

KomInDu - A Small Project about Big Issues

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ABSTRACT

In this short paper, we present glimpses from an interdisciplinary research and development project aimed at enhancing local democracy by developing ICT support for the consultation process around the comprehensive plan of a municipality. For the participating researchers, the project offered the opportunity of combining and comparing approaches and methods from two different design traditions that share democratic ideals and ambitions of nurturing citizen/user participation in design processes. This proved to be more challenging than we had originally anticipated. Differences in perspective gave different interpretations of the design context as well as of how participatory the processes actually were.

Keywords

Planning, consultations, participatory design, e-democracy, citizens' perspectives, users' perspectives

INTRODUCTION

The *KomInDu* project was a research and development project run by the municipality of Ronneby in southern Sweden during the period February 2003 – March 2004. The main focus of the project was on making use of the Internet for renewing and enhancing the compulsory consultation process connected with the comprehensive plan that is the main tool for strategic spatial planning in the Swedish planning system. The software platform envisioned for this was an existing web-based application, which had to be customized for this specific purpose.

KomInDu was run within the larger framework of TANGO (*Thematic Arenas Nourish Growth Opportunities*), a regional research and development initiative financed through the Innovative Actions program of the European Regional Development Funds (ERDF).

The TANGO arena for e-government, one of five thematic arenas, was established in 2002-2003 as a platform for regional research and development projects focusing on designing public e-services, developing e-administration and exploring e-democracy in co-operation between the public sector, private enterprise and university-based research in Southern Sweden. [2] The starting point for this regional co-operative effort has been e-government understood as co-construction of technology, society and citizenship in everyday life. [3], [4] This approach is based on the Scandinavian Tradition of Participatory Design. Our current research questions focus on exploring and managing multi-perspectives as a resource for design. [6] Thus, when faced with clashes and gaps between our various perspectives in the KomInDu project, we felt these should be juxtaposed and the differences explored further. [1]

The KomInDu Project

The primary goal of the KomInDu project was the design and implementation of a web-based discussion forum for supporting and enhancing the consultation process around the municipal comprehensive plan, *vision.ronneby.se*. This platform was seen as an important part of the municipality's e-services for the citizens. In the KomInDu project, we soon realized we were focusing on two different processes of participation. One participatory process concerned the design of the website; the other concerned the actual planning process. Yet these were not two entirely separate processes. Rather, they were interwoven. Several of the same actors participated in both processes. The main purpose of the web design process was to create the best possible conditions for a good planning process. The web design process and the planning process thus had to be recognized as two different processes, yet at the same time in some sense needed to be regarded as one coherent process, which consisted of a whole chain of activities.

The Actors Involved

A large number of actors can be identified in the two processes, the design of the website and the planning process. According to Swedish law, the politicians and the employees of the planning office are responsible for the planning process. They produce a document as a base for the consultation process. In the KomInDu project, this document was subsequently to some extent adapted for the web design process. Planners have also cooperated in the web design process, while the politicians were not involved in this process. Concerning the web design process and other parts of the KomInDu project, the municipal information office has also been an important actor. Politicians and the planning office have also taken part in the dialogue during the traditional consultation process and will later need to decide how to take care of and follow up on the comments and opinions (from whoever has expressed these) in the continuing planning process.

The paper version of the consultation document has been sent out to all municipal units (schools, etc), to local enterprises, and to local organizations etc for comments. Consultants were hired by the municipality, on the one hand an advertising agency for presenting parts of the comprehensive plan in a more accessible form, and on the other hand a software company, for designing and developing the *vision.ronneby.se* website.

After a brief introduction to the Swedish tradition of comprehensive planning, we focus mainly on the software company, the planning office and the politicians, and their role in the development process.

THE COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING CONTEXT

The Swedish planning legislation puts strong emphasis on consultations with those concerned. Today, the concept consultation in the planning process includes being able to influence the shaping of the plan, not only being informed about it. In the case of the comprehensive plan, all municipality citizens have a right to express their views. The purpose behind consultations is mainly to convince citizens that ongoing planning is in the public interest, in other words to legitimise ongoing processes.

In a communicative process, the planner creates conditions for a dialog, planning is *with* citizens and a process of learning for all involved. Fully utilized, the communicative approach may even be empowering. In some places the web has been used as a medium for consultation, both for traditional information and to create a dialog between the citizens and planners/politicians.

The Comprehensive Plan of Ronneby

The transformation of the traditional paper-based comprehensive plan into a web-based version has basically consisted in converting Word documents into pdf format.

The language in the report is the same as before; the professional language of spatial planners. What has been added in the web version is that certain questions are brought up for discussion. Citizens are invited to “say what they think” about certain issues, but the effect of the software application was that it steered the communication towards dialogue between citizens, rather than between citizens and municipal planners/politicians. The web-based discussions should have been included earlier in the production of the comprehensive plan, when the process was still open and allowed the possibility of influencing the contents of the plan.

Other ways of inviting the citizens of Ronneby to join the consultation process on-line as well as off-line were an initial exhibition of the comprehensive plan at the Culture Center, a press release about *vision.ronneby.se* and the KomInDu project, and repeated information on the local radio station.

THE SOFTWARE DESIGN CONTEXT

The Web Design Process in the KomInDu Project

The web site was developed in co-operation with the municipal information department, the planning office, the researchers and the software company. Workshops and focus group interviews were held as parts of the design process to ensure user participation. Furthermore the web site was discussed during project meetings where researchers and practitioners took part. In these meeting new requirements arose that later became implemented.

Workshops and focus groups interviews as parts of the design process

Workshops give participants the possibility to discuss and reflect on a specific issue. Participants from different areas of expertise often find workshops helpful for understanding each other’s work practises. [8] In the KomInDu project, the workshops also offered an opportunity to discuss the purpose of the web site

Three workshops were held during the web design process. These workshops were organised by four of the Ph.D. students who participated in the project. Staff from the information department and the planning office participated in the first workshop. The topic for this workshop was “*what is communication?*” Some of the questions raised were; How is it possible to communicate through a web site? What kind of communication do we want to have? At this first workshop, examples of different types of communication were used to inspire the discussion, and mock-up techniques were introduced as a tool for cooperative design of the web interface.

The second workshop was held two weeks after the first one. The project leader from the software company extended the group form. He did not take an active part in the work,

he sat in the background, watching and listening to the on-going work and discussions. The focus of this workshop was; how do we want to communicate with the citizens and what do we want to communicate about (e.g. content of the website). Several mock-ups were constructed during this workshop.

The aim was to use these mock-ups as an input in the design and development process.

The last workshop was a video workshop carried out together with the project leader from the software company, Ph.D. students and representatives from the municipal information department. Results from the earlier workshops were discussed and some reflections were made concerning the web site.

The outcome of these workshops did not turn out fully as we had expected. We had hoped that the mock-ups would be an important input for the design and development of the web site. It turned out that the workshops were most important for the staff at the planning office and for the advertising agency that had been hired to popularise parts of the comprehensive plan for publishing on the web. The planning office staff stated that the workshops helped them to understand and concentrate on their task. The advertising agency claimed they understood their task when they studied the mock-ups. The project leader from the software company thought that workshops offer a good opportunity to discuss content, but not layout. He felt that he and the others working at the software company are specialists in layout and know best how to do the layout. He had expected more information about the content that would build up the web site.

Focus group interviews were conducted as well as individual interviews with citizens. Citizens got the chance to react and comment on the web site. These comments were passed through the information department to the software company, but not in time to really have an impact on the final result.

THE MUNICIPAL PLANNING OFFICE CONTEXT

The Effects of Understaffing

The project took place in a working environment that was characterised by changes in staffing, and the level of staffing was lower than normal, even at the beginning of the project. During the project, two key members left the planning department. This meant a lack of time and resources for producing and working with material for the web site. The design of the web site was in many ways fixed before the software company actually received the material that was to be presented, which may mean that the contents of the web site were subordinate to the application designed to present them.

Who Does What and When?

Apart from general open discussions during project meetings, there was little effort to examine the impact that the introduction of the new system has and will have on work within the planning department, and how current work practices will be affected. In general, there is still little support for what can be characterized as complex back office operations. There is still little support for processes of negotiation and decision-making, which are central activities of public administration [9]. This lack of support is an important factor regarding how well the actual work is and can be performed.

There were unclear responsibilities, and uncertainties about how the incoming comments were to be dealt with. This was discussed at project meetings and it was agreed that the staff in the planning department should check the website for incoming comments, and would then take an active part in replying to those comments, to encourage discussion. This active participation did not take place, as nobody was given responsibility for it, and the everyday operations of the work of planning took precedence over this activity.

There was also uncertainty concerning how incoming comments were to be dealt with. All incoming errands and communication are logged in a registration system, which is at the core of many facets of Swedish administration. Citizens' comments concerning the comprehensive plan, were supposed to be registered, and acknowledged. Even as the consultation process was coming to a close, there were no routines for doing this in connection with the comments arriving via the web site, and it was unclear which comments would be given the status of official contributions to the consultation process.

THE LOCAL DEMOCRACY CONTEXT

Situating e-democracy

The KomInDu-project was envisioned as an e-democracy project in the official project description, building on "*own and others' experiences of edemocracy /... / aiming to develop and evaluate methods for citizens' communication with the municipality.*" (Project description/application, January 2003)

Even though the main task was to set up a website in order to broaden the input for comprehensive planning, another important objective was to situate e-democracy in this particular setting. An important distinction was the relation between different applications of e-democracy, meaning organising electronic support for actual e-participation or just supporting a new example of an opinion poll.

Previous local experiments of e-democracy development in the city consisted of websites containing information about local politicians and political parties prior to upcoming elections on both local and national level, (VAL2002) as well

as making public thematic debate forums available on the municipality site. But the election site was criticized in public for being dominated by a few, talkative politicians debating more with each other than communicating with the citizens. In contrast to this, the *vision.ronneby.se* website was, according to a municipal officer, an initiative to improve the basic data for decision-making and get more citizens involved and interested. It was emphasized that the number of answers is not the crucial thing with this kind of dialogue, that there are other aspects that are of greater importance.

Charting the Mismatches

According to a recent evaluation of Swedish governmental IT-politics, [10] it is a common tendency that municipal employees drive e-democracy projects and processes in Sweden. Politicians are seldom involved during the implementation phases. This was also the case in Ronneby. Both citizens and municipal employees pointed out during focus groups and interviews that they experienced a lack of involvement of politicians in the KomInDu Project, as active partners in the development of the project as well as in the dialogue with citizens on the actual website. When confronted with this, the politicians gave the mismatch between current political practices and the higher demands on visibility that new technology convey, as the main reasons for not taking part in this particular case.

Participation then, according to these politicians and the municipal officers, mainly seems to be equivalent with "citizen participation". However, both practitioners and politicians agreed that it is important to weave in alternative dialogues in already existing patterns of communications and realised that this was not done by simply adding one more website to the collection, or by implementing a new tool in the traditional process. The participatory aspects of e-democracy call for a more explorative approach and an active will to redefine current practices for both politicians and municipal officers, as well as redefinition of participation.

CRUCIAL POINTS:

1. For the practitioners, the mock-up sessions and the design of the interface were ways to create ownership of the design and customizing process. The representatives of the software company wanted to see a more focused, content oriented approach from the participants.
2. Participative e-democracy was primarily seen as a way of letting active citizens have their say. Since there was no clear responding partner, due to absent politicians and the circumstances within the planning department, this meant that there was no real dialogue. The attempted dialogue also took place at the wrong point in the process.

3. One of the municipal officers pointed out that: "...this is not about how many explanations we can offer and in what way the answer is given. We must invite citizens to develop more questions and new ways of knowing." As long as the design and consultation process is not designed to include all participants on their own terms – their work practices, skills, access to technology, or time constraints – then there will be no real commitment for establishing real participative e democracy.

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