

Future potential – potential futures: The manifold challenges of participatory technology assessment

Ulrike Felt

Over the past years, debates about emerging technosciences have been closely accompanied by calls for both assessing their future potential and deliberating on the potential futures that come along with them. At moments we were first confronted with strong imaginations about specific futures, and then technologies were fostered which would be able to contribute to its realisation. The most recent EU policy turn towards “Innovation Union 2020” and the sociotechnical imaginaries, which carry this policy, are an excellent example for the latter rational of development.

Simultaneously contemporary democracies have increasingly imagined and implemented diverse forms of public participation as central elements in the governance of technoscientific development. This turn towards participation also meant re-enacting science-society relationships, triggering the expectation that citizen involvement will lead to a broader and more robust support of technoscientific developments. These debates around public participation are typically characterised by a high density of promissory discourses, staging participation as a remedy against science-society relations perceived as all too fragile. Yet, while the intensity of the rhetorical performance of democratisation in technology assessment seems to be growing, much less attention is devoted to the actual processes of arriving at the expected opening of debates concerning technoscientific developments.

This presentation will investigate and reflect upon the broad variety of processes and methods which have been developed and put in place to allow different forms of participatory technology assessments to happen. In doing so, processes and methods will be understood themselves as technologies which open up spaces for the co-production of both issues at stake and relevant publics to be engaged with. In that sense such participatory settings are never simply open, but have to be seen as highly normative and performative. It will thus be essential to trace “the scripts” embedded in the different participatory arrangements and reflect how they define possible ways of acting, roles of actors and the room for manoeuvre. These scripts in turn impact in important ways on how future potential and potential futures can be connected and deliberated upon.