Democratic input provides more than average output. 
Designers need users and users need designers.

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ABSTRACT
I will in this paper argue that the users are essential to the Participatory Design process, when the purpose of that process is to make products with market potential. First I will take the reader on a brief tour through Peter Lloyd’s paper [3]: The Paradox of the Average. Why Users need Designers but Designers don’t need Users.

Then secondly in a critical reflection, I will analyse Lloyd’s examples. This is done by relating his participatory design opinion to arguments from other contributors of the participatory design discussion (but also by relating to Lloyd’s own examples). This paper concludes that designers do need users.

BACKGROUND
In 2004 Peter Lloyd launched a paper: The Paradox of the Average [3]. The paper was published by “Design Philosophy Papers” [2]. At the time Peter Lloyd was Associate Professor in Design Theory and Methodology at Faculty of Industrial Design Engineering at TU Delft, were he among other things was working with the social context of the design process. “The paradox of the average” was made just after December 2002 were the international conference “Designing in Context” took place. This conference was organised by Peter Lloyd and Henri Christiaans (TU Delft) and the purpose was to bring together a multi-disciplinary group of researchers to look at designing from a more critical standpoint.

POLITICAL ASPECT OF THE DESIGN PROCESS
“The paradox of the average” concentrates on the fields of product design of consumer objects. Objects like mobile phones, computers, coffee machines, MP3 players, televisions and possible software.

In his paper Peter Lloyd characterises the political aspect of the design process. In one end of the scale, we find the traditional designer in an autocracy design process. Here the designer is the head of the project. Success of the project is dependent on the designer’s experience, intuition and judgements.

Figure 1. A design process can be Autocracy based or Democracy based (or anything in between).

An autocracy design process are characterised by the designers responsibility and accountability. Over the time, this process has been used of various icons like Philippe Starck, Dieter Rams, Michael Graves and Rem Koolhaas.
Keywords from this “judgment process” as Lloyds calls it, are experiment and intuition.
At the other end of the scale of the political aspect of the design process, the process is more democracy based. Here the users are designers in the project and the design outcome is negotiated among all parties involved (the group decides).

From the democracy design process Lloyd’s highlights are; a social process born out of a respect for other persons. Users own experience is organised in a way that no user is ignored. Another point is that the design will respect all people affected by it. Lloyd claims that the general assumption is, that a design process involving users are more successful than a design process not involving users. He disagrees with this assumption.

The one-liner for the democracy design process is; give the design back to the people.

In his paper, Lloyd builds an argument against the democratic based design process. However he points out, that the argument does not apply to user centered designs in general – just to the design of consumer objects.

EXAMPLES OF AUTOCRACY AND DEMOCRACY DESIGN PROCESS

As examples of an Autocracy project, Lloyd referees to big-budget Hollywood film. Here it has been seen that the ending of a movie has to be re-filmed, because a pilot audience did not like the original ending. The implication is that the directors cut is the “real” version (the most interesting version), while the popular version is just a popular version.

As an imaginary example of a Democracy based project, Lloyd referees to novel-writing. In his example a writer asks the readers for help, during the novel writing process. The novel will be written in participation of the readers.

The imaginable example are supported by a real experiment from 1997 were a writer made the first paragraph of his book and then each of the following 40 days, different readers wrote a paragraph. The story was called “Murder makes the Magazine” and reviews of the book were less than favourable.

LLOYDS DIGEST

Lloyd summarises his argument in “The Paradox of the Average” by saying that the value of Participatory Design are low. This is due to the democratic process that produces average solutions only. Participatory Design does not solve any real user needs. Lloyd concludes that users need designers but designers don’t need users.

Figure 2. Lloyd claim that “users need designers, but designers don’t need users”

USER CENTERED APPROACH IN PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

In the democracy based discussions, Lloyd equally uses the term of the design process as “user centered design” or as “participatory design”.

In Elizabeth Sanders paper written in 2002 “From User Centered to Participatory Design Approaches” she distinguishes between designs made for users and designs made with users [4].

When designing for users, the more traditional autocratic approach is used.

In a process designing with users, she utilize the Participatory Design (PD) term. This is a process in which the design solutions and suggestions are presented to the users. The purpose is to evaluate and co-design with the users. The designer is still in charge, leading the project. The users are giving input to the designer. However using Sanders view, Participatory Design is not a democratic process.
OTHER DEFINITIONS OF PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

In 2007 a more market oriented Participatory Design definition were used by Ylirisku & Buur [5]:

The overall goal of user-centered design is to ensure that a product has potential in the market and that it improves the quality of life and work as perceived by its users.

The socio-political approach of Lloyd is reduced in this definition. Involving users in a democracy manner is not part of this definition. However Participatory Design is a new discipline and user-centered design is still in transition. So looking back to 1998 (6 years before Lloyd’s paper) Kensing & Blomberg’s paper [1] might give more credit to Lloyd’s democracy perception of Participatory Design. Here are Kensing & Blomberg thoughts around Participatory Design:

Participatory Design is not defined by the type of work supported, nor by the technology developed, but instead by a commitment to user’s participation in design and an effort to rebalance the power relations between users and technical experts.

Kensing & Blomberg stats that a designer needs knowledge of the actual use context before a good product can be made. On the other hand users need knowledge of technological options, which are given by to them by the designers.

Kensington & Blomberg states that users participate in negotiations over how projects are organised and what outcome are desired. The users take active part in:

1. analysis of needs and possibilities.
2. evaluation and selection of technology components.
3. design and prototyping of new technology.
4. the organisational implementation.

User participation is considered central to the value and therefore the success of the project. The users are giving input to the designer and they co-design. So here we see that the democratic element is higher. But the users are still users, not designers. Before involving users, Kensing & Blomberg points out that the form of participation must carefully be considered. The vote/voice/saying of the designers are still of higher importance compared to the vote of the users.

ONE MAN ONE VOTE

Let us go back to Lloyds own example of writing a book with users. This is an example of one man – one vote. The book came out boring, it did not sell.

You might want to ask your readers what they prefer in terms of plot, roles and story line for the book (like Sanders suggests). But the readers are not writers. The readers are not skilled in building a plot, making a story line and writing interesting dialogues. You would like the readers to co-write and evaluate your writing – but they do not know how to write. The readers have no plan for writing, they have no review culture and they have no quality control.

Lloyd’s book example, is not a good Participatory Design example.
Participatory Design is not one man one vote. However, let us try to follow Lloyd’s argument of the democracy design process. Can we find any examples, better than the book example? Would the one man, one vote principle “improve the quality of life and work” as Ylirisku & Buur defines it to day? Lloyd did focus his paper towards design on consumer objects possibly including software. So what are the greatest successes of consumer software products? Are today’s successes:

- PDA’s with satellite navigation
- some of Microsoft’s products
- a NOKIA video mobile phone
- or perhaps a Blackberry device?

No – to find the answer, we have to look towards the internet – here, in 2009, Facebook, YouTube and Wikipedia are the greatest successes of them all.

Ylirisku & Buur’s modern definition works fine her, but this is not Participatory Design in Kensing & Blomberg’s definition. The users here are designers (not just co-designers).

These successes are all democratic based.

It works fantastic, a massive success. You would never be able to make Facebook, YouTube and Wikipedia without user involvement. Users are essential to these examples. However, this democratic user success does not support Lloyd’s argument against “one man, one vote” – on the contrary.

**UNIQUE OR JUST AVERAGE DESIGNS**

Lloyd states that the interesting features and uniqueness of a product in an autocratic process, will be honoured the designer (experience, intuition and judgements). Consequently, following his argument; when the users design experience is low, the outcome will be lower. And the product will be “more average” with less interesting features.

Here I would like to go back to the imaginary novel example. In a Participatory Design process, Sanders states that designers can use the ideas generated by the users as sources of design inspiration and innovation. Let us take Lloyds novel example a little further. Let us give the readers a go, and let them provide input for the novel.

In a Participatory Design writing process, a writer could ask i.e. ten readers for a plot idea, just as an example. Eight readers might come up with an ordinary average plot idea. But two of the readers might have a good idea, taken from their daily life or a holiday event. So which plot would the writer use? The writer would use one of the two extraordinary plots for inspiration and innovation. Not the eight ordinary average plots. As Ylirisku & Buur would put it; to ensure market potential. The purpose must be a good novel – not just an average novel.

That takes us back to the question of “what are the purpose of design”. Is it a good, usable selling product? Or is it an aesthetic interesting high class product?

Lloyd uses the example from a big-budget Hollywood film – where the ending has to be re-filmed, because a pilot audience didn’t like the original ending. I find that very interesting. To “Blomberg & Kensing”, to “Ylirisku & Buur”, to Elizabeth Sanders and also to me, that film example is a nice example of Participatory Design. That film example is Participatory Design in its essence.

Problem is that Lloyd’s intention of showing us the film example, remains unclear. This leaves us at a cross road (one of two options), when trying to understand Lloyd’s argument.

1) If the purpose was to show that the directors cut are of a higher quality or more artistic and beautiful in its expression – it is fine, but that has nothing to do with Participatory Design.

2) If the purpose was to show this as an example of Participatory Design – the only
question to ask are; why the movie companies uses Participatory Design? Here, Lloyd provides us with the answer:

It is more popular.

When it is more popular, there are more happy users. And when it is popular the income to the movie company and the director are higher.

CONCLUSION
If the purposes of the product design process are to make a good product, the designer may draw on the users input as inspiration – just like in the imaginary example, where a writer writes a novel using ideas from his readers.

If the purposes of the product design process are to make a product that has potential in the market and that improves the quality of life, then the designer needs users – just like a big-budget Hollywood film.

If the purposes of the product design process is to develop an internet based software product (a super product) that the average user likes, the designer need users in a truly democratic process (an on-going process) – just like Wikipedia.com

Peter Lloyds claims that “users need designers, but designers don’t need users”. Reading his paper does not convince me.

Designers need users.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
A special "Thank You" to Ben Matthews for an inspiring program.

REFERENCES


NOTE
(1) Kensing and Blomberg use the term “worker” and “user” somewhat interchangeably (though recognizing that neither are natural terms).