

Improvisation practices in a Living Lab-setting

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In order to better understand the relationship between users and technological artefacts so as to enhance ICT innovation, Living Laboratories have been set up. Living Laboratories facilitate a setting that affords "experimentation environments in which technology is given shape in real life context and in which (end) users are considered co-producers" (Ballon, Pierson & Delaere, 2005:13).

In a Living Lab, design takes place across different settings. The "laboratory" as such is extended and becomes subjected to the "vagueness" of daily life. In addition to this, Living Labs promise to include "real" users in a co-creative manner. In terms of actor network theory, this suggests that users are to become "co-writers" of technological scripts (Akrich, 1992). Including users in design is not a new practice. The call to focus on situated innovation echoes Suchman's ideas on situated action and plans; "the vagueness of plans is ideally suited to the fact that the detail of intent and action must be contingent on the circumstantial and interactional particulars of actual situations" (Suchman, 2006: 183).

Added to the ideas on performance, and the vagueness of plans, is the concept of improvisation (Montuori, 2003). To what extent do Living Lab-practices afford users to improvise uses of technologies; what kind of co-scription methods are facilitated and what kind of roles are enacted by users in Living Labs?

This paper concentrates on the empirical findings of qualitative research that has been carried out in a project facilitated by Amsterdam Living Lab, namely the Fabrication Laboratory (FabLab) project. In FabLabs, users/citizens have access to high tech machines to "make almost anything". Citizens are positioned as designers in the context of the FabLab; machines are used to create a material artefact and blue prints are collectively shared in an online database. According to MIT's Neil Gershenfeld, FabLabs provide the next step after the digital revolution: that of personal fabrication.

The main question that the paper deals with is how FabLabs allow room for messy improvisation, who the real life users of FabLabs are and what the empirical findings suggest in terms of the material relationships enacted by users/citizens and technological artefacts. On the conceptual level, the empirical findings inform and interrogate the use that can be made of the idea of "improvisation" with technological scripts. Does the term oversimplify the complexity of design practices, or does this proposed turn to the "theatrical" provide an adequate handle to translate "messiness" into a framed enactment?