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WALKSHOPS – TESTING A LOW THRESHOLD METHODOLOGY FOR PARTICIPATORY CITY MAKING

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We present ongoing research that suggests and tests an inclusive participatory research methodology: walking in the 'datafied' city. Walking interviews (Evans & Jones, 2011), data walks (Powell, 2018), or walkshops (Greenfield, 2010) facilitate experiences of and discussion about the urban environment in which social challenges arise, together with citizens who may perceive them in different ways than decision-makers. This enables investigations into social issues, but also co-production of knowledge, and improvement of solution-finding processes (Anastasiu, 2019).

Our main research question is whether walkshops can provide a low-threshold methodology for meaningful involvement of citizens in technological decision-making in cities. Our specific interest lies in the involvement of societal groups that are vulnerable. The paper evaluates the utility of 'walkshops' as an approach to hearing perspectives of urban dwellers on the ubiquitous processing of data in public space (Van Zeeland et al., 2021). We believe that it can be valuable for engaging urban dwellers in decision-making processes on technological interventions, on the balancing of risks against benefits, and on impacts on fundamental rights.

We describe how the methodology was tested during eighteen walks in the three Belgian cities of Brussels, Gent, and Leuven. In each of the cities, a walkshop (i.e. a route along which diverse data processing technologies are encountered in public space) was co-created, together with different public organisations. Walks in each city were conducted three to four times, with between five to twelve citizens each. In two of the cities, follow-up walkshops were organised with decision-makers within the

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municipal authorities, to discuss insights from the walks with citizens. The overall evaluation of the methodology and executed walkshops, by researchers as well as by participants and partner organisations, showed very promising results. In this paper, the description of the testing and evaluations will be accompanied by a set of conclusions and recommendations on how to reach also vulnerable groups.

Underlying this research is the notion of the three-way interrelationship of mutual shaping between artefacts (i.e. the technology), practices (i.e. the people, users or citizens), and socio-economic arrangements (Lievrouw, 2014; Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006). In the context of datafied urban space and ubiquitous data processing, an influential socio-economic arrangement that organises practices is the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (EU, 2016).

The GDPR offers means of control to ‘data subjects’. In smart, datafied cities, it could contribute to empowering citizens, or the data subjects (Christofi et al., 2022), through its accountability principles, transparency obligations, and data subject rights intended to enable control and empowerment (Ausloos, 2020). Specifically, Article 35(9) GDPR stipulates involvement of data subjects in risk assessments.

However, while it is difficult for non-experts to take self-determined decisions regarding legal provisions and complex technical systems (Breuer & Pierson, 2021), it can be nigh impossible for specific groups in society: How can individuals exercise their rights if there is already a struggle to, for example, read and write, to speak the language in which a privacy notice is composed, or to set up an email account? As a result, despite legal efforts to empower all data subjects in making self-determined decisions vis-à-vis the processing of their personal data, inherent power imbalances remain and the provisions in the regulation hardly reach some groups (Malgieri & Niklas, 2020; Piasecki & Chen, 2022). An important aim of the walkshop methodology is therefore to be inclusive and attractive enough to be meaningful for anyone.

Our walkshops do have methodological downsides: recording discussions can be difficult in crowded public areas and not all challenges of inclusiveness will be solved (e.g., language). Participant recruitment efforts have illustrated how difficult it can be to gather representative societal groups and recruit beyond the ‘usual suspects’. However, the evaluations of the first walks demonstrated potential for socially relevant empirical work that creates win-win situations for researchers, public partners, and citizenries.

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