Co-Creation of Public Service Innovation Using Open Data and Social Media: Rhetoric, Reality, or Something in Between?

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the analysis of the usage of open data and social media in the co-creation of public service innovation. The article concludes that using open data and social media in co-creation of public service innovation is a promising approach but not yet fully implemented. It seems clear that the advances in digital technology may provide a bridge for bringing service providers and service users together. The benefits are clear. First, the more accurate and real-time data available, the more effective the service provision will be. Second, the more citizen participation, the more tailored services can be co-created. Third, the more transparent governance becomes, the more legitimate and accountable it becomes. Fourth, governmental legitimacy increases societal trust which supports knowledge sharing and spurs innovation. However, co-creation of public service innovations can be more complex, more unpredictable, and more political than what the rhetoric indicates.

KEYWORDS

Co-Creation, Complexity, Open Data, Public Service Innovation, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Open innovation (Chesbrough, 2006) and democratizing innovation (von Hippel, 2005) have been cited as foundations for seeing and doing things differently, i.e. innovation. While the concepts have been mostly employed in the context of private sector innovation, in recent years, they have become more and more popular also in searching remedies for public sector innovation (Mergel & Desouza, 2013; Cohen, Almirall & Chesbrough, 2017). However, research suggest that the public sector suffers from an innovation deficit compared to the private sector. This has been explained to be a by-product of a culture of risk-aversion and a reluctance to close down failing programmes (Mulgan, 2014) and by an unintended consequence of the concerted public sector drive toward the elimination of waste through efficiency, accountability and transparency (Potts, 2009).

Common for open innovation and democratizing innovation is that innovation is seen as emerging from the interaction between various elements in the socio-economic system. It is believed that the more diverse the knowledge base, the more ideas there are, which, in turn, can be refined as new or improved products and services. Open and democratizing innovation suggests that the success of innovation can be improved by engaging users and other stakeholders in the design and development of innovation. This is understandable, as studies show that one of the main reasons for innovation failures is users’ passive or active resistance (Heidenreich & Spieth, 2013). The rationale for innovation success goes that the more users (and other stakeholders) are involved, the more natural ‘buy-in’ for
innovation adoption. Rogers (2003), for example, has argued the importance of a social system where innovation is expected to be diffused and adopted. From idea to innovation and from innovation to practice is a process that does not happen spontaneously.

Rapid development of digital technology has been seen as important for improving public sector innovation capabilities (Gil-García, Helbig, & Ojo, 2014). The Quadruple Helix (Cavallani, Soldi, Friedl & Volpe, 2016) and Open Innovation 2.0 (European Commission, 2018) initiatives, for example, rely on open data to spur innovation. Freely accessible and re-usable open data has many indicated aims. Open data drives economic benefits and furthers transparency. Digital technology also enables governments to raise their outreach to citizens whilst empowering citizens to have their opinions heard. Based on thinking that citizens are experts of their own situation, it has been suggested that social media provides means for engaging citizens in public service innovation (Jalonen, 2016).

Neither digital technologies nor open and democratizing innovation are ‘silver bullets’ to guarantee success. This is because the benefits of openness and diversity come with costs. Open and democratizing innovation in a multi-actor environment is usually portrayed as a complex process which lack clear cause and effect sequences. The complexity of the innovation process can manifest itself in various forms, but the fundamental reason lies in the interaction containing nonlinear feedback loops and conflictual differences in opinions (Jalonen, 2016). Innovations do not ‘go viral’ and spread as straightforwardly as contagious diseases (Centola, 2018). In addition, many scholars have warned that digital technologies might transform our societies irrevocably. It is hypothesized that while digitalization has increased societal transparency, it has simultaneously introduced new black boxes that produce results which are based on the use of assumptions that are not made clear. (Pasquale, 2015; Cheney-Lippold, 2017.)

This paper argues that the complexity of public innovation cannot be ‘solved’, but rather must be ‘managed’ in collaborative ways. Innovation is not seen as something that can be created in isolation in ‘laboratory settings’ and then delivered to the users/citizens. Instead, the paper’s rationale is based on the premises that public service innovations should be co-created with citizens and relevant stakeholders. Theoretically, the paper draws on public service logic (Osborne, 2008) and service-dominant logic for value (co)creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The paper analyzes the pros and cons of co-creation of public service innovation using open data and social media.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 briefly describes theoretical grounds focusing on co-creation in the public sector, public service innovation, service-dominant logic of value co-creation and digital governance. Section 3 presents the methodology. Sections 4 and 5 discuss the use of open data and social media in the co-creation of public service innovation. Finally, Section 6 concludes the report.

Co-creation in the Public Sector, Public Service Innovation, Service-Dominant Value Creation and Digital Governance

Various ‘co-processes’ (co-initiation, co-design, co-production, co-implementation, see Voorberg, Bekkers & Tummers, 2015) are enthusiastically celebrated initiatives for improving public services. While there are many similarities between the concepts, the distinctions lie in the role of key stakeholders (particularly citizens and their representatives). Fox, Jalonen, Baines, Bassi, Marsh, Moretti & Willoughby (2019, p. 15) provide the following conceptualization: in co-initiation, stakeholders form a part of the movement that spurs the creation of a new public service from the very start of the process; in co-design, stakeholders jointly come up with ideas for the various parts of a public service, how it will be delivered and whom it needs to reach; in co-production, stakeholders collaboratively produce materials and share perspectives in a way that public services undergo continuous evaluation and improvement; in co-implementation, stakeholders are not only recipients of a service, but actively take part in putting it into practice throughout the lifetime of the scheme. ‘Co-creation’ is often mistakenly seen as a synonym for ‘co-production’. The distinction between them is the degree of involvement of citizens: co-production does not necessarily require
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