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Building Community – Or Why We Need an Ongoing Conference Platform for TA

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Abstract: *As a background for current outlooks towards strengthening the technology assessment (TA) community, Scherz et al. give a historical overview of efforts to establish international fora for communication among professionals and researchers in TA. Against this background, the article conveys experiences from the first two bi-annual TA conferences, arranged in the context of the PACITA project. The authors describe experiences of mutual learning across national boundaries and communicate a renewed understanding of the necessity for supporting TA capacities at the national level through professional community building. Ultimately, Scherz et al. argue that a European TA platform is necessary for establishing a common language for TA and for supporting the spread of TA across borders.*

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Conferences are a promising format to include an extended range of European, national and regional stakeholders – especially with a focus on widening the debate of TA in Europe. Therefore, they are important under several aspects: for scientists from several disciplines in order to discuss inter- and trans-disciplinary approaches and projects as well as for TA researchers to get in contact with their target audiences, such as citizens, policy makers or scientists from other disciplines.

This chapter deals with the question of how conferences can encourage mobilizing stakeholders to establish TA capacities while creating awareness regarding the benefits of cross-European TA throughout Europe. Thus, it reflects on the format of TA conferences as such and gives brief insights into two international conferences, which took place in Prague (2013) and Berlin (2015). Our main argument is that TA can act as a 'knowledge broker' between scientists and policy makers (Riedlinger, 2013). In our experiences, TA and its conferences can provide unique spaces for 'discourse'. Yet at the same time, these discourses need continuity and ongoing activities, which include already established networks as well as new contents, methods and people.

It is in these spaces for discourse that the conceptual basis of TA is reflected upon and further developed. Being a problem-oriented approach, TA needs areas of exchange to enable 'identity-shaping' and adaptation to current challenges. Especially in contexts where its institutionalization is still under development, TA requires formats, which enable mutual learning and critical self-reflection. With recent concepts such as Responsible Research and Innovation emerging, TA has to reflect on how it can contribute and/or offer its wide experiences in various contexts. Further, the format of conferences also offers a useful and inspiring atmosphere for younger researchers and practitioners who are working in the field of TA to present themselves and their questions and to engage in exchange with the wider TA community.

The ambitious goals of the two conferences within the PACITA project were to address the grand transitions and grand challenges that define our societies as a whole. This frame set the scene for presenting and discussing TA research at the conferences and at the same time for offering fruitful spaces of encounter to further strengthen and foster TA as a concept and approach by including all its significant actors (e.g. researchers, practitioners and policy makers). For this, it also seems important to reflect on the experiences already made with international

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TA conferences within the community in order to guarantee a high quality of conferences' input, integrative formats and inspiring topics.

Making it work – the context of the two European TA conferences

As a mobilization and mutual learning project, PACITA aims to bring together established TA institutions and new actors. Consequently, scientific conferences are at the very heart of the project's mission: they intensify the debate on TA and have the potential to expand the landscape of TA in Europe. There is a special focus on the methods and activities in which citizens and policy makers are directly involved in debates and discussions. 'Such "interactive" methodology has proven to be a specific trademark for Technology Assessment and is of special interest today when the focus of research and innovation is turned towards the Grand Challenges of our societies' (Klüver, 2014: 12). Further, conferences provide a platform for scientists with practical experiences as a result of doing TA and for politicians that are addressees of TA research and its results. The two PACITA conferences, held in 2013 and 2015, were the first European TA conferences in more than two decades. In general, the feedback from the conference attendees showed clearly the need for further continuous exchange, networking, discussions and documentation. 'Technology Assessment has shown to be a practice still in the making and continuously expanding its reach and borders, which gives hope for a future with a larger and more branched-out professional community' (Klüver, 2014: 12).

These two major European TA conferences fostered and enhanced the scientific debate about TA as well as the exchange of TA experiences on a European level. The main aim of these and PACITA's ongoing activities is to establish a European network of institutions and persons from the academic world, from scientific policy advice and from policy making. The conferences present an important context for this. With an informative and interactive format, the conferences aimed to bring together several different disciplinary communities. Adopting a broad understanding of what qualifies as 'TA' allowed the conferences to address TA practitioners, academics, scientists, policy-makers, and CSO representatives together. In retrospect, the conferences succeeded in delivering a two benefits

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ways. On the one hand they offered a broad platform for presenting and reflecting on project results, its outcomes and new insights. On the other hand, they helped to set the stage for current and future thinking about TA and its role in tackling the societal challenges ahead.

No future without a past

In order to reflect on the necessity of an ongoing conference platform, it is helpful to have a brief look at the historical development of the TA community in Europe. The major strands of development show that there is a shift from national activities to cross-European and international activities. Also there is an interest in widening the disciplinary community to inter- and trans-disciplinary work. The first meeting of the European TA community under the label of 'European Congresses of Technology Assessment' dates back to October 1982 when the Ministry of the Interior of the Federal Republic of Germany hosted a conference in Bonn that attracted some 60 experts from eleven countries – among them were representatives of the US Office of Technology Assessment. Congresses on TA later held in Amsterdam (1987), Milan (1990) and Copenhagen (1992) contributed significantly to the conceptualization, philosophy as well as institutionalization of TA. These conferences made clear that the European debate on TA took place on several levels – between international groups of scholars, experts, and officials who held a series of meetings during which methods of TA, the utility of its results and the possibilities and problems of institutionalizing TA agencies were discussed.

Another ongoing activity is the institutionalization of networks. During the last ten years, the institutionalization of the German-speaking 'Network Technology Assessment' (NTA) can be seen as a forerunner. Founded in November 2004 in Berlin, NTA aims to identify joint research and advisory responsibilities, to initiate methodological developments, to support the exchange of information and to strengthen the role of technology assessment in science and society. Today, ten years after this first meeting, there have been six scientific NTA conferences, ten annual member meetings and several meetings of the Network's working groups. The primary mission of NTA remains: to provide a platform for information and communication among scientists, experts and practitioners who work in the wide range of TA-relevant topics.[1] The NTA conferences are the central format of exchange among the

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German-speaking TA community. With decades of experience, the three main organizations of the Network for Technology Assessment (NTA) – the Institute of Technology Assessment and Systems Analysis (ITAS) in Karlsruhe, Germany; the Institute of Technology Assessment (ITA) in Vienna, Austria; and the Center for Technology Assessment (TA Swiss) in Berne, Switzerland – also brought their expertise to the PACITA project. Also, other PACITA partners, such as the Danish Board of Technology, the Norwegian Board of Technology, the Advisory Board of the Parliament of Catalonia for Science and Technology and the Rathenau Institute from the Netherlands have worked intensely and enduringly to realize TA in and for parliaments. Together with institutions from Finland, France, Greece, Italy, Sweden and the United Kingdom, they are organized in the European Parliamentarian Technology Assessment Network (EPTA), which was established in 1990 by the president of the European Parliament.[2]

In general, the two PACITA conferences benefitted greatly from these traditions. The conferences of the 1980s and 1990s gave first insights into which topics were relevant for research and policy advice. They also showed how important it is to invite both the scientific community as well as practitioners and policy makers to one and the same event, enabling networking and cooperation on an international level. The EPTA network in particular was and still is exceptionally important to bringing up TA-relevant research topics to national parliaments. For the two PACITA conferences, these contacts are crucial to continuously strengthen the European TA community and to bring together interested researchers, stakeholders and politicians from all over the world. In the days of globalized problems like climate change or world-wide trade networks, this internationalization aspect is of special importance.

Overcoming challenges – making cross-European TA conferences

Generally, doing TA in Europe still remains a challenge. The broad variety of the topics and the positive resonance to the conference show that there was a great necessity to revive the tradition of European TA conferences. It is a substantial gain that TA practitioners and policy makers from countries with established TA practices were able to get involved in discussions with colleagues from countries where TA is still in its beginnings, not only to give advice but also to reflect on their own traditions and established

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TA practices. Besides the national perspectives, cross-European TA must, among other obstacles, face the tension that may arise between the different levels of decision-making structures: European ones versus national and local ones. Which TA topics will be important and popular during the coming years? What can scientists learn from their experiences of working together with stakeholders and politicians?

The two conferences, namely in Prague (2013) and Berlin (2015), clearly showed that there is a strong European TA community interested in joint work and scientific exchange – in spite of sometimes significant differences in the TA approaches that they respectively follow. In Germany, for example, TA institutions work closely with policy makers and politicians. In Denmark, TA institutions strive to fulfil the politicians' needs with a more service-oriented approach. On the other hand, in the Netherlands, there is a certain distance between them. In the so-called TA-emerging countries, technology assessment is yet to be institutionalized. There are many ongoing TA-like activities in countries such as the Czech Republic and Poland – research and development mainly focus on forward-looking studies and methods. But also experiences from beyond Europe are valid contributions. For example, in Japan, as a result of the Fukushima nuclear accident in 2011, the government is trying to recover the lost public trust, by launching an innovative education and research programme that includes TA, which was introduced for the first time in history. These various situations show the challenges and specific situations that TA faces (Michalek et al., 2014). Moreover, spreading the TA community eastwards brings up yet another challenge of finding a 'common language' (Nierling et al., 2013: 105). Due to the fact that TA as such is not institutionalized in the TA-emerging countries, the practices and relevance of such an approach are still being understood differently: 'The processes of institutionalisation of TA infrastructures are always embedded in the understanding of democracy and the role of (national) parliaments' (Nierling et al., 2013: 102).

The PACITA conferences were especially important for TA researchers, in order to get closer to their clients – be it citizens, policy makers or scientists. As David Cope summarizes,

> 'like any congregation of specialists, the TA "community" can sometimes seem a little introspective, self-regarding and indeed perhaps almost presumptuous about its existence, activities and importance. A good antidote to any such tendencies is for TA practitioners to ask, among contacts in the world outside TA, what these contacts understand is meant by "Technology Assessment". It

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TABLE 11.1 *2nd PACITA Conference programme*

	Fact sheet		
	Date	**13–15 March 2013**	**25–27 February 2015**
	Place	**National Technical Library, Prague, the Czech Republic**	**Umweltforum Auferstehungskirche, Berlin, Germany**
Participants	Participants	245	349
	Speakers	155	230
	Countries	31	33
	5 Most Represented European countries	Germany – 59 The Czech Rep. – 53 The Netherlands – 26 Austria – 14 Belgium – 10	Germany – 150 Austria – 22 The Netherlands – 21 United Kingdom – 20 Denmark – 15
	5 Most Represented Non-European countries	Japan – 7 Australia – 4 Rep. of Korea – 4 USA – 3 Turkey – 2	Japan – 8 USA – 5 Russia – 3 China – 3 Australia – 3
Sessions	Sessions:	22	42
	Keynote speakers	Wiebe Bijker Stefan Böschen Rut Bízková	Naomi Oreskes Roger Pielke, Jr
	The most discussed topics (As per sessions)	Governance and Participation Technology Assessment Methods Evidence-Based Policy Making Emerging Technologies Ageing and Health Care Big Data and Privacy Sustainable Development Robotics and Synthetic Biology	Responsible Research and Innovation Technology Assessment Methods Governance and Participation Evidence-Based Policy Making Robotics and Synthetic Biology Ageing and Health Care Big Data and Privacy Energy
	Special formats	Panel Discussion/Round Table Politicians' and Researchers' Views on Joint Projects TA Meets Young Talents Author Meets Critics	PACITA Workshop Panel Discussion/Round Table Film Presentation World Café Seminar

Continued

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TABLE 11.1 *Continued*

Outcomes	Web page	pacita.strast.cz/en/conference	berlinconference.pacitaproject.eu
	Social media	Twitter@PACITAproject #paciTA13 Facebook, YouTube	Twitter @PACITAproject #paciTA15 Facebook, YouTube
	Outcomes	Book of Abstracts Conference Proceedings	Book of Abstracts Conference Proceedings

> invariably becomes clear that we operate in a rather restricted space, whose recognition by wider society is limited. TA is immanently in a supplicatory relationship with wider society. It has legitimacy, indeed an existential claim, *only if it is seen as having utility by that wider society*.' (Cope, 2014: 376).

Notes

1 All agendas and conference topics can be downloaded here: http://www.openta.net/nta-tagungen (in German).
2 See also http://eptanetwork.org/about.php.

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