

03/06/2022

## Citizen involvement in smart cities



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While current enthusiasm for the smart city raises a host of technical challenges to be overcome, the most pressing questions relate to governance and politics. Smart technologies offer the potential to provide innovative solutions to urban challenges, but they also carry the risk of embedding and amplifying existing social divisions. While smart innovation is often championed as of benefit to “the general citizen” (Shelton and Lodato, 2019), the extent to which citizens and communities, rather than corporate or other stakeholders, are – or can be - the primary beneficiaries of smart city innovation in practice remains an open question.

Empirical work examining “actually existing” smart cities frequently finds that headline commitments to citizen-centred practice translate into neither citizen participation in development processes nor clear benefits to identifiable communities. The citizen remains elusive, if not entirely absent. There is also insufficient reflection on whether successfully reorienting urban digital innovation so that it is approached squarely from a citizen or community perspective would change our understanding of what “smart” looks like. Does genuinely citizen-oriented smart city innovation have a different flavour to it?

These two articles use an institutionalist perspective to frame an analysis of recent smart city developments in Mexico City. The articles are based on a qualitative study that included the analysis of: the attitudes of citizens towards the innovation of smart cities; existing state-led smart city development policies, strategies and practices; and the co-design, with representatives of community sector organizations (CSOs), of a digital solution to problems that CSO representatives had identified as urgent during and after the pandemic period. The 2 articles present three lines of argument.

First, it develops the argument that to understand smart city practices it is essential to locate them within the complex of existing institutional structures operating at societal as well as sectoral level. We draw out particularly the role of deeply embedded understandings of the relationship between a government and its citizens, with a particular focus on trust in government. Second, we argue that Mexico City has distinctive characteristics as a case study of smart innovation practice. Its strongly state-centric approach highlights how crucial it is to understand the political dynamics within which smart city activities are embedded, including how the user is configured. Finally, we demonstrate that if smart city development is decentred then communities can articulate priorities and problems to which digital solutions can potentially offer an answer, albeit a partial one.

In the process, questions of (re)configuration come to the fore. Moreover, if we recognize where communities are starting from with respect to their engagement with digital innovation then it would be more appropriate to think of this as a developmental process that seeks a “smarter” city, rather than seeking to realize some abstract technocratic ideal of the “smart city”.

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