

Remarks on the Politics of Citizen Bioscience

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Challenges for Mainstreaming”***
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Understanding RRI Discourse

- **Definitions of RRI:** “transparent, interactive process by which societal actors and innovators become mutually responsive to each other with a view to the (ethical) acceptability, sustainability and societal desirability of the innovation process and its marketable products’ (Von Schomberg 2012) // “on-going process of aligning research and innovation to the values, needs and expectations of society” (Rome Declaration on RRI 2014).
- **RRI discourse has a strong Habermasian flavour.** Habermas has argued that in moral discussions, rationality is what enables the discussion to arise in the first place, as people who engage in discourse assume that they engage with other rational people. In ideal circumstances, a consensus can be reached, which is the basis for a moral norm. According to him, there are, however, certain preconditions to come to a rational discussion: (1) power-free communication (no discussant should have a dominating role based on anything other than the strongest argument); (2) all participants can address arguments and problems; 3) no one is beforehand excluded from the discussion; 4) all participants truly want to engage in the discussion.
- Habermas acknowledges that to assume the existence of these preconditions is quite unrealistic but he argues that the discussants will simply disengage whenever they think that the preconditions are not given.

A Discourse Strategy

- Critics nevertheless argue, often in a **Foucauldian** manner, that Habermasian notions of RRI are too naïve: Discourses are constituted by mechanisms of exclusion which are in turn often justified by means of claims of superior or even exclusive rationality of certain actors (e.g. “experts”). The mechanisms of exclusion determine what knowledge is seen as legitimate. E.g. Michiel van Oudheusden (2014): “Where are the politics in responsible innovation?” // we should be “cognizant, and even appreciative, of politics in a broad sense” and thus attend “to the workings of power in and through” RRI // “relations of power cannot be dissolved in communication: participants should be allowed to discuss about and engage in games of power as a means of channeling and regulating it
- **A mixed strategy.** Our strategy in the large EU RRI dialogue project SYNENERGENE (2013-2017) and other project activities was to encourage stakeholder groups to conduct activities (and ourselves analyze these also) in a Foucauldian vein as long as they would also participate in Habermasian-style multi-stakeholder events.

- Biohacking controversial mainly due to **biosafety and biosecurity concerns** (e.g. Odin Kit); early interest of the FBI
- What are and could be the **fora for deliberating** on the status of (bio)hacking practitioners?
- To what extent are the new hacking communities and their critics willing or even keen to deal with „**hacking and society**“ **aspects** (beyond delegitimation of publicly funded research institutions)?
- Risk of an increase of **precarious work in bioscience** (non-standard or no employment, poorly paid, insecure, unprotected)?
- **Return of the tinkerer?** Need for a new Zilsel thesis? (Edgar Zilsel: late medieval, early modern erosion of the boundaries between university scholars, humanists and tinkerers aka superior artisans due to the rise of free enterprise capitalism); spread of technoscientific knowledge in post-industrial society
- **RRI and open innovation:** role of citizen bioscience? **Funding mechanisms?**

Agora – Arena – Theatre

- Swierstra/Rip (2007): deliberation activities in the sense of “the classical Athenian **agora**: the market place where the free citizens gathered to decide, solely on the strength of arguments, the good of their polis. [...] Instead, one should start with actor strategies, serving particular interests. Not an agora [...], but an **arena** where some win and others lose. In an arena consensus is never reached, although a workable compromise is sometimes achieved. [...] To win in the arena, participants have to act as if they were in an agora. In other words: even if the agora is an illusion, it is a necessary one, and it is productive.”
- ->In the case of hardened lines of conflicts, the **theatre** can be an alternative to both, the agora and the arena: **Art – which plays an important role in biohacking / citizen bioscience – provides an alternative approach to reality.**
- ***The Theatre Proposal: The role of bioart – mainly as artistic research – should be further strengthened in RRI in the biosciences.***

Justifying the Theatre Proposal

- Habermas distinguishes between the **domains of the instrumental, the moral-practical and the aesthetic** which correspond to three validity claims: **cognitive truth, normative rightness, subjective expressiveness**. In his view, **communicative action based on normative reason is crucial for democratic social interaction, and aesthetic works cannot coordinate action in this way.**
- **But what about artistic activities on the basis of an understanding of art as a cultural domain with its ,own logic‘, different from, for example, instrumentalist logic?** Art is not a means but can contribute to normative communicative action. According to Habermas, only such communicative action is capable of subjecting power to rational evaluation and democratic accountability.
- Again according to Habermas, **aesthetic experience can permeate our cognitive significations and our normative expectations, change the manner in which they refer to one another, and renew the interpretation of our needs in whose light we perceive the world.**

->Art is a domain on its own but, via its public reception and interdisciplinary and transprofessional thematisation, can thereby significantly contribute to normative communicative action on the biosciences – and thus to the social shaping of this field.