Paradoxes in SI network formation

Paradoxes of Transformative Social Innovation

December 6th -7th 2017 – Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels

Jens Dorland – Aalborg University Copenhagen

Contents

- Three paradoxes related to network formation, development, and scaling.

- **Paradox 1: The empirical challenges – Unit of Analysis**
  How to study something that is ambiguous and fluid? What are we studying? And what do we provide?

- **Paradox 2: A theoretical & empirical paradox – Macro-actors in a flat relational ontology**
  We have two foci – local social innovation initiatives & international networks– how can the two be related to each other and societal transformations in a flat relational ontology?

- **Paradox 3: Empowerments and relevance of international networks**
  How are international networks even relevant for local social innovation initiatives?

Paradoxes in SI network formation Paradox 1

The Empirical paradox – Unit of Analysis

The Empirical paradox – Unit of Analysis (UoA)

SI networks are not social movements, not organisations in the traditional sense, and maybe too diverse to be comparable.

• Networks have widely different transformative ambitions, organise very differently, and materialize differently locally.

• **Where to draw the boundaries around the empirical phenomenon in a way that makes our cases comparable?**

• **How to talk of network formation, scaling up, or diffusion when the entity itself is so diffuse?** *i.e. what and whom are we trying to empower.*

• *Practically we opted for embedded, fluid, and provisional UoA's when in the field-work and case studies, but this also makes it challenging to establish analytic categories subsequently.

The Empirical paradox – Unit of Analysis

Empirical examples

- Many **Hackerspaces** are opposed to be seen as a network, have **no formal organisation or member list**, and are often also registered as FabLabs, MakersSpaces, Living Labs etc.

- **FabLabs** invariable also identify as Living Labs, MakerSpaces, HackerSpaces, or even Science Shops. They **do not have a formal organisation or a recognized spokesperson**. Even more complicated, **the members using a FabLab might engage with even numerous SI initiatives**. There might be sub-groups in the network there are more comparable, like university-based FabLabs.

- **Time Banks, Credit Unions, and the Seed Movement** have **several different international organisations sometimes in opposition** to each other. Some local seed initiatives are yearly events, which is more empirically specific and tangible.

The differences is not a question of maturity or stage of development, as the networks follow widely different paths towards very different types of networks (overview next page)

A way to understand the types of and organisation of SI networks

Table: the nature of networks

Transnational social innovation networks and their characteristics	Have a specific representative network organisations	Identify with a wider network or movement	Member of several networks or organizations simultaneously	Is a formal/legal entity	There are "resources" in the network
FabLabs		X	X		X
Hackerspaces			X		
Living Knowledge Network	X		X		
DESIS-network	X		X	X	
???					

Possible solutions - paradox 1

EXAMPLES of a few types of networks that could be comparable internally:

- **A kind of social movement:** Diffusion of concepts & ideas independently of any network and without any direct association between initiatives, a network with no distinct boundaries – *Hackerspaces, Basic Income, Time Banks, Eco-villages, Science Shops (initially), Seed Movement, Shareable, RIPESS (?)*

- **Very decentralized networks:** Associations of like-minded initiatives with fluid boundaries, used for exchanging experiences, knowledge and peer-support without any formal organisation – *Living Knowledge, FabLabs, INFORSE*

- **Coop-Franchise networks:** Formal organisations with firm boundaries that owns their brands and needs to approve new members – a kind-of cooperative of SI-initiatives with a strong identity and coherence – *Impact Hubs, Living Labs, Transitions Towns, Desis Labs, Credit Unions, Slow food*

- **Traditional (commercial) organisations:** Formal and centralized organisations with clear boundaries that legally owns and controls all local initiatives – *Ashoka, social entrepreneurships (in general)*

- **Or divide them according to transformative ambitions** – I am writing an article on FabLabs, Science Shops, and Desis labs working at universities – the role science can play in social innovation.

Paradox 1 – findings

- It has been important to have fluid, provisional, and embedded cases to capture the diversity in the field.

- With an intention to empower and be practically relevant, it is likewise important to subsequently establish categories that contain comparable entities.

  - Researching specifically on relevance of science for SI, I can develop specific insight of practical relevance that would not be applicable across all the cases. The last two months I have had 3 meetings in Sweden, explaining operational models, funding opportunities, types of empowerment etc. in science-civil society interactions. The propositions would not have been useful here.

Paradoxes in SI network formation Paradox 2

Local initiatives and societal transformations – Macro-actors in a flat relational ontology

(A sprint through some theoretical considerations with an empirical finale)

The theoretical challenge - Macro-actors in a flat relational ontology

We have two foci – local social innovation initiatives & international networks – how can the two be related to societal transformations? Paradox 2. (Especially given our flat ontology →)

A flat relational ontology and material semiotic approach inspired by Actor-Network theory (but *not* ANT).

- We see SI as a locally anchored phenomenon and our flat relational approach ensures:
  - Focus on the local
  - How the networks manifest materially
  - The objects that circulate and facilitate interactions and social relations trans-locally

The theoretical challenge - Macro-actors in a flat relational ontology

- **How are Macro-actor like international networks or societal institutions represented in a flat relational ontology?**
  - **Definition**: A macro-actor is a network, an association between actors, equipped with a "voice" to speak and act on their behalf (Czarniawska & Hernes 2005). Divisions between global and local is a relational effect (Law & Hetherington, 2000). Concepts like *punctualization* and *black-boxing* illustrate this dynamic.
  - **Purpose**: Macro-actors are pertinent to the discussion because that is often the only way for local initiatives to interact with other macro-actors, like institutions, many of which are the target for their transformative ambitions.
  - **Relevance**: The difference between micro- and macro-actors is thus not in any ontological differences but due to negotiations and associations – *the focus in network formation is how the networks construct macro-actors and endow them with power to interact with or affect other macro-actors or local initiatives.*

Construction and enactment of Macro-actors

- Networks have widely different transformative ambitions – Some support or "improve" societal systems, other aim to replace, and others create parallel/shadow systems – and the macro-actors they need & construct differ accordingly.

- **Different types of macro-actors**
  - **The networks themselves** – but not all the network want or have succeeded in becoming macro-actors. *Ashoka has resources and are in some arenas forces to be reckoned with. Living Knowledge has established itself as a "partner" of the EU commission.*
  - **Macro-actors living beyond the SI network** – Facilitates faster and wider diffusion and scaling at the cost of control. *FabLabs is now a living concept beyond the control of any single actor. Basic Income is an idea that has travelled back and forth across the Atlantic beyond the control of any actor.*
  - **External organisations, movements and networks** – like the European Commission, NGOs, Governments, Universities etc.
  - **Societal institutions and norms** – macro-actors not directly equivalent to specific organisations and entities, like "capitalism", consumerism, global warming etc.

Empirical examples of macro-actors in our networks

Networks come together to construct macro-actors that can engage other macro-actors – a solution to how local/global interactions can be studied

- Science Shops formed Living Knowledge to interact directly with the EU commission. **Living Knowledge is an umbrella, a black-box, for interacting with other macro-actors**. Living Knowledge also worked on strengthening civil society research, giving it agency.

- Slow Food have constructed the "macro-actor" of slow living – an idea separate from the network but closely connected. They have also constructed specific objects, the Ark of Taste, that connects small food producers with potential customers.

- Basic Income is in itself a concept, a macro-actor, that can be picked up by anyone. The networks works to give it legitimacy, to empower it, to enable its agency.

- Impact Hubs changed their name and registered their brand to become distinct from similar initiatives, and retain control over their concept (opposite FabLabs).

This **strategic essentialism** that construction of macro-actors require have both pros and cons though…

A way to understand how the trans-local nature of the networks and how they interact with dominant institutions

Table: macro-actors of the networks

Transnational social innovation networks and their characteristics	Does the network have a recognised macro-actor?	Have the network constructed or given birth to living macro-actors?	Does the network enact macro-actors to gain empowerment locally?	Does the network aim to change/transform macro-actors in society like institutions?	Is the network trying to interact with other macro-actors? (fx EU commission)
FabLabs		X	X		
Hackerspaces		X	?		
Living Knowledge Network	X		X	X	X
DESIS-network	X		X	X	X

Examples: Materiality & manifestations of macro-actors

- **Policy documents** like university strategies, or the research programs of the EU commission. These texts sometimes become macro-actors in their own right, which local initiatives can enact, but also structure their aim & activities.

- **Webpages like Living Knowledge** is the (only) manifestation of the network. There are no offices, address, or legal entity. The text of the webpage is the negotiated purpose of the network, and the recognized spokesperson.

- **Events – fairs, conferences, workshops, demonstrations** are also examples of how the networks manifests. The biennial Terra Madre conference in Torino started by the Slow Food network has gained an agency of its own.

- **Manifestos**? A co-production of practitioners and academics from different networks, might become a macro-actor, or might fail to get a life.

- Blueprints (FabLabs), handbooks, tool-boxes, are knowledge objects that might get agency.

Paradox 2 – findings

- Macro-actors are negotiated and stabilised networks that can be black-boxed by other.
- SI networks unlike traditional organisational forms do not have firm boundaries and recognized spokespersons – it is important to "construct" these network entities to navigate and interact with other networks.
  - Living Knowledge, Time Banks, Eco-villages, Living Labs etc.
- Giving life to or strengthening macro-actors beyond control of the network is another way to facilitate fast and wide diffusion and scaling
  - Alternative production (FabLabs, Maker movement), alternative living practices (Eco-villages, Transition Towns, Seed movement)

Paradoxes in SI network formation Paradox 3

empowerments and relevance of international networks

Paradox 3 – empowerments and relevance of international networks

- **How are international networks even relevant for local social innovation initiatives?**
  - Many of them, it seems from the CTP database, have little need or interest in the international network in their development or daily life
  - The initiatives are very locally focused and do not interact on a daily basis with other initiatives or the "network"
  - A few of the networks are so thin that they have few or no resources on their own, i.e. what is there to interact with?
  - Lastly, globalisation have had a very visible impact, making a lot of interaction trans-local rather then international, and many networks have developed very distributed agency.

The role of international networking for local social innovation initiatives - OVERVIEW

Empowerment types & resources	Description	Examples
Knowledge	• Many knowledge-objects require actors to accompany it to control or ensure translation , and so objects do not transfer practice or knowledge on how to do "stuff", but rather give information on location of knowledge and afford enactment of societal problems. • This resources also illustrated the importance of physical co-location and limitations of ICT.	Local Initiatives exchange knowledge and experiences on how to operate, practical challenges especially. FabLabs, Seed Movement, Hackerspaces all share knowledge on specific practices, i.e. how to build or grow specific things.
Financial	• Financial resources heavily structure relations, and often has a trade-off, i.e. funding comes with requirements and expectations and can steer LSIs in unwanted directions. These resources can come directly from interactions in the networks, or might be side-effects of such interactions.	Desis Labs declined having membership fees, unlike for instance Living Labs, because this would change the relationship between the volunteers active in the network and members to one of clients-service providers.
Visibility	• Visibility is a basic necessity for most LSIs. Visibility can lead to funding, support, and legitimacy, and increased membership and partners.	Prominent members of the slow food network have brought visibility to local convivia in Spain and Mexico through local media attention, which then attracted funding from local authorities and businesses.
Legitimacy	• Visibility alone is not enough, LSIs need legitimacy to cooperate with actors like a city council, or to be accepted into international networks, or merely to attract members.	Impact Hub demands memberships fees and use the resources to construct and guard the brand, which is now widely recognized. This empowerment does no entail any daily interactions between local initiatives and the network.
Support	• Support relate to motivation of individuals, and is the resources we have the least data on. The typical comment is that knowing you are part of something larger motivates actors.	Eco-villages, Credit Unions, Living Knowledge members all comment that the support they get from colleagues are invaluable for their motivation.

Knowledge - Examples of empowerments

Science plays a large role in legitimising local initiatives, I.e. knowledge objects can in themselves empower without transferring knowledge.

- Science Shop provide scientific documentation to NGOs that can strengthen/empower them in their transformative activities, i.e. documentation of pollution in the water supply enables them to engage public authorities.

- Desis design systems and material artefacts based on research, giving scientific knowledge material form and impact.

Arranging events can facilitate diffusion and knowledge sharing

- The seed movement exchange knowledge on practicalities in opening and operating a seed exchange, knowledge on their practice, i.e. how to grow specific seeds

- Maker Fairs also facilitate exchange of knowledge on specific practical matters, i.e. how top operate machines, blueprint for specific objects, operational procedures for their spaces.

- Slow Food, Basic Income, Living Knowledge and many other networks arrange conferences and other events to facilitate knowledge sharing and diffusion.

Finance- Examples of empowerments

- Slow food receives membership fees that is uses to run projects spreading the idea of Slow Food and expand the network, and generally strengthening the brand. This is then resources going from the local to the network, which then work to strengthen the network but without specific benefits for the individual local initiative.

- Living Knowledge indirectly enable member to apply for project funds from the EU commission and other international sources, which they have used to fund new science shops.

- Financial resources have little focus in the data, it seems not to be a huge focus/concern after successful establishment.

Visibility - Examples of empowerments

A network can bring attention to initiatives in their local context

- Prominent members of the slow food movement actively travel and advocate for the movement, which **brings local media attention** for local initiatives.

- Basic Income like many networks **hold conferences** on a regular basis, which brings attention to in the local area they are held.

- Desis, like many networks, enable interested actors to find like-minded initiatives. I.e. if you are interested in sustainable design, and are travelling to a new area, looking at the Desis member list is a way to find actors to engage with.

Legitimacy - Examples of empowerments

A network can work to strengthen the "brand" (constructing a macro-actor but retaining control)

- Impact Hubs, Living Labs, Ashoka, Slow Food, Credit Unions etc. all have brands.

International networks can give stamps of approval through letters, certificates, visits etc.

- Living knowledge and Living Labs have both used these methods to help the founding of new local initiatives.

A network can work to diffuse its concept and ideas and give them legitimacy (constructing a macro-actor with a life of its own)

- Living Knowledge lobbied the EU commission over a decade to put civil society on the agenda in the research programmes – enabling Science Shops to apply for project funds. There is now always a "science shop" call to apply for.

- The FabLab foundation & academy have successfully popularized the concept but have also lost control – resulting in very wide and fast diffusion. Also drawing on other macro-actors like economic growth and innovation.

Support - Examples of empowerments

- Living Knowledge (Science Shops) – Local initiatives are often very small (1-3 people), and so often feel alone and facing a lot of opposition. Peer-support from colleagues in the network have been mentioned as crucial to keep going. Both for motivation but also advise on specific challenges.

- Eco-villages has mentioned that there mere knowledge that there are so many other like-minded communities is very encouraging, a knowledge they didn´t have before the network emerged.

- Credit Unions (Merkur Andelskasse) mentions the importance that they can show clients that they are part of a wider network of ethical finance institutions.

- Local slow food convivias mentioned the importance of attending the biennal slow food event and experience the "energy".

Paradox 3 – findings

- Networks have a lot of empowering functions indirectly, i.e. building a brand, giving legitimacy, creating visibility & awareness, all ways to empower that do not necessarily involve interaction with the local initiatives. However, it does enable the initiatives to receive funding, get more members, establish new relations etc.

- Often the local initiatives empower the "network", the spokesperson, to deal with other macro-actors like the EU commission. Or to just general diffuse and scale up the network.

Inspirations/references for this presentation

- Pel, B., Dorland, J., Wittmayer, J., & Jørgensen, M. S. (2017). Detecting Social Innovation agents; Methodological reflections on units of analysis in dispersed transformation processes. *European Public & Social Innovation Review*. Retrieved from http://vbn.aau.dk/da/publications/detecting-social-innovation-agents-methodological-reflections-on-units-of-analysis-in-dispersed-transformation-processes(89431a07-1245-4e28-9fd8-3162e52a5767).html

- Cooren, F. (2004). Textual Agency: How Texts Do Things in Organizational Settings. *Organization*, *11*(3), 373–393. http://doi.org/10.1177/1350508404041998

- Czarniawska-Joerges, B., & Hernes, T. (2005). *Actor-network theory and organizing*. Liber. Retrieved from http://www.cbspress.dk/Visning-af-titel.848.0.html?&cHash=1fde117f7e&ean=9788763001441

- Czarniawska-Joerges, B., & Sevón, G. (2005). *Global ideas: how ideas, objects and practices travel in a global economy* (Vol. 13). Copenhagen Business School Press.

- Law, J. (2002). Objects and Spaces. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *19*(5–6), 91–105. http://doi.org/10.1177/026327602761899165

- Law, J., & Hetherington, K. (2000). Materialities, spatialities, globalities. In *Knowledge, space, economy*. London ; New York: Routledge.

- Law, J., & Mol, A. (2008). Globalisation in practice: On the politics of boiling pigswill. *Geoforum*, *39*(1), 133–143. http://doi.org/10.1016/J.GEOFORUM.2006.08.010

- Law, J., & Moser, I. (2012). Contexts and Culling. *Science, Technology & Human Values*, *37*(4), 332–354. http://doi.org/10.1177/0162243911425055

- Moghadam, V. M. (2012). *Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement* (Second Edi). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Retrieved from http://www.amazon.com/Globalization-Social-Movements-Islamism-Feminism/dp/1442214198/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1430901335&sr=8-1&keywords=globalization+and+social+movements+second+edition

- Putnam, L. L. (2013). *Dialectics, Contradictions, and the Question of Agency: A Tribute to James R. Taylor*. *Organization and Organizing Materiality, Agency and Discourse*. http://doi.org/10.4324/9780203094471

- Robichaud, D., & Cooren, F. (2013). *Organization and organizing : materiality, agency, and discourse*. Routledge. Retrieved from https://books.google.dk/books?id=Vc_77LS14E0C&dq=978-0-415-52931-0&hl=da&source=gbs_navlinks_s

- Smith, J., Chatefield, C., & Pagnucco, R. (1997). *Transnational social movements and global politics* (1st ed). Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press. Retrieved from http://books.google.com/books?id=IpF2RlHxQiQC