

# A Participatory Design: Technological Tool or Liberatory Movement?

## Panel Discussion

**Convener:** Douglas Schuler, The Evergreen State College, The Public Sphere Project (CPSR)

**Panel Members:** Peter van den Besselaar, Virginia Eubanks, Gerhard Fischer,  
Leah A. Lievrouw, Randy Trigg

Participatory design (PD) was originally conceptualized as a way to promote workplace democracy. Several years after its conception PD was declared (at least by some) to be a way improve *software* -- not as a way to improve the *world*. But technology and the way that technology is shaped influence the world.

If we define PD in terms of technical tools and methods, we will be unable to acknowledge, understand and predict the consequences of using them. PD tools and techniques cannot be evaluated (as good or useful) without taking social dynamics into account, the way technologies interact with the social dynamics, and the critical interventions that may ultimately change of the social system. Social movements play a decisive role in this, as they can go beyond the micro behavior of individual actors. If PD has normative goals, it should look at the technical tools from the perspective of social movements.

According to panelist Gerhard Fischer, "Cultures are substantially defined by their media and tools for thinking, working, learning, and collaborating. The fundamental challenge for computational media is to contribute to the invention and design of cultures in which humans can express themselves and engage in personally meaningful activities." Can PD help us meet this challenge?

Within this panel discussion we will explore some of the ways in which PD could contribute (and *is* contributing) to positive social change. We are interested in theory, ideas, and actual examples. We are also interested in ways in which PD could be

used to help integrate people from diverse experience levels, and cultural backgrounds inside and outside of the workplace.

The aim of this panel is to promote a lively discussion and brainstorming session among panel members -- and the audience -- holding a diversity of opinions and backgrounds. Ideally we will identify opportunities for charting new directions.

### PANEL MEMBERS

Peter van den Besselaar is professor of communication studies at the University of Amsterdam, and head of the social sciences department of NIWI-KNAW, Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. His main interests are in the dynamics and social implications of large technical systems, and in the implications of information technologies for the production and use of knowledge. His recent work focused on community informatics, e-democracy and e-government systems, and scientometrics.

Virginia Eubanks is Assistant Professor of Public Policy in the Department of Women's Studies, University of Albany, SUNY. She is the author of *Popular Technology: Citizenship and Inequality in the Information Economy*, based on three years of participatory research building technology tools for social justice with the women of the YWCA of Troy-Cohoes community. She is a founder of the Popular Technology Workshops (<http://www.populartechnology.org/>).

Gerhard Fischer (<http://www.cs.colorado.edu/~gerhard/>) is a professor of Computer Science, a fellow of the Institute of Cognitive Science, and the director of the Center for LifeLong Learning & Design (L3D) at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Current research interests include new media supporting lifelong learning, human-human

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and human-computer collaboration, (software) design, domain-oriented design environments and universal design (assistive technologies). More information about the (L3D) center can be found at: <http://www.cs.colorado.edu/~l3d/>.

Leah Lievrouw is a professor in the Department of Information Studies, part of the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. She is also affiliated with UCLA's Communication Studies Program. Her research and writing focus on the social and cultural changes associated with information and communication technologies and the relationship between new technologies and knowledge. Her current projects include an exploration of "the right to read anonymously" in the context of pervasive information and communication technologies (with Michael Curry of UCLA); and the genres and characteristics of "oppositional new media" used by artists and activists. Leah is co-editor (with Sonia Livingstone) of *The Handbook of New Media: Social Shaping and Consequences of ICTs* (Sage Publications, London, 2002). She is an editor of the journal *New Media & Society* and has published over 30 journal articles, proceedings papers, and book chapters.

Randy Trigg has been a participatory design practitioner ever since having the great good fortune to work in Denmark (1989-1992) with some of PD's founders. In the 1990s, he combined PD with ethnographic field studies in Lucy Suchman's group at Xerox PARC. Currently, he practices PD as database designer and de facto IT department at the Global Fund for Women, and in his consulting with other non-profit foundations.

#### **CONVENER**

Doug Schuler is a longtime researcher and practitioner of democratic media as an educator at The Evergreen State College and as an activist for Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility. He is one of the co-founders of the Seattle Community Network, a free, public-access computer network. Doug has organized nine Directions and Implications of Advanced Computing (DIAC) symposia for CPSR and is now the program director for the Public Sphere Project within CPSR. He is the author of *New Community Networks: Wired for Change* and the co-editor of six books on computers and society including *Participatory Design: Principles and Practices* (with Aki Namioka) based on CPSR's first Participatory Design Conference convened in 1990.