

CREATIVE COMMUNITY, COLLABORATIVE NETWORK AND DIGITAL SERVICE: AN EXPERIENCE OF DESIGN FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY¹

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ABSTRACT

Social innovation is being considered as an important driver to sustainable society. And grassroots social innovations (creative communities) have been observed and studied as the promising cases of sustainable everyday life. The aim of this ongoing research is to focus the design role in enhancing creative communities in network society, in particular to explore the new opportunities of digital collaborative network as an enabling platform. This paper is an intermediate result of the research based on a design course (Final Synthesis Lab) in the programme of service design at the Politecnico di Milano, where the students developed seven service design concepts. The course is a part of the framework that collects several didactic and research initiatives towards design action within sustainability.

The analysis of the process and results of the course reports that: 1) Service design can play particular roles in promotion of social innovations in terms of local context, complexity of system and process of co-creation; 2) In information and network society, new opportunities can be generated into the collaborative network and digital service as enabling solutions and platforms for social innovation towards sustainability.

Keywords: *Creative community, social innovation, service design, collaborative network, sustainability*

1 CREATIVE COMMUNITIES AND SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLE

Innovation is the key drive of present human society to face the challenges and expect the future possibilities. Innovation is a multidisciplinary issue, and in the last years the field of social innovation has emerged, as a new systemic approach, over the technical, management and governance innovation.

In fact, Social Innovation, defined as “*innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly developed and diffused through organizations whose primary purposes are social*”(The Young Foundation 2006, 11), has been widely discussed in the field of civil society and is becoming a new wave of human evolution since our environmental and social problems are increasing all over the world. This fast speed changes challenge the traditional approach to business and technology innovation. Given that, sustainability can possibly be the answer in bridging the gap between the change rhythm and the innovation impact.

Previous researches in Europe² (EMUDE 2006) and worldwide (CCSL 2007) observed and discovered cases of creative communities, as bottom-up emerging initiatives that illustrate through case studies the real possibility of reorienting the evolution of present society in the direction of a sustainable knowledge and network society (Manzini, Jegou 2003). Therefore sustainable development requires a strategy that has to be drawn from this social innovation experiences, and help promote them: strategic design approaches are supposed to play an important role in the social learning process in the context of learning

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²For instance: groups of people who re-organize the way they live their home (as in the co-housing movement) and their neighbourhood (bringing it to life, creating the conditions for children to go to school on foot; fostering mobility on foot or by bike). Communities that set up new participatory social services for the elderly and for parents (such as the young and the elderly living together or micro-nurseries set up and managed by enterprising mothers), or new food networks fostering producers of organic items and the quality and typical characteristics of their products (such as the Slow Food movement, solidarity purchasing and fair trade groups). (For more, and more detailed, examples see: <http://www.sustainable-everyday.net/cases>).

communities, both diffusing the sustainable footprint culture and enhancing sustainable networks. In last decades, sustainable development became a keyword for manufacturing and production system, and efforts towards it proved to be successful. However, paradoxically, the overall ecological footprint in the world is not improving. Therefore, it is necessary and important to consolidate new paths to promote sustainable innovations that are not bounded in production but expand in creation and thinking. The sustainable lifestyle could be a kind of radical change to steer the directions of development and the systemic action of design can be a effective driver in redirecting the change.

1 COLLABORATIVE NETWORK IN DIGITAL WORLD

The digital word that arises around the Internet networks show us rich and meaningful examples of cooperative practices and community behaviours: in the last two decades the idea of digital communities came to light from the experience of the free software, as a milestone experience in the practice of knowledge sharing and grassroots creativity.

Nowadays the ongoing ferment within networks has brought wider communities join together in the production of knowledge and in the sharing of public activities. It is in the context of digital networks that we observe a quick and viral participation from the new users in the process of content generation. In this sense the information communication tools represent the capacity of the users to enable new relations. Effective use of the Internet has been achieved through its use as a means of communication, as a medium for the transfer of information and as a prime mechanism for interactions between individuals, in a networked and communitarian sustainable approach.

Experiences, learning and content production by many are the main processes that currently lead to creative innovation; these processes have been fully explored in organizational studies and we mainly refer to the "Creative Support Tools Report" (2006) for a synthesis of these concepts from a practitioners' mindset. Digital communities and creative communities share a common approach that underlines the role of sharing and cooperation as a practical action, and we consider this as a strategic tool not only for the professional creative activity like the design discipline, but most of all as a expertise that belongs to individuals enabling them to directly contribute to their own problem setting and solving. In this wider scenario creativity is a process with social nature and significance. Furthermore the recent theories of Benkler about the impact of technology in the social life, made a breakthrough in socio-economical analysis of the community organizational model: it is primarily the sharing expertise fed by the Net and practiced by communities that makes possible the expression of creativity and the related innovation. Participation and cooperation are considered as the major trends in social innovation (Benkler 2006). Through the power to join people, the network paradigm refers mainly to cooperation practices; from this paradigm comes the interest for digital communities and the digital tools that they use to connect and act in the field of production of public goods. The evolution of the above mentioned issues is tied up to the quick expansion of ICT (Information and Communication Technology), which is used for the public management of resources and data, to foster cooperative work and to nourish the emergence of a public heritage. The public domain is enriched thanks to ICT's capacity to enable new models of knowledge production; it has been observed that Web 2.0, social networking, Peer-to-Peer (P2P) and etc. are generating the new opportunities of the radical change of the way of being and doing in everyday life, and their impact affects both the digital and the physical networks. In particular, mobile communication is expected to provide important enabling technologies for promotion of sustainable everyday life where collaborative services are implicated.

2 SERVICE DESIGN EXERCISES: FINAL SYNTHESIS LAB (LSF)

A didactic course based on research initiative has been organized to investigate how mobile communication can support collaborative services. The course is the Final synthesis Lab in the master programme of service design, starting from October of 2007 to February of 2008 with a collaboration of Politecnico di Milano, Telecom Italia Lab, Provincia di Milano and Nova IISole 24 Ore.

Twentytwo students participated in this course in seven groups; the partners cooperated in supporting the different design phases, and giving the input contents. The design activities were divided into four stages: 1) Case studies and field research, 2) Idea generation and concept definition, 3) project development and

simulation, 4) Project communication. The lectures have been organized in six input clusters:: Digital service and interaction design by research unit of D.Com (Polimi), Service design and social innovation by research unit of Dis (Polimi), Management of service by Business School (Polimi), MCTs and services by Telecom (Italia Lab) and Cultural and political local context by Comuni Area Sud Milano. Design action started from the exploration of the local context and building connection with communities and the administrative body. At the beginning each group of students was asked to explore the field research techniques as a effective knowledge tool, and define a project question rooted on the given local context .

Service ideas and concepts came from the dialogue with future users, based on the findings from the field research. Finally the students developed service solutions by the use of typical service design tools (moodboard, storyboard, system map, motivation matrix, interaction schema). The whole process considered two basic dimensions of service: local context as an opportunity for designers, and mobile communication, as the tools that clearly facilitate connections and eventually can enhance cooperations. Regarding the local context: if by definition, a designed service has to be localized, this stands true evenmore for collaborative services that rely on specific context conditions. Therefore, a full and thick understanding of the environment, actors and network is required in order to implement project question on specific problematic areas. Moreover, the solutions to design questions will need to be shared within a clearly identified local system of partners and stakeholders. It is only by using this kind of approach, that design initiatives can evolve from grassroots initiatives into social innovation process.

3 NEW SERVICE IDEAS AND SOLUTIONS

The course generated seven service ideas and solutions, related to activities of social administration and public services delivered to the citizens.

From the beginning, the encouraged design approach is considered the opportunity to link the self-organizing capacity of people and the opportunity of mobile communication technologies to create and thugh-up new social networks. A general and prior aim of the course was to create a new generation of services based on the social cultural and relational expertise that people posses, and inquire the potential of the mobile communication as a cognitive tool that could revitalize and activate social participation. We tried to pursue this aim through a direct action methodology, that make the projects rooted in the local context, however considering all concept ideas scalable in other environments. All concepts are original and have been developed to reach the prototyping phase, and they have been tested through usability simulations.

Group/Title	Service idea ¹
	Cantastorie: a platform to collect multimedia contents about places, territories, local stories, antique behaviors; it is based on the idea that anyone in the community could play the role of the narrator. It uses SEMACODE technology: stickers that allow places to tell stories.
	La Maglia: The service makes possible what otherwise might remain only probable encounters, building a collective and trusted solidarity community for women and enabling social relationship and mutual aid within trusted network
	Ritagli di Quotidiano: This service is a collective and bottom-up storytelling, that allow to build a virtual ethnographic museum providing to citizens a virtual spaces to tell about memory and identity
	Agora: is a virtual/multi-language board that helps to share practical and logistic info between foreign people in a city using their own language, and it is addressed to the different foreigners communities
	Proposte: the service enables a participatory process for citizens, and mobile technology helps activate discussions and facilitate dialog between the different citizens and the public administration
	Bookcase: Users of libraries are librarians themselves. The service allows people to share their own books with other users. So private resources become shared resources, and thematic heritage can be available also in common public libraries
	Biblioticket: Libraries are shown as space of knowledge, and are used to aggregate and encourage people to share skills. Service is mainly addressed to the students that use the public libraries. The platform allows help-desk, support and collaboration searches regarding scholarly topics

4 DESIGN FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION IN NETWORK SOCIETY

4.1 Service design for social innovation

- 1) Design for places. The main evidence of LSF results is the connection between the service design action and a clearly identified problem context. Grassroots social innovation evolves through bottom-up initiatives and experiments and starts with top-down interventions. In other words it is generated in concrete places (referred as *creative places* in literature) by groups of collaborative people (so called *creative community*). This is why, the field research and other thick-knowledge tools are fundamental steps within the service design process, and most of all during creative and problem setting phase.
- 2) Complexity-based design. The power of local contexts relies on the ability of creative communities to build partnership networks. In most of the studied emerging cases this takes place and works through a tacit and unconscious process. Service design initiatives deal with interpretation and promotion of these systems, and deals with the challenge of complex, rather than complicated, problem setting context
- 3) Design as a co-create process. The role of local partners and system stakeholder in the service development is helpful and necessary to the creation of the service itself, in order to build a scenario of dialogue that is mandatory for each kind of service design initiative. The local partners are in this case assumed to be not only the end clients of projects. Given the problem-oriented design approaches' need for real collaboration between different partners including the whole system of stakeholders, a co-creation scenario rather than a commission action one is necessary.

4.2 New opportunities in network society

There are some final considerations about community processes and technological systems within the network society. It is common knowledge that complex systems and networks involve complex information processes, but this is not narrowed just to digital world and information networks: it is more and more true also in networks of people and in processes that go beyond the management of information and sharing. ICT technology proves to be a useful tool that enables people to deal without intermediates with complex issues management. Within the framework of IC technology, MCT (Mobile Communication Technology) are nowadays diffused enough to become one of the privileged tools used as drivers of networked communication. Finally, we can assume that collaborative networks are not designed artifacts, but enabling platforms for grassroots communication between peers. This is why for the design practice is mandatory and urgent to deal with the enhancing process of this kind of actions, as a wider goal within the network society.

5 CONCLUSION

The analysis of the process and results of the course reports that: 1) Service design can play particular roles in promotion of social innovations in terms of local context, complexity of system and process of co-creation; 2) In information and network society, new opportunities can be generated into the collaborative network and digital service as enabling solutions and platforms for social innovation towards sustainability. More precisely, strategic design and service design can be convergence between the collaborative networks or initiatives in physical everyday life and those in digital world in order to promote the sustainable lifestyle.

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(Footnotes)

1 Detailed descriptions, video simulation, prototypes and materials from the projects can be found in the course website: <http://servizicollaborativi.politecalab.org>