular – by offering a mix of debating and theatre, public performances attracted over a thousand visitors of an evening (Van Rijn, 2010). The debates however, owing to commercial interferences, were somewhat moderate in nature, nevertheless, toward the end of the 19th century, some of the clubs became more radical and, in consequence, were banned.

In the 20th century, journalistic media became the main arena for public debate (McCchesney 2004, Starr 2004, Van Dixhoorn, 2006). Journalistic outlets provide information, instigate debates and operate as watchdogs, thus performing a key role in democratic processes (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). Van Vree (2000) however stresses that the mediated public spheres of the media differ considerably from Habermas’ Öffentlichkeit because of the commercial interference with advertising, publishing houses etc., a phenomenon also framed as commercialized publicity (Van Dixhoorn, 2006). Habermas himself already predicted this decline of public culture in 1962. According to him, as with the rise of public culture in the 18th century, boundaries between governance and society would fade and specific interest groups would come to dominate and manipulate the public domain (Habermas, 1962) entailing its decline.

In the 21st century, debates have also moved to the online domain. Whereas in the first years following the inauguration of the World Wide Web, many had high expectations of the open and interactive capabilities of the internet (Aigrain, 2012; Bruns 2008; Leadbeater, 2009), nowadays more and more scholars stress that our digital culture in fact has a rather polluting effect on debating culture. As the conditions and rules of online public debates are not defined, discussion becomes polarized, polluted (Van Stokkom, 2010) and fragmented (Poell & Borra, 2012; RMO, 2011).

It is not only the quality of online public debates, which are currently the subject of critique, but also the digital platforms that shape the conditions, as their interests are not aligned with public values (RMO, 2011, Van Dijk, Poel, De Waal, 2016). The architecture and design of the platforms define how we debate, as well as how, and with whom, we interact. These platform mechanisms (Van Dijck, Poell & De Waal, 2016) steer and shape our public debate, and since their guiding principles are neither transparent nor fully aligned with public interests, that is troubling.

Furthermore, questions are raised about how public online debates actually are, since it is a relatively small group that participates in online discussions (RMO, 2011, Pariser, 2012), as well as a succession of others, warns about filter bubbles – where algorithms filter out information, based on previous online interest and
searches, and customise information accordingly. This results in diminishing one’s chances of being confronted with opposing or unexpected ideas or points of view. Flaxman, Goel & Rao (2013) speak of the rise of ideological segregation, or of the increase of interpretive communities (SCP, 2011). Others are concerned that capacity to deal with opposing views is diminishing (RMO, 2011; SCP, 2001).

In short, we have sketched out how, throughout history, we never fully succeeded in designing a debating culture where everyone was included, where free speech for all was guaranteed, and where we were confronted with opposing points of view. Furthermore, it is clear that the rules on how to debate, or whether or not to express emotions, fluctuated. At the Greek agora however, and within the Rederijkers chambers, the coffee houses and debate clubs, there were clear rules to safeguard the public sphere and make sure that those able to take part in public discussions, understood how to participate, discuss and disagree in an appropriate way. Nowadays, the absence of rules and regulations, and the fact that more and more debates are not publicly visible, as they often occur in an online realm, leads to the question of whether design could be of help in redesigning the rules and conditions for a healthy public debating culture?

Consensus, Dissensus

Arendt (1958) imagined active citizens’ participation playing an important, active and reflective role in the common realm. Citizens who collaborate have the ‘power’ to transform conversations on common ‘interests’ into deeds. In her vision, this power is not given to them, rather it arises from their mutual collaboration. Unfortunately however, with current affairs such as Brexit in the UK, the Yellow Vests in France and the polarized discussion surrounding black-faced Zwarte Piet in the Netherlands, it appears that people are primarily coming together to express anger and despair rather than finding common ground. Nussbaum (2019) defines our political crises in her latest work as a Monarchy of Fear.

For Mouffe (2000, 2005), however, agonism is the basis of democracy. We will always encounter difficulties and conflicts, and so it is necessary to find new ways to deal with them. According to Mouffe, the paradox of our democracy is that we strive for a pluralism that never can be achieved (Mouffe 2000, p.15,16). Consensus is impossible, because the very possibility of consensus requires exclusion - there are always ideas and emotions excluded from the debate. Mouffe argues instead for an agonistic approach to democracy and encourages contestation. Citizens ought to relate to one another as adversaries, exploring where they disagree. They should work out their differences, instead of looking for their common interest.

Mouffe (2005) suggests that contestation should take place in a ‘symbolic space’, where by means of activism one can work out ‘conflictual consensus’ – by this she means achieving temporary agreement. We need to ‘work through’ our differences, defining where we disagree. This means we should not only bring rational arguments into the discussion, but also the emotions that are at stake. Mouffe sees a crucial role for art and creativity in revealing these emotions by means of what she calls artistic activism or artivism. According to her, art and politics are not separate entities – there is an ethical dimension to politics, and a political dimension to art (2013, p. 91). Artistic practices can offer space for resistance, for counter forces, Mouffe speaks of ‘counter-hegenomic struggles’ because they can shape a new form of subjectivity. "If artistic practices can play a decisive role in the construction of new forms of subjectivity, it is because, in using resources which induce emotional responses, they are able to reach human beings at the affective level” (2013, p 96).

Can we use the theoretical frameworks of Arendt and Mouffe to discuss the role of design in democratic renewal? Whilst there has been a substantial amount of literature written about political agonism as a theory, there have been surprisingly few attempts to apply these theoretical assumptions to empirical case studies (Harvey, 2012). During a philosophy working session with the DESIS network (series of philosophy talks) and Design Academy Eindhoven, during the Dutch Design Week in Eindhoven (October 2018), we tried to shape the conditions for Mouffe’s symbolic space and questioned how designers could be meaningful in designing new rules for contestation and agonism.

Thinking Through Making workshop

We invited 25 participants (a balanced mix of policy makers, design researchers, journalists and citizens) for this working session. All invitees received, three weeks prior to the event, a positioning paper expressing some of the aforementioned ideas in relation to Arendt and Mouffe. They were also asked to hand in a short statement (video, written, visual) a few days prior to the workshop (figure 1).
Figure 1: Statements handed in by participants prior to the session. In total 15 statements were handed in. These were used as conversation starters in the discussion.

We kicked off with a short presentation on the philosophy of Arendt and Mouffe, after which the participants tried to work out rules and regulations around a specific (real) case-study, presented by professor Meijer (Goverdance Studies, Utrecht University). The case concerned an area in the city of Utrecht (Netherlands) for which there are plans to build houses, plans which are opposed by existing residents of the surrounding area who fear a lack of green space, car parking spaces and excessive demands on existing public services.

We divided the participants into three groups of eight participants, one moderator, and a designer to visualise or map the conversation. Within the groups, we discussed how to deal with this particular conflict between current residents, incomers, and city planners – where and how the discussion should take place, and what the role of designers could be. (Figure 2)

Figure 2: Working session, Dutch Design Week Eindhoven, October 2018

The first group, discussed how designers could help people to better understand different roles of the various stakeholders involved in this case – current residents, newcomers, city council etc. By sharing personal experiences about housing, conflicts with neighbours, etc., it became clear early on in the conversation that we don’t have adequate tools to deal with differences. The root cause of these conflicts is the fact that we are not trying hard enough to understand other people’s perspective. The participants in the conversation discussed what this implies for designers.

Within design research, the question of how designers should empathise with their users is an important one. One view is that designers need, by means of a ‘particular kind of imagination’ (Fulton Suri, 2003b), to understand the user. Others (Kouprie, & Sleeswijk Visser, 2009) think that this ‘empathy’ entails the ability to understand the users, and to be sensitive to them and their thoughts throughout the design process. Some (McDonag, 2006, Batterbee 2004) go even further, seeing it as the intuitive ability to identify with other people’s thoughts and feelings, values and inner conflicts, and to internalize these.

Because a clear definition on empathic research in relation to the role of the designer and their methods, is lacking, Kouprie and Sleeswijk Visser (2009) suggest making a distinction between empathy and sympathy –
sympathy being a way of knowing, and empathy a way of relating (Wispé, 1986). This means that, during the process, designers need to be able to switch from one to the other (Koupríe & Sleeswijk Visser, 2009). Before and during the design process the designer requires sympathy or compassion for the users involved but there is no need to internalize their emotions and frustrations through empathy.

In the first group conversation, the participants thought up a process to stimulate ‘sympathy’ through an intervention to instigate the process of stepping in and out other people's shoes. They came up with the idea of using the game of ‘musical chairs’ to illustrate that, within participatory projects, we should aim to involve all stakeholders, whilst at times trying to take someone else’s seat in order to understand the different perspectives and interests involved.

In a previous design research project at our research lab, we developed a game entitled Value Pursuit (Rygh, 2015) to help stakeholders visualise their different interests, points of view and preferences. In the aforementioned distinction between empathy and sympathy, this game, which was brought up in the conversation, would also be way to sympathise with different stakeholders. The participants in the conversation session, felt it requires more than a visualisation and discussion tool to understand other stakeholders, if one is to achieve more empathy. The game of musical chairs should therefore force people into different positions, to enable them to internalize different points of view.

After the workshop, the designers at each table, were asked to come up with a design proposal based on the insights gathered in the conversation. Designer Fides Lapiedere who participated in the first conversation, designed a musical chairs performance (poster, figure 3), stating her aim thus, “After the session I went further with the question of how we could magnify that almost uncomfortable closeness of working together. How we could we train that skill in our daily lives.” This led her to the proposal: ‘Share a seat, shape a thought... Shape a seat and share a thought.’ Her proposal involves a communal activity whereby people take turns being responsible for public tasks.

Furthermore, as the group thought that making things together encourages the empathising process, participants should not only share a seat, but also shape ideas and seats together. This concept relates to Sennett’s ideas – in Together (2012) he underscores how making things together doesn’t necessarily mean people are working from the same point of view. Often it is the ability of the participants to make it work despite their differences, the social capacity to cooperate together (11), that brings things to realisation – makes it work. To practice this it is necessary to make things together, but as Sennett stresses, this is not easy in a digitalized context where we hardly ever get together and actually meet. To attain satisfying results one needs to overcome a certain form of resistance, “not to fight against it […] but to employ a minimum force” (2012, p.208). Sennett also makes the distinction between empathy and sympathy stating that, “Along the one path cooperation is a tool, a means; along the other, more of an end in itself. (45)

The second group discussed the affect that current digital agoras, which result in disembodied conversations, have on debates. Online agoras are becoming places where people express frustrations linked to a general
feeling of abandonment. Our digital interfaces reinforce individualisation – behind the screen there is only space for one person – the result is that we become disembodied from the debate. The lack of physicality in virtual spaces transforms the discussions into intangible narratives where the other becomes somewhat fictional, and the notions of truth and trust are more than ever called into question. Yet, when it comes to tangible spaces, our participants noted that for many years these locations have had a temporary nature, which makes it difficult for people to evolve a more durable relationship with these spaces for holding discussions.

Following the conversation, designer Maxim Benvenuto reflected on the ideas of architect Lefebvre, whose philosophies expressed in the Right to the City (1968) offer a more radical, more problematic, and more open-ended vision of urban politics (Purcell, 2002, p.100). In Lefebvre’s point of view, neither architects nor planners, philosophers or politicians, can create new forms and relations out of nothingness. They can only, under favourable conditions, help the formulation and shaping of existing trends (Kofman & Lebas, 1996).

Benvenuto observes the design of the Tuilleries in Paris, with a simple layout of the space and chairs, as being very effective for people to meet, linger and take the initiative for ‘get-togethers’ and conversations. The role of a designer or architect, according to Benvenuto and the participants in this conversation, is to create the conditions and the space for people to do precisely that. These public meeting spaces need be visible as places for people to meet, to discuss the future as well as to reflect on the past.

The third group, moderated by the first author, mainly focused on the role of design in conflicts, and came to understand that we could use public space to articulate differences more precisely. During elections, for example, public voting and debates, people are often asked for simple binary decisions.

The group imagined a ‘wailing wall’ (figure 4) where various complex ideas could be discussed and made visible in a more nuanced way. The idea came into being as one of the participants brought up the fact that in every conflict there are winners and losers, and these positions might change over time. When losing something you go through different emotional stages that, if better recognised, might make it easier for all involved to recognise what has been lost.

Based on this discussion, designer Martina Huynh created an interactive wall. The wall allows people to express feelings, ideas, thoughts etc. in a more precise way. The wall, installed in a public space, with a spectrum of choice options and colours, would visualise the ‘public’s opinion’ and create a starting point for further discussions.
Reflection workshop

We concluded the workshop by sharing insights. Although each group worked on slightly different subjects, they all expressed the need to find new ways to articulate differences. The first group pointed out how we need to empathise more with different roles and stakeholders. The second group stressed the importance of tangible conversations in a public space where people could work on common interests and different points of view, and the third group emphasised the importance of disagreeing in a more nuanced way, pointing out the importance of tangible and visual designs in public space that could instigate debate.

Although in every session the designer proved to be very helpful in steering the conversation, making sketches, mappings and clustering ideas, the designer themselves were not positioned as an expert with unique knowledge (Schuman, 1993), instead, we emphasised how the co-creation process itself generates unique insights (Manzini, 2015).

The question of inclusion, was also brought up at the reflection session. Although we hoped to create a balanced group by selecting various disciplines e.g. journalist, designers, policy makers and philosophers, the group felt they were more or less part of the same strata of highly educated people with an interest in design research and participatory processes. Especially now that we are starting to realise more and more that differences are key for social innovation and for the levelling of power and resources (Westley, Zimmerman, and Patton, 2007), it is seen as necessary to involve as many different actors as possible in the participatory process. It became clear, that we could have included an even wider variety of people in the conversation.

What proved to be difficult in the workshop was the fact that in the particular case study of a new construction area in Utrecht, the new residents were not visible, and therefore not present in the workshop. Despite this, the other participants did manage to have a meaningful conversation by reflecting on personal examples. Almost everyone had experiences with neighbourhood arguments, or with conflicts in their working or private environment. “There is a huge need to develop tools to deal with conflicts”, stated participant Robert Elbrink, policy maker at City of Eindhoven, “Within policy making it is getting more and more difficult to deal with frustrated, angry citizens and we are lacking tools to deal with this.” Many others also recognised this through their practices as journalists or researchers.

Thorpe & Gamman (2012) acknowledge that we need to develop new tools for working through conflicts, as there are few in existence. Based on their studies (2010-2011) with the Design Against Crime Research Centre (DACRC) and Central Saint Martins (CSM) college of Arts and Design, they also came to understand that design tools and approaches to deal with conflicts are sorely lacking. This is rather surprising as more and more scholars acknowledge that conflict and dissent should be part of participatory projects (Björgvinsson, et al. 2012; Ehn 2014; Emilson in Ehn, Nilsson, Tolgaard, 2014).

Reflecting on the possible roles and tools for designers in dealing with conflicts, this conversation and the designed outcomes, led us to understand that the thinking through making (Raijmakers, Arets, 2015) session, where thinking and the actual making of a tangible outcome go hand in hand, is a very helpful strategy, as, commented participant, researcher Lucky Belder, “it gives everyone an equal voice in the conversation”.

Furthermore, the participants thought that designing open spaces, like the Tuilleries in Paris, for people to get together, and preferably also make things together (Sennett, 2012), would be very helpful. Many participants came to the conclusion that disagreeing in a more precise manner is key, expressing the need to design tools that make more nuanced debates possible.

Prior to many debates the opposing views are outlined. By focusing on the opposites of the spectrum, Brandsma (2016) calls them pushers, we stimulate polarisation. Instead we should focus on the silent, as Brandsma calls them in Polarization. We need to give voice to the silent people positioned in between the pushers, to make their ideas, thoughts and emotions visible. This also relates to the ideas of Rosanvallon (2014) who, in Le Parlement des Invisibles, writes that we should work towards narrative representation, making sure that the stories of the people who are invisible, are told. The participants of this session were convinced that design can be meaningful in achieving this.

To conclude

At a time when, in the context of disinformation, people are losing trust in media outlets and politics, and are unable to find common ground on the internet, which is a virtual space where there are no rules and
regulations to work out these differences, we should start to design the conditions for new public agoras. Designers could give shape to symbolic spaces (Mouffe, 2005) where this working out could take place, using artivism as a means to also include the emotions at stake, in order to better work through, and out of, differences.

These symbolic spaces need to be designed in such a way that they accommodate differences and offer various possibilities for people to interact. The participatory practice of design can be very helpful here. Options could be co-designed through interplay between different stakeholders (Bason 2014). Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge differences (Mouffe, 2005) and ‘work these out’ by making things together (Sennett, 2012). We need to get more practice in doing this, by getting together in a physical realm. Finally, designers could help to find agreement in a more precise way, revealing stories of the silent.

Though we think designers have important roles to play in reshaping societal debates we should take a humble approach. Throughout history we have seen that it is very difficult to create inclusive spaces where a wide variety of people feel welcome and where they are able to express thoughts and emotions and work out their differences. The good news though, is that over the years we are getting better at getting into non-aggressive disagreements (Achterhuis, Konings, 2014). Based on this workshop, and other case studies by the authors, we do however see a lot of potential for designers to apply their capabilities and mindsets to redesign public debates, creating symbolic spaces for people to interact, make things together, using artivism to reveal emotions, giving voice to the silent and helping people to disagree in a more nuanced way.

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