

Title:

*A critical analysis of Digital Social Innovation and its potential
in strengthening constitutional democracy*

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Abstract

Civic Society, Business, Government and Society are becoming increasingly connected through online digital platforms. The increasingly networked nature of social innovation (as integrated networks of societal, public, private and research actors) has also been acknowledged (Păunescu, 2014).

Digital Social Innovation (DSI) has been described as a particular form of social innovation aiming to promote *“innovation and social change based on the network effect: meaning internet connections, web collaborative tools, sharing of open data and a process of bottom-up peer-supported activities and applications”* (Anania & Passani, 2014).

The increasing role of digital technology as driver of social development is also becoming evident (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014). Recently attempts have also been made to link the paradigm of open innovation to that of social innovation resulting in the suggested concept of *“Open Social innovation”* (Chesbrough & Di Minin, 2014).

There are currently high expectations around the potential role of digital technology as mechanism to bring government closer to the people. A couple of dynamics problematizes these interactions and may impact the potential successful use of these platforms as catalysts, facilitators and/or mediators of inclusive governance and social innovation. Some of these dynamics include digital inclusion; concerns about online privacy; concerns about increasing disintermediation by online platforms; increasing algorithmically determined decisions around network membership and access to relevant decision-making information.

This paper explores this problematic against the background of some of the challenges and opportunities it presents to constitutional democracy.

Introduction

Justice Dikgang Moseneke, at the event of the celebrations of 20 Years of South African Democracy commented as follows on the role of the Constitution within our democracy (Moseneke, 2014):

“The Constitution enjoins and hopes for an effective, responsive, open and accountable governance from all organs of state inclusive of parliament, the executive and the courts. Parliament must make laws, hold the executive accountable and provide a forum for the debate of matters of national importance. The executive must implement laws, make policy and spend fiscal allocations. Courts must resolve disputes in accordance with the Constitution and the law which includes African indigenous law and the common law.

It must follow from what I have said that our constitutional design is emphatically transformative. It is meant to migrate us from a murky and brutish past to an inclusive future animated by values of human decency and solidarity. It contains a binding consensus on or a blueprint of what a fully transformed society should look like.”

The notion of an inclusive and fully transformed society can be described as one of the key ideals of most South Africans. It has been argued that Social Innovation is the most appropriate concept for understanding and creating lasting social change (Deiglmeier, Miller, Phills, Deiglmeier, & Miller, 2008). They define Social Innovation as follows:

“A novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing solutions and for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals.”

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The often assumed causal link between utilising digital technology, digital social innovation and creating a fully transformed, inclusive society is not a simple matter though.

Defining Digital Social Innovation

Civic Society, Business, Government and Society are becoming increasingly connected through online digital platforms. The potential transforming role of digital technologies in enhancing public participation and engagement in civic processes has been suggested by, for example, Bresciani & Schmeil (2012). The increasingly networked nature of social innovation (as integrated networks of societal, public, private and research actors) has also been acknowledged (Păunescu, 2014).

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Civic empowerment and more inclusive participation in society has been put forward as main goals of digital inclusion (Stewart et al., 2013 as cited in Mariën & Prodnik, 2014). Digital Inclusion, however, still remains a significant challenge in South Africa (South African Government, 2015).

Mariën & Prodnik (2014) comments as follows about the problematic nature of digital inclusion policies:

“The ultimate goal of digital inclusion is claimed to be the development of capital-enhancing user practices that are based upon free and fully informed digital choices (Heeley and Damodaran, 2009). These assumptions, however, tend to, a large extent, disregard the social, economic, political and technical conditions within which individual choices are made and within which individuals must inevitably act. Instead of attempting to narrow the existing social gap within class-divided societies, and of probing the limitations given at the macro-level by questioning the wider social structure, digital inclusion policies tend to individualize problems that are in fact social in their nature. “

There is a concerning tendency to uncritically view digital technology as an “automatic” driver of social capital construction within the developing world context. This is especially true in the context of fast increasing levels of both broadband and mobile internet access in developing countries. The underlying assumption that digital access equals equal opportunity can be highlighted as specifically problematic. The concept of “fully informed digital choices” as discussed above by Mariën & Prodnik (2014) has not been appropriately unpacked within the context of our constitutional democracy in South Africa.

There are increasing questions being asked about the uncritical assumption often made that technology decreases social divides (van Dijk & Hacker, 2003; Verdegem, 2011; Zhao & Elesh, 2007). Zhao & Elesh, (2007) describes the prevalent "ubiquitous human connectivity" thesis as follows:

(1) the Internet has made it technically possible for people on this planet to communicate with each other regardless of distance and time (global connectivity); (2) people all over the world will therefore avail themselves of this opportunity to contact and be contacted by others regardless of social differences (universal accessibility); and, as a result, (3) the entire globe will become a single village like an ancient tribe (tribal intimacy). This is a strong version of the ubiquitous connectivity argument. A weaker version of it can be constructed by dropping the "tribal intimacy" claim, which accepts the idea of universal accessibility without embracing the concept of one global village. This weaker version can be further modified to subsume various other technofix positions that view the Internet as a "technological solution to social problems"

Digital technologies are often erroneously positioned as being automatically inclusive as all community members theoretically have the same level of (often free) access to digital platforms. This would however be a gross oversimplification of the issue, especially in the context of the developing world. As Amartya Sen described the complicated issue of social exclusion:

“Indeed, many problems of deprivation arise from unfavourable terms of inclusion and adverse participation, rather than what can be sensibly seen primarily as a case of exclusion as such.”(Sen, 2000)

Besides the potential blinding effect on policymakers of the above-mentioned techno-determinist assumptions often underlying major digital technology projects, various other factors also complicates the succesful utilisation of Digital Social Innovation within the context of deepening equality within constitutional democracies.

Jin (2013) highlights the “appification” of the digital environment, specifically the decline of the distributed internet structure and increasing prevalence of closed digital platforms (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc) with highly concentrated ownership and control structures. Jin even goes as far as referring to it as “digital imperialism”:

“In the early 21st century, platforms, known as digital media intermediaries, have greatly influenced people’s daily lives. Due to the importance of platforms for the digital economy and culture, including intellectual property and participatory culture, several countries have developed their own social network sites and Web portals. Nonetheless, a handful of Western countries, primarily the U.S., have dominated the global platform market and society. “

Digital inclusion and the so-called New Divides are complex and dynamic phenomenons (Van Dijk & Hacker, 2003). The increasing use of and dependence upon digital technologies in everyday life forces a rethink on how we manage both our private and professional lives in this digital era (Verdegem, 2011). This has implications on policy level, especially as “techno-enthusiastic visions” oftentimes negate to take into account the digital inequalities (“digital divide”) and often leads to policies developed from technological deterministic spirit (Verdegem, 2011).

Another dynamic that problematises the use of Digital Social Innovation within the developing world context is the notion of “selling privacy for convenience” that seems to permeate the business model principles of various digital intermediaries. It bears mention that these same intermediaries are also often used rather uncritically within the context of Digital Social Innovation (i.e. using a social network to crowdsource support for a well-meaning government of civic society initiative while unbeknownst to participants their privacy is compromised, even commoditised, simply by their online participation).

If the notion of “algorithmic black boxes” is added to this equation, the seemingly easy, “always-on”, low-cost online digital solutions so often used by governments, political parties and civic society to market programs, gather support for or simply communicate ideas, become much more problematic.

A wide range of algorithmic software tools have been attempting to change human behaviour since BJ Fogg coined the concept of Persuasive Computing (Byrnes, 2015). The emerging field of Persuasive Computing can be viewed as a “Fourth Phase in the utilisation of digital technologies as computer systems are being expressly designed to change human behaviour (Fogg, Cuellar, & Danielson, 2009).

The convergence of Persuasive Computing, mass adoption of Social Networks and increasingly sophisticated tools to analyse massive, largely unstructured datasets (also referred to as “Big Data”) creates the potential for large scale social change. However, as the Edward Snowden revelations of large scale cross- border privacy infringements and cyber-surveillance by the US National Security Agency proves, such convergent trends may also come at a steep price for local communities, especially where large power differentials exist (Wexler, 2014).

Concerns have for example been voiced around impact of algorithms on ideology (and ideology on algorithms) (Mager, 2012) and Cheney-Lippold (2011) states that:

“We are effectively losing control in defining who we are online, or more specifically we are losing ownership over the meaning of the categories that constitute our identities. Algorithm ultimately exercises control over us by harnessing these forces through the creation of relationships between real-world surveillance data and machines capable of making statistically relevant inferences about what that data can mean.”

The impact of the previously mentioned three phenomena is the gradual erosion of informed access to information online that may strengthen and build the values and principles of constitutional democracy. Citizens are increasingly receiving information mediated by algorithm-determined digital imperialist sources. Citizens are largely operating within commoditised, highly unequal relationships with digital platforms.

When these platforms are utilised in the context of Digital Social Innovation, it is necessary that we start looking more critically at the manner in which we utilise these high potential technologies. Failure to do so may put us at risk of gradual (albeit highly “convenient”) erosion of our constitutional principles of privacy, equality and freedom.

If our Constitution is meant, as stated by Moseneke (2014) to enable and facilitate the creation of an inclusive future, we should more critically engage with the notion of what our fully transformed digital society should look like.

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