digital underdogs: economic opportunity and the ‘ordinary’ city

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the meta-question...

Will the ‘digital economy’ more deeply entrench ‘digital divides’ or - with intentional (policy) intervention - are more ‘inclusive innovation’ pathways possible?

“The exact nature of the change will be determined by the social, political, and business choices that we make”

(Kenney & Zysman, 2016)
we need to know a lot more about the people & places – and people IN places - on the wrong side of the digital divide.
economic opportunity & the ‘digital divide’ in 4 cities
(Greensboro, US; London, Canada, St. Etienne, FR; Tilburg, NL):
3 analytical entry points & 3 research questions

1. spatial: mid-sized, ‘ordinary’ cities outside ‘digital corridors’

2. socio-technical: digital inequality & work
   ▪ literacy, skills, & tech career pathways (Lowe, 2008; Chapple, 2006; Giloth, 2004; OECD, 2017)
   ▪ entrepreneurship (Porter, 1997; Kauffman, 2016, OECD, 2017)

3. institutional: policy & local governance (Bradford & Bramwell, 2014; Benner & Pastor, 2015; Savitch & Kantor, 2002; Rodriguez-Pose, 2013; Gertler, 2013; Harrison & Glasmeier, 1997)

1. Creating digital opportunity?
   (tech-based innovation or conventional attraction strategies?)

2. Expanding digital opportunity? (inclusive development from within or talent attraction from elsewhere?)

3. Governing digital opportunity? (leverage policy & coordinate local efforts or fragmentation & competition?)
main findings

• policy and/or governance innovation in 3 out of 4 cases
  • Saint Etienne (innovation) – DesignTech
  • Greensboro (inclusion) – Innovate GSO
  • London (governance) – Community Economic Road Map

• but none are ‘success’ stories
  • variation in durability & impact
  • trade-offs – no instance of sustained local govt, nonprofit, business governance
  • changing civic leadership – driven by local government &/or non-profits
  • business participation weak

• ‘ordinary’ cities are not ‘resilient’
  • public policies with socio-spatial and socio-technical implications will fail without attention to local politics
Implications for understanding digital opportunity in Canada?

The Canadian (Ontario) case demonstrated the weakest performance on all 3 research questions.

There are a lot of ‘ordinary’ cities in Ontario ...
policy implications:  
‘ordinary’ cities can’t do it alone

• urban policy innovation is required alongside technological innovation

• governance challenges are due to a complex mix of economic structure, policy context, and local political choice

• urban policy innovation is hard - will fail without attention to local politics

• public policy needs to support local institutional capacity building
  • place-based policies
  • Inclusive innovation policies
  • build local policy capacity
  • incentives & disincentives to collaborate

BUT HOW?

Is one of the most pressing and wide open questions of our time ...