Assessing design approaches’ political role in the public sector.

Abstract

Governments across the globe are increasingly deploying design tools and methods to explore new ways of public policy-making and governance. Such design approaches are often portrayed as politically neutral. Building on contemporary research that argues the contrary, this paper proposes a framework for making their political dimension explicit by distinguishing between the artefacts, techniques, and discourses that compose them. This article is based on an interactive session held at DRS2018 titled ‘Smuggling ideologies? Inquiring into the underlying ideas embedded in design for public governance and policy-making’, where design practitioners and academics piloted the proposed framework, and follow-up interviews with some of the participants. An analysis of the discussions in the session and the interviews revealed the recurrence of certain themes, in particular the reinforcement of existing power relations and the encroachment of market logics into the public sector through the introduction of design approaches. The recurrence of these themes in the discussions, we argue, shows how the proposed framework makes visible the underlying political conceptions in the design approaches, and thus how it can contribute to the awareness and understanding of the political implications of (the otherwise proposed as neutral) design tools and methods utilised in the public sector.

Keywords: design; public sector; political; ideologies

Introduction

Design has gradually made its way into the public sphere over the past decades. The scale and complexity of the challenges faced by the public sector have triggered governments to look at new, non-incremental ways of framing issues and developing solutions (OECD, 2017). This process has now become relatively mainstream, with governments across the world incorporating a myriad of design approaches into their activities. Moreover, design has rapidly spread with the help of design thinking training to ‘non-designers’ (Bailey and Story, 2018; Mazé, 2018). Innovation mandates and technological and digital goals in government agendas also nurture the narrative through which design approaches are being introduced in the public sector (Bailey and Story, 2018; Tunstall, 2007). In this context, such tools and techniques are by their proponents presented as a ‘neutral’ innovative (or even anti-political) approach absent from political “complications” (Bailey and Story, 2018). Furthermore, understood as a social technology (Liedtka, 2020) design appears to be presented to help in material and technological ways to “transcend ideological differences” (Barry 2011, p.8).

However, the majority of design tools and methods utilised in the public sector are being ported from the private sector and devised for purposes that may substantially differ from public sector goals. Several scholars (Bailey and Story, 2018; Kimbell, 2016; Mazé, 2018; Opazo et al., 2017; Vink, Wetter-Edman & Rodrigues 2017; Keshavarz 2015) have therefore questioned the perceived neutrality of design approaches, and whether the introduction of design approaches into the public sector have a political dimension embedded in them.
According to this line of research, the tools and methods used in public sector design are not ‘aseptic’ instruments but have been developed in specific contexts, to help solve specific problems, under specific circumstances, and in specific socio-cultural and political environments. Thus, utilised without careful scrutiny, these tools have the potential to become ‘black boxes’ whose underlying conceptions and political views remain invisible to those who are transferring them into a new context. Indeed, it implies that designers developing such tools and methods may not always be fully aware of their ideological biases, and may thus contribute to the reinforcement of hegemonic political agendas through seemingly innocuous professional practices.

Taking as starting point that design tools and methods are entangled with political ideologies, we developed a framework for helping both researchers and practitioners unearthing and moreover understanding how political ideologies are smuggled into the public sector from the private sector through design tools and methods. The framework consists of the disaggregation of design tools and methods into the discourses through which they are presented, the techniques operationalising them, and the artefacts that embody them.

In order to test whether the framework could be used to highlight how design tools and methods bring ideologies with them, we convened one of the 21 Conversation sessions held at Design Research Society conference 2018 (DRS2018) under the title ‘Smuggling ideologies? Inquiring into the underlying ideas embedded in design for public governance and policy-making’. The framework was employed to provoke a discussion among the participating practitioners, researchers, and academics. We also conducted follow-up interviews with some of the participants.

This article is organised into five sections. Firstly, we provide a brief overview of how tools and methods from design have been implemented in the public sector and in particular to improve on the practices of public policy-making and governance. Secondly, we discuss the concept of ideology in this context and introduce a framework that considers discourses, techniques, and artefacts as the three components through which design permeates political ideologies in the public sphere. Thirdly, we present the context from which this article originates, as it represents an original way to conducting design research. Fourthly, we offer an account of the themes constructed from the insights gathered during the DRS2018 Conversation and follow-up interviews. Lastly, we discuss our findings and observe that perhaps also the context and the facilitator should be taken into consideration when studying the political impact of integrating design in the public sector.

Design, governance and the public sector

Design in public policymaking is usually presented in two different (often overlapping) ways: design as a matter of policies, and design as (an) approach(es) to change how policies are conceived. On the former, design appears in different countries’ legislation, focusing on public expenditure, promotion, and protection of design and designers (Tunstall, 2007). On the latter, often referred to as ‘Design for Policy’, design is introduced as an innovative way to change policymaking, promising to tackle social problems and experiment through novel public policies (Bason, 2014; Kimbell and Bailey, 2017). We are in this article interested in the latter sense of design in public policymaking.

In fact, design is promoted to the public sector as a key approach, if not also almost as a ‘magic wand’ solution, to tackle complex societal challenges (‘wicked problems’) by experimentation and innovation (Bailey and Lloyd, 2017, p.10). For this reason, design is
being mobilised into the public sphere to affect the apparent much-needed change traditional approaches require as they struggle to deliver the publics’ expected results (Bason, 2014). The most widespread conceptualisation of design in such contexts is framed under “design thinking”: an agile and creative problem-solving approach to deal with social problems in an innovative and even entrepreneurial way (Blyth et al., 2011).

An increasing number of governments around the globe are progressively incorporating such approaches into governance by collaborating with citizens, the private sector and other stakeholders. A popular set-up of this approach has been the ‘lab’ (McGann et al., 2018; Puttick et al., 2014; Tõnurist et al., 2017; Williamson 2015), flexible units or group of people introduced in different public sector organisations to ‘change’ public sector by introducing new participatory and empathic approaches. The phenomenon became more visible in the early 2000s with North and Western Europe, and North America at the forefront, but during the last five years, a growing number of ‘labs’ have sprouted in various countries around the globe. Despite several international platforms and organisations contributing toward more omnidirectional knowledge transfer (e.g. Apolitical, FutureGov, Centre for Public Impact), many of the more novel labs have developed in the image and likeness of those first Anglo-Saxon and Nordic organisations (Bason, 2014).

Despite the enthusiasm with which design has been introduced into the public sector (Bason, 2014; McGann et al., 2018) there are also critics of how such ways are presented as “new and superior approach[es] to social problem solving” (Clarke and Craft 2018, p.1). In particular, there is today a growing body of research concerned with the political implications of design in the public sector (Bailey and Story, 2018; Kimbell, 2016; Mazé, 2018; Opazo, et al., 2017; Vink, Wetter-Edman & Rodrigues 2017; Keshavarz 2015). By focussing on how the methods and tools of design being imported into the public sector are developed in an instrumental and fast-paced environment with an emphasis on ‘value creation’ where value holds a market-based imprint, they question whether design can be portrayed as ‘neutral’. Instead, it seems to have brought with it neoliberal and consumerist values (Julier, 2013; Kimbell and Bailey, 2017) even though design many times contests the industrial cradle where it was born (Bailey and Story, 2018). Thus, while design tools and methods are often promoted as inclusive, distributed, and accessible, some design scholars question if and how these tools and methods reproduce and reinforce authority, elites, and power structures (Bailey and Story, 2018; Kimbell and Bailey, 2017; von Busch and Pålmas, 2016; Winner, 1995, Keshavarz 2015).

**The notion of (political) ideology**

In general then, our working hypothesis is that design tools and methods imported into the public sector come with certain conceptual baggage inherited from the private sector in which they were conceived; baggage that we will refer to in broad terms as their ideological underpinnings. Now, while the term ‘ideology’ has been referred to as “the most elusive concept in the whole of social science” (McLellan 1986, p. 1), we believe it can be made sufficiently precise for our purposes in this article.

A dictionary definition, which is perhaps closer to the term’s vernacular usage, says that an ideology is “a system of ideas and ideals, especially one which forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy” (Oed.com, 2019). In academic terms, Van Dijk explains that “ideologies have been defined as foundational beliefs that underlie the shared social representations of specific kinds of social groups” (2006b, p.116). These social representations define the group’s social identity while conversely, the kind of group defines the type of ideology (ibid). This means that different groups, namely, political parties,
professions, and social movements, may have distinct ideologies. However, these are not any sort of shared belief, but rather general in nature, controlling and organising other socially shared beliefs (ibid). Used in this way, our interpretation goes beyond the Marxist pejorative conception, towards the ‘materiality’ of ideologies as it is the determining manner in which people behave, reason, and produce (Daldal 2014, p. 158). While a “political ideology” would be tautological according to the dictionary definition, the academic definition seems to provide room for a non-political ideology. In this regard, Gerring (1997), poses that to avoid depriving the concept of its utility, it is imperative to define its boundaries as an ideology is, in relation to other social science terms, perhaps one of the most context-dependent. We will therefore restrict the usage of “ideology” to the political arena, thereby focusing on political ideology.

Our usage will thus be along the lines of Erikson and Tedin (2003, p. 64) who define political ideology as “a set of beliefs about the proper order of society and how it can be achieved”. Importantly then, both ideology in general, and political ideology in particular, are not only devices for explaining the state of things, but also for providing rationales for how things should be (Jost et al., 2009). A political ideology frames the future possibilities while specifying the acceptable means of accomplishing them (ibid).

What is more, and considering the Conversation focussed on what we called the ‘smuggling of ideologies’, understanding the means of ideological reproduction is key to explore the phenomenon. In this respect, Van Dijk (2006b) explains that it is mainly through discourse, be it in written or spoken communicative exchanges, that ideologies are acquired. Correspondingly, Van Dijk (2006a, p. 728) asserts:

Politics is one of the social domains whose practices are virtually exclusively discursive; political cognition is by definition ideologically based; and political ideologies are largely reproduced by discourse.

The relationship between political ideology and discourse becomes then clear. However, in the section below, we develop the idea of how design approaches introduced into the public sector can be studied by disaggregating them into three constituent parts, thus helping in explaining the reproduction of political ideologies beyond discourses. We argue this is of utmost importance because of the part ideologies can play in legitimising power structures (Van Dijk, 2006a). By omitting the analysis of these approaches, we may be contributing towards the naturalisation of dominant ideologies, thus fostering their acceptance as notions of common sense into what Gramsci (1971) defined as hegemony.

Developing a framework for analysis

As we have already observed, design’s contribution to the public sector is mostly seen in neutral technocratic terms: design can contribute to the development of better (more efficient, less resisted) solutions to public problems. This is, in turn, generally perceived as an inherent advantage of the approach. However, the role of the designers (professional or not) implementing these approaches is often disregarded. On this, Heaton explains that:

Firstly, designers are subject to constraints and structures in their work and practices. [...] But designers are also the product of their environment and their relationships. Their various cultures influence their thoughts (and values) about their work, their role and about the possibilities and desirability of various choices they will make in designing. [...] Finally, the artefacts that result from this process carry with them a heritage that will facilitate or constrain their use in other contexts. This is the material
dimension, which serves to structure and to constrain the next round of action in a
given context (Heaton 2002, p.70).

Following, and given that the introduction of design for policy is still a relatively emerging
design sub-discipline with scarce specific training (Whicher, 2020), it seems reasonable that
designers migrating to the public sector will find themselves shaped and constrained by
structures and professional cultures different to that of the public sector.

Likewise, Opazo et al. (2017) claim that design —understood as the process of imagining
alternative worlds and acting to that effect— entails an apparent political aspect. Moreover,
the authors claim this is even more so when the design process concerns citizen participation
(ibid) – a significant aspect of the introduction of design in the public sector.

Therefore, the question we raise is not only about the intrinsic political ideology of the
solution developed through a design process, but that of the process itself. We then argue that
the utilisation of specific technologies (design methods) will produce outcomes that are
necessarily limited by not only their technical capabilities but also the world-views within
which they have been conceived.

As to illustrate this concept, one could consider the numeric system represented by Roman
numerals. Besides its many advantages, this numeric system presents several limitations such
as the absence of a way to numerically express fractions or the need for counting boards for
the division of numbers. These limitations —which ultimately lead to the adoption of the
Arabic numerals— help us in understanding how a system may condition the available
techniques, thus also constraining the universe of possibilities it offers. Similarly, and as
Langdon Winner answered to his 1980 ‘Do artifacts have politics?’ essay, patterns of power
and authority can be established by specific features in a given design, thus asserting the
political qualities artefacts can have. He exemplifies this by citing Robert Moses's low
bridges in New York, referring to Moses’ successful attempt to restrict the use of state parks
by poor and lower-middle-class families (and minority ethnic groups in particular) by
ordering the bridge heights lowered, thus limiting access by buses (Caro, 1974).

Winner (1980) goes further, as to claim that it is due to our habituated way of perceiving
technologies as neutral tools that we systematically fail to interrogate them in their capacity
to produce other, less apparent outcomes.

In explaining the relationship between design and governance, Rosenqvist and Mitchell
(2016), introduced a three-level model. With it, the authors illustrate how the socio-material
arrangements that constitute design and governance are intrinsically intertwined. These span
from day to day governance (artefacts), and the worldviews attached to such daily
governance instruments (visions), to meta-governance, described as the values driving and
controlling the other two levels. Design appears more clearly in the first order, with the
tangible and day to day governance (Rosenqvist and Mitchell, 2016; Tunstall, 2007). The
other two levels are “highly invisible”, but important to designers to engage in creating
deeper and longer change in governance structures (Rosenqvist and Mitchell 2016, p.4).

It is under these considerations that, to better understand the ideological implications of
design approaches in the public sector, we propose to disaggregate them into three
components:

1. The discourses utilised by individuals and organisations in proposing and fostering
   ‘designerly ways’ of developing public policies and modes of governance;
2. The *techniques* associated with the deployment and operationalisation of such ways; and

3. The *artefacts* that materialise and make these approaches tangible.

This framework looks at analysing the design approaches by systemically examining the relationship between 1. the materiality enabling (or restricting) our interactions with the environment and others; 2. the ways of and the abilities needed for performing specific tasks; 3. the worldviews that frame the techniques and guide behaviour. As we have seen before, there is an intrinsic relationship in the dyad discourses-ideologies, and this can be interrogated by means of discourse analysis, amongst others. However, making explicit the link between a way of operating and a certain ideology requires a more thorough examination. Even more so, when it comes to that of the material world— again, Robert Moses’s urban design of New York City is a good example. Therefore, examining these three components, we propose, can aid in better understanding whether a certain political ideology is being introduced along with the use of a design approach. It is interesting to notice how, whereas in Rosenqvist and Mitchell’s (2016) three-level governance model design moves from being more tangible at the artefact level to more abstract at the meta-governance level, in our construct the relationship between design and the ideologies it carries is inverse. By this we mean that whilst at the discursive level ideologies are more clearly manifest, at the material level (artefacts) these become fuzzier, making its operating set of values less trivial to elicit. We thus argue that an examination allowing for the understanding of the interactions amongst the artefacts, techniques, and discourse that compose the design approaches can bring forward how ideologies are intertwined and present across the three components.

**Methodology**

To investigate the potential introduction of political ideologies coupled with the design approaches, we resorted to expert knowledge from design academics and practitioners working in these matters. This was done in two stages. Firstly, we engaged in a group discussion with 18 participants utilising the framework by acknowledging its three different levels: artefacts, techniques, and discourses, to analyse several cases from different organisations from around the world which utilise design in the public sector, and to discuss the political implications of using design methods in the public sphere. The 90-minute-long Conversation was registered by note and picture taking of the groups’ discussions and materials generated. Conceived as alternative channels to challenge established approaches to conducting design research, Design Research Society (DRS) Conversations function as platforms to develop experimental formats during DRS conferences (Prendeville et al., 2018), allowing participants to engage in open exchange and advance new understandings on specific topics (Drs2018limerick.org, 2017). The Conversation was structured in three segments, starting with the introduction of the framework through a policy case, and followed by a two-part discussion. During the discussion, three groups were formed to focus on one of the framework’s components each: discourses, techniques, and artefacts. In facilitating the discussion, participants were provided with resources (see Figure 1) including publicly available pictures, reports’ excerpts, manifestos, and website screenshots from organisations that, at different levels and with different aims, utilise design approaches in the public sector (eg: Danish Mindlab, City of Helsinki participatory game, Mexico’s Laboratorio para la Ciudad, Chile’s Laboratorio de Gobierno, etc.). A report of the session can be found in the Book of DRS2018 Conversations (Ferreira and Vaz, 2018). In the following, we shall refer to the groups as the *artefacts group*, the *techniques group*, and the *discourse group*. 

Secondly, we interviewed one participant from each group half a year after the Conversation. The purpose of these interviews was to validate the findings elicited from the Conversation, as well as to advance the understanding of the issues addressed during the Conversation. These hour-long interviews were conducted individually during early 2019 through online video calls, producing, in each opportunity, a video recording and its corresponding transcript. The three interviewees were designers whose professional expertise and activity are, from different perspectives, linked to the introduction of design in the public sector. Henceforth, we will identify the interviewees as the artefacts interviewee, the techniques interviewee, and the discourses interviewee.

![Figure 1](resources.jpg)

**Figure 1** Resources provided to the workgroups during the Conversation at DRS2018.

Both stages of the inquiry produced different outputs that we compiled to analyse. Importantly, the object of analysis of each instance is not strictly the same. Whereas during the DRS Conversation we asked participants to inquiry about the potential ideologies embedded within the material provided, during the interviews we asked participants about their professional insights and experiences utilising the framework during the Conversation. Notes and transcripts were analysed through thematic analysis, by “systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield and Terry, 2014, p. 57). This method pursues the extraction of significant themes in a text at different levels (Attride-Stirling, 2001), and it is argued to be theoretically flexible as well as useful when working with participants as collaborators (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Perhaps especially in regard to this article’s topic, it is important to stress that in conducting a thematic analysis, “the researcher is positioned as active in the research process; themes do not just ‘emerge’” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.36). In this context, this means we not only had an active role in facilitating the Conversation and conducting the interviews but that the themes presented below are the result of an iterative process in our pursuit to answer the research questions.

**Findings**

The thematic analysis of the textual data obtained from our research resulted in four recurring themes: efficiency and efficacy, experimentation and participation, design and power
structures, and designers’ neutrality. These four themes appeared both during the DRS Conversation and the interviews, with the latter playing a crucial role in shaping the themes. Below we present excerpts and quotes that aid in illustrating them.

Efficiency & efficacy

The most recurrent theme relates to the notion of introducing design methods in the public sector for efficiency and efficacy purposes. For instance, the artefacts group directed the attention towards how some of the games utilised in engaging participants are built on what they describe as a ‘managerialist’ approach to the public sector. They understood that many of these present a focus on efficiency gains as the main driver to winning the game, therefore making it the most important value worth pursuing. Moreover, they emphasised how the underlying assumption about the artefacts is that by utilising them the outcome will be inexorably ‘better’.

Similarly, the discourses group identified the potential for cost reductions whilst producing gains in the effectiveness of public services and user acceptance as a key selling point across the different materials provided. Furthermore, they claimed ‘impact evaluation’ recurrently appeared in the organisation’s manifestos, often presented in what they described as ‘neoliberal’ terms; namely, cost reduction and benefit maximisation. Based on their experience, however, the group acknowledged that measuring design’s impact would represent a challenging task for any government. Although this was the only group enquiring about the use of the term ‘ideology’ as the most appropriate for assessing these matters, they agreed on the need for dissecting how design is being introduced in the public sector in order to elicit which purposes it serves. The group’s final remarks questioned to what degree design’s introduction is not a cover-up to ‘humanise’ otherwise resisted austerity measures, thus further encroaching market logics in the public sector.

Participatory experimentation

The techniques group questioned the predominant notion of participation as the guiding principle for its introduction in the public sector. In this regard, the group discussed what the benefits of top-down governance are, and which decisions should be tackled from this perspective. Likewise, the artefacts group interrogated to what extent are public servants, (who ultimately will be the recipients and users) involved in the development of these tools. And more importantly, who gets to decide who is involved. Similarly, the discourses group identified the concepts of participation, co-design, and co-production across the material. They explained that the inclusion of a larger number of stakeholders than what is usually considered in the development of public policies and services appear to be a core characteristic of the discourses. This aspect was seen by them as key to operationalise the efficiency and efficacy mandate discussed above. However, the discourse group also questioned to what extent are the gains in efficiency obtained by shifting part of the workload from the public sector to the citizens involved in the co-production of public services. Finally, they also found the concept of experimentation to be auxiliary to participation. In this regard, ‘providing a space for doing things differently’ was recurrently considered to be an important feature highlighted by the organisations.

The artefacts group questioned how and to what extent these experimental designerly approaches clash with the established ways of doing things in the public sector, and moreover whether anything would be lost by abandoning the traditional approaches.
Design and power structures

During the interviews, the topic of participation reappeared. However, this time it appeared in connection with design’s role in maintaining or challenging power structures. In particular, according to each of the interviewees, design and designers understood as political actors can play a role in challenging or perpetuating the existing power structures.

Amongst the various ways in which design can be employed in the public sector, the techniques interviewee recognises it can be used to generate genuine engagement so “people can have their voices heard or can influence policy-making in different ways”. This, the techniques interviewee claims, relates to the use of design tools and techniques that “put people on an equal level, allow[ing] them to talk to each other across social norms”. When referring to the use of tools for engagement that are “somewhat standardised”, however, the techniques interviewee expressed their concerns about designers stepping into communities of practice that are not their own and ignoring their specific dynamics. Similarly, the discourses interviewee has seen in connection with their work with civil servants how although some struggle to appropriate those ways of working as their own, they do recognise designers’ ability to challenge the status quo. The discourses interviewee subscribed to this “intrinsic design’s ability” and considered that it is important to position designers in places where change can be indeed affected.

The discourses interviewee explained how, according to the design thinking promoters, design in some cases has been introduced into the public sector after observing the benefits it has reported to corporate management. In assuming public structures can also benefit from it, the discourses interviewee remarked that some governments have bought into design’s attractive efficiency gains and economic added value promise. Adding to this, techniques interviewee comments this has been particularly problematic for service design projects where “people had worked within constraints that are given by, for example, austerity policies without questioning those… and even though the value is still social, there is no questioning what the mandate for it is or where that mandate is coming from”. Furthermore, they expresses their reservations toward the participatory narrative, since the genuine attempts and those acting as “screens for policy ideas that are actually already decided” are externally difficult to distinguish from each other. The problem with these tools and techniques, the artefacts interviewee asserts, “is that they’re highly managerialist […] therefore, […] the professionals doing the engaging, are focussing on efficiencies rather than engaging, and it has the potential for reducing that practice to a series of standard blocks that are rendered meaningless in the complexities of different context that they can actually go into”. They support this idea based on a “solid body of literature” claiming that “by creating these spaces for participation from the perspective of establishment what you are doing is removing people’s ability to actually make a change and stand up against ways in which they might being oppressed”. In this regard, the discourses interviewee added that the introduction of these approaches has been— in some contexts— carefully executed to circumvent local resistance. For instance, when conducting training sessions or setting up innovation labs abroad, the local staff has been preferred to avoid ‘neo-colonialists’ claims.

Designers’ neutrality

In terms of the surreptitious introduction of ideologies, the techniques group inquired whether these are ported by the techniques in use or if it is those using them who infiltrate their worldviews during the execution. In that regard, it was also mentioned that the set of values practitioners carry with them may not be evident even for themselves. Moreover, these may
also be conflicting and incompatible within each person, but because they are seldom made explicit, they tend to coexist and operate depending on the tasks and work to be done.

In this regard, the discourses interviewee claimed that “all design is political… because [the designers] always have some kind of intention… regardless of them declaring it or not”. Likewise, they asserted that when working in or for the government remaining neutral is at least very difficult, since it is by definition a political arena. Furthermore, the interviewee explained that in becoming part of the public service, the job “is always related to some kind of ideological powers that are in place or are opposing them”. The techniques interviewee explains this perception of impartiality not as a design specific concern but as a wider societal issue, where different stakeholders were often portrayed as neutral negotiators sitting at the table. In challenging that view and accepting there is no such thing as a neutral negotiator, the techniques interviewee claimed that by assuming its political role, design takes a much more interesting position, especially when conducting or facilitating social interventions.

The artefacts interviewee went beyond the role of the designer as to claim that design tools cannot be neutral either. Although the artefacts interviewee recognised that the practitioner using the tool will play a significant role in enabling its affordances, the tools are conceived to empower or constraint actions and interactions. As a professional who designs tools with deliberate intents, the artefacts interviewee understood that these are “inevitably based on a particular theory or idea on how something needs to be done”. Neutrality is for designers, as the artefacts interviewee explained, “an easy cloak to assume when the worldview that you are coming from has you at the centre of it”. Interestingly, the group looking at the artefacts questioned the agency and accountability of such tools, adding that this could not be answered by solely investigating the artefacts.

Discussion

The aim of our study was to explore whether the disaggregation of design approaches in three constituent parts —discourses, techniques, and artefacts— could assist in unearthing their underlying ideologies, that is their political dimension. This framework was tested out with the participants of a DRS Conversation and further discussed with some of the participants through online interviews. We anticipated that the framework’s components would enable participants to assess the potential ideologies embedded in a series of cases of design in the public sector. As described above, we identified certain recurring notions from the discussions with the participants.

In particular, the Conversation showed that the framework can assist in evidencing how designers, either directly or through the design of tools and methods, can play a role in maintaining or challenging power structures, a point already made in the literature (Kimbell and Bailey 2017). Also, it appears that design’s introduction into the public sector has been functional to the encroachment of market logics, as pointed out by Julier (2013) and Kimbell and Bailey (2017). Whilst such claim could be more easily identified within the discourses, it is often presented in combination with the ‘participation’ narrative, making it less obvious to elicit. Therefore, disaggregating design in the public sector through the framework proved helpful in identifying these as independent characteristics.

As previously mentioned, governments have incorporated design focusing (at least explicitly) in the complex problem-solving narrative of its techniques (Bason, 2014), but also because of its value-adding promise and economic prowess. This denotes a very specific understanding of what design can offer and what it should be valued for. It is then apparent why the
narrative around efficiency and efficacy is so prevalent in the design discourses, and how the apparent ‘neutrality’ of the tools is what drives them (Williamson, 2015). This implies, to some degree, imprinting on the State’s operative that of the private sector, as the advantages presented were obtained in the latter. However, this might have passed unnoticed by some of the governments adopting them. Evidence of this is that these efficiency drivers were found in organisations operating in governments with varied ideological affiliations, ranging from politically conservative to social-democratic. The latter being typically averse to identifying the role of the state with that of the private enterprise. Other features, however, could perhaps be more attractive to such governments. For instance, the notion of participation conceived not as a method for consumer insight capturing but rather as a way of promoting a more democratic decision-making process could be seen as worth pursuing. In this light, the ‘effectiveness’ driver can be understood as a more democratic outcome of the policy process.

Although these design approaches are portrayed as ideologically aseptic tools for improvement, it is in that very definition where the oxymoron reveals. Thanks to Winner (1980) and Barry (2001), we already know that technologies (even those of a social nature) are usually perceived as neutral tools. However, the idea of ‘improvement’ necessarily implies the transition from a current state to a preferred one, and it is to that preferred state that a particular worldview is inevitably ascribed. Betterment, in this context, becomes contentious, as it can only be assessed under certain principles which, as the participants discovered, is not always made explicit. Moreover, the intellectual and practical exercise of identifying problems in the first place, conceiving solutions, and accordingly acting to their attainment, is a political process. This, of course, does not per se identify a specific ideology but reveals the existence of a set of values guiding the design approaches’ introduction.

The findings also suggest that some designers operating in the public sector are aware of their role as political actors whose intervention is not neutral, as identified in the literature (Vink, Wetter-Edman and Rodrigues 2017; Keshavarz 2015, von Busch and Pålmas, 2016). This, however, does not necessarily imply they are aware of the values guiding their work. As the techniques group suspected, the literature is clear in that designers, based on their worldviews, cultural and societal values, and professional and organisational norms, make assumptions that ultimately inform their design decisions (Heaton, 2002). Moreover, we also found participants’ agreement in recognising design’s political nature. Nevertheless, neutrality appears as a common stance for the designers and design promoters in the public sector. As explained by one interviewee, the organisations introducing design approaches may take direct actions to avoid political resistance, such as reducing dissonance by carefully selecting staff. Although there may be several reasons to portray the individuals facilitating these approaches as politically neutral actors, the (perhaps even inadvertently) adherence to the hegemonic narratives could also contribute to this. From this perspective, it is easy to see how recognising one’s political role when interrogated about it and knowingly exercising it are not the same thing. However, even if designers’ professional tradition is still largely based on market-oriented logics, from the literature and the concerns of many of the participants we can sustain that awareness around such issues is growing.

From the above, we can assert that the introduction of design approaches into the public sector, especially when contributing to public policymaking and governance, has political implications which need to be assessed on a case-to-case basis. By examining these in their discourses, techniques, and artefacts as their constituent parts, we are better suited to understand the ideological conceptions framing them. Furthermore, we argue that whereas an analysis based on the discourses used in introducing design could offer an account of the
ideologies framing it, it is the systemic examination of all three elements that could provide a more comprehensive understanding.

However, the subsequent interviews also made us realize that our proposed framework could be further expanded to account for the situated deployment of the design approaches by including two other elements. Namely, the context in which the design approach is introduced, and the individuals facilitating its introduction. Our proposed framework does not explicitly consider the role of the facilitators in (even unconsciously) projecting their biases and political views in their work. Nor does it contemplate the contextual reality that might — irrespective of the intentionality of the approaches and the individuals — steer the design practices toward its norms and codes. Hence, the role of individuals and the power structures they are immersed in (and even enacting) appear as substantial aspects to consider in analysing specific cases.

Conclusions

In this article, we contributed to the growing literature addressing the political dimension of design for developing public policies and governance.

We did this by, together with a group of design scholars and practitioners, interrogating the ideological frames informing the design approaches in use by a set of public sector organisations. In particular, we have shown how analysing the discourses, techniques, and artefacts that constitute the design approaches brings awareness and reflection to elicit the political ideologies that frame them. However, we also found that examining the context in which each design approach is deployed, and the individual actions of those facilitating the processes are of importance to comprehensively understand the political implications of their introduction. Nonetheless, our findings suggest that the proposed framework can give a broader understanding of the basic assumptions and rationales within the introduction of design approaches in the public sector.

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References


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