

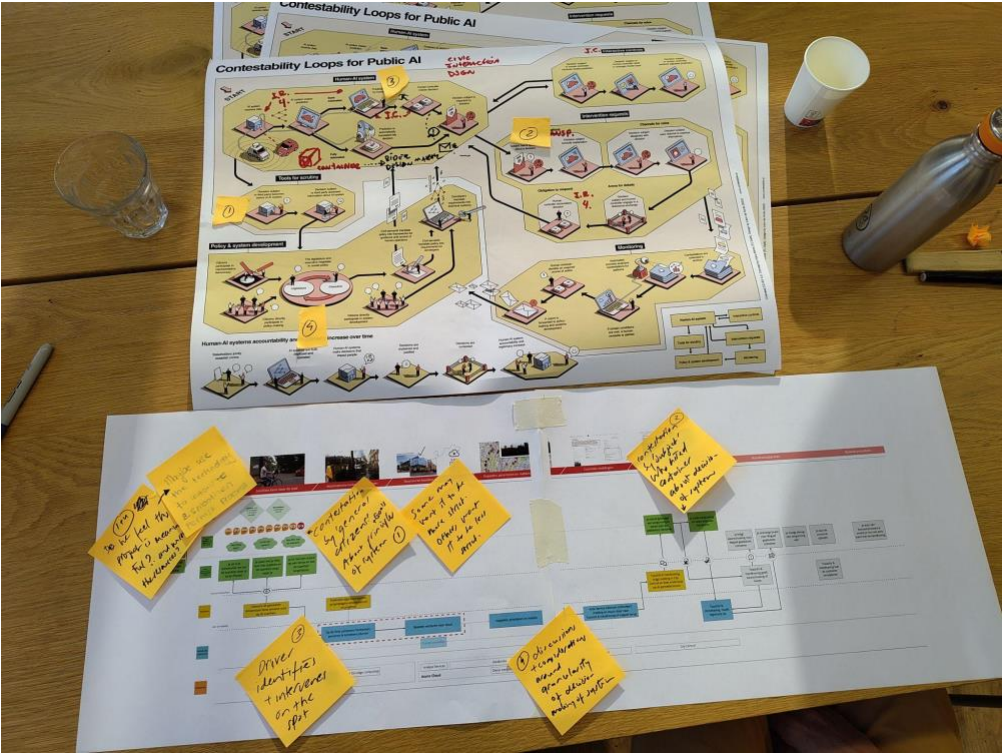
Don Quichot in the Smart City - Highlights

[ThingsCon Salon](#)

September, 5th 2024

Contestability loops

In the workshop, Kars Alfrink started with an exploration of contestability in the context of systems used in public spaces that contain an element of AI. Kars' work focuses on autonomy via human control to contestability. Contestation can be related to opposing an action or competing for power. If something becomes contested by activists, it probably means it did not have a high enough level of contestability, defined as being responsive to dispute throughout its lifecycle by creating dialectical relations between actors. The life cycle of a system can include the political, legal, and administrative aspects, as we saw in the infographic about contestability loops for public AI that Kars introduced.



To get a feeling of contestability loops, Mike de Kreek first introduced a real-life use case from the context of Amsterdam. The so-called “scan bike” recognizes construction containers on vulnerable canal walls without a permit. It blurs the persons in the images in which a container is recognized before it is matched with permits and vulnerable canal wall locations. The positive results are checked and prioritized; the combination of no-permit and yes-vulnerable gets higher priority. Enforcement officers receive notification of these cases and visit the location to take further steps. The assignment for the workshop was to identify contestability loops for this process. Four groups got to work.

At one of the tables, a discussion emerged about how much effort the municipality puts into helping people to do the right thing versus the effort that is going into punishing people for doing it wrong. If getting a permit takes longer than promised, people might install a construction container, hoping that the permit will arrive soon. In other words, could part of the surveillance focus also be redirected to a service focus? The path of this contestability loop was thought to point to the “Policy and system development” part of the visual Kars introduced.

At another table, the black-or-white character of the decisions was identified as a potential danger in the conversation. It was emphasized that just like in a world where law enforcers can make exceptions based on their professional leeway, there should be a “maybe category” with an open end of the next steps. One of the ideas was to try to help someone get a permit if there was none. This idea was related to the part of the “Monitoring” pointing towards the “Policy and system development.” Some other miscellaneous ideas involved the container companies helping to use the right container positions and the possibility of pinging the scan bike to come for a potentially misplaced container or other problems.

[Kars' presentation can be found here](#) | [Mike's presentation can be found here](#)

Co-designing the scan bike

In the evening, during the plenary part of the ThingsCon Salon, we first listened to Evelien Zengeringk, the product owner of the scan bike. She explained how the City of Amsterdam aims to keep the city livable, clean, well-maintained, and safe, among other things, by investing in technology, with a strong commitment to the responsible use of such tools. In 2023, the Computer Vision Team successfully piloted the image recognition project for construction containers and, during the first half of 2024, has been working on its implementation for the “Toezicht & Handhaving” department.

A key part of this process involved co-designing image recognition in public spaces by engaging citizens through a citizen panel to understand their wishes and concerns. By gathering their input on scanning and recognition, particularly regarding which objects or situations should be recognized, the municipality can better address its citizens' interests and jointly develop ideas and solutions that contribute to a more livable city. Some of the topics introduced in the

workshops were tackled during Evelien's presentation. For example, law enforcers mostly give a warning (a "maybe") to people who do not have permits for their construction containers.

[Eveliëns presentation can be found here](#)



Better support for people with low digital skills

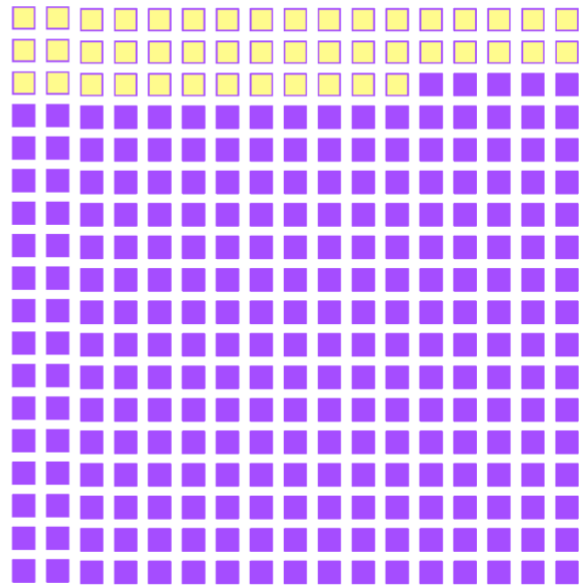
The last presentation was about citizens' digital literacy by Geke van Dijk of STBY. STBY conducted a qualitative field study to identify challenges people may have with digital government services. She explained how their research showed that some people repeatedly click on areas of a website that contain no buttons. Because the researchers were sitting next to the person using the website, they were also able to see and, if necessary, ask why they clicked there.

Based on these findings, a government team then trained a machine learning model to recognize behavior people exhibit when visiting a government website, that could indicate they are having difficulty with something. Those users were then directed to an alternative version or function that is tailored to their disability.

Based on the presentation two interesting points were discussed. Firstly, this research uncovered the opportunities unsolicited feedback caught by qualitative research might have for civil servants or designers involved in monitoring smart city technology. Moreover, this qualitative research was the starting point for machine learning engineering.

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There are approximately **2.5 million people** ($\pm 14\%$) in the Netherlands who live with low digital skills – they struggle to work with computers, smartphones and tablets in their daily lives.



Secondly, one participant regarded this approach as an interesting contrast to the direct participation that is sought by the scan bike project presented by Mike and Evelien. STBY very nicely took responsibility for representing the interests of the people she had spoken to. That seems to be in contrast to the way in which citizens in the citizen panel are made responsible for addressing shortcomings themselves, not only for themselves, but implicitly also for all other residents of Amsterdam.

[Geke's presentation can be found here](#) | [The research report can be found here](#)