

Empowerment, legitimacy and social impact

Introduction

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1. EMPOWERMENT, LEGITIMACY AND SOCIAL IMPACT



The importance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in cities is much debated. Before looking at how smart cities develop, part 1 sets out to identify and describe the challenges to the legitimacy of smart cities. Three challenges are particularly important.

1. PHYSICAL WORLD VERSUS DIGITAL UNIVERSE

The first challenge centers on how ICT interact with the “real” world. Smart cities can conjure fears of a mechanized and robotized city, a place where the randomness of human action no longer prevails. Worse still, the automated city could cut us off from all contact with reality as technology will end up suppressing our ability to pay attention and make decisions. This is the argument that Matthew Crawford develops in his interview. Crawford wrote a much commented-on paper looking at the meaning of work and is the author of a book examining our ability to concentrate in the digital age. In this interview, we discuss the ways that ICT risk undermining our ability to concentrate and pay attention to others, as well as discussing strategies for maintaining control over the technologies that surround us. In other words, how to identify the conditions that ensure ICT remain a faithful servant and do not become a bad master.

2. VERTICAL MINDSET VERSUS HORIZONTAL APPROACH

As Edouard Geffray points out in his interview, smart cities were originally driven by a vertical mindset, where public authorities working with ICT companies delivered centrally designed smart cities by introducing digital technologies into metropolitan policies and urban infrastructure.

These early approaches were soon overtaken by new mindsets that set out to enable citizen-users to share goods and services quickly and simply. This is the platform mindset that allows the “multitude” to interact, as described by Henri Verdier and Nicolas Colin in their book¹. The smart city is no longer a result of centralized strategies designed by public authorities but of interactions between city dwellers who now have the ability to self-organize thanks to applications created by startups. Transportation is simplified with taxi booking platforms, accommodation with applications like Airbnb, and the secondhand market with websites like Leboncoin in France. Platforms are multiplying and enabling everybody to appropriate and fully participate in the smart city mindset.

This tension between vertical and horizontal mindsets lies at the heart of the construction of smart cities. Neither seem sufficient when taken in isolation: self-organization risks producing sub-optimal results, while the top-down approach severely limits citizen appropriation.

Deciding how best to combine these two approaches is the biggest challenge that public and private actors currently face. The trick, says Edouard Geffray, lies in devising ways for public authorities to work more closely with platforms, closing the gap between innovation and the common good.

“Lulu Dans Ma Rue” is an initiative that offers a real-life example of how to balance these competing forces: digital versus physical, centralized versus horizontal. The article exploring the project set up by Charles-Edouard Vincent provides food for thought on the conditions needed for platform approaches to achieve legitimacy. Lulu Dans Ma Rue proposes a threefold innovative solution based on:

- a responsible and locally based way to create activities and services;
- a public-private partnership between Paris City Council, private businesses and citizen-clients;
- a physical presence in the form of a kiosk and strong neighborhood relationships that aim to build lasting social ties.

This balance between vertical and horizontal mindsets and digital and physical presences is a concrete illustration of how to embed the social acceptability of these new models.

3. ECONOMIC INNOVATION VERSUS POLITICAL REGULATION

The final challenge to legitimacy centers on questions of data protection and the political role of regulation. Edouard Geffray and Jean-Bernard Auby help us to arrive at a better understanding of what is at stake, of the possible dangers surrounding data protection, and of the tensions between innovation and data protection. They stress that personal data are the building blocks of the smart city universe, and that smart cities’ social acceptability requires both a functioning forum for discussing and enacting regulations, and an educational effort to ensure that everyone properly understands the issues at play.

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¹ Henri Verdier, Nicolas Colin, *L'âge de la multitude, entreprendre et gouverner après la révolution numérique*, 2012