

Industry 4.0? Participatory Design as a process to share the benefits of automation

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In the 1950s, Norbert Wiener – the father of cybernetics – was contacted by automotive companies to discuss the possibilities of introducing cybernetic machines in the factories, to reduce the quantity of human labor necessary to run such a labor-intensive industry. His answer was to get in touch with the leadership of the United Automobile Workers, the biggest American trade union in the industry, to discuss potential implications of cybernetics for labor, without luck.

In the 1970s, the introduction of computing technologies in Scandinavian factories was making more visible the scenario Wiener was anticipating, with the deployment of digital technologies to substitute human labor, and other prominent computer scientists, like Kristen Nygaard – the co-inventor of object oriented programming – started working with the trade unions to elaborate practices to design computing technologies that could support the workers instead than weaken them.

The practices elaborated by Nygaard and his co-workers have, later on, become to be known as Participatory Design (PD), and the contemporary PD academic community is one of the most innovative actor in the fields of human-computer interaction and computer supported cooperative work. The seminar will discuss what are the challenges posed to PD by contemporary development in the domain of digital technologies, like platform capitalism or Industry 4.0, and how researchers and professionals in platform development and Industry4.0 technologies could profitably relate with PD practices in innovative projects.

Short bio

Maurizio Teli has been working interdisciplinarily for more than ten years. His current research revolves around sociologically-informed Participatory Design. He has recently published a co-authored Routledge monograph and journal and conference articles oriented to bring political economy back into Participatory Design. He is Research and Innovation Coordinator of the H2020 PIE News/Commonfare project, aiming at rethinking welfare provisions in the age of platform capitalism.