
Sharing tools and know-how: challenges and potential approaches for self-organized urban communities

Joanna Saad-Sulonen
Aarhus University
Centre for Participatory IT
Department of Computer Science
8200 Aarhus N, Denmark
jss@cs.au.dk

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Abstract

In this position paper I address the theme of designing for sharing in self-organized urban communities by bringing forward the aspect of sharing tools and know-how. I report the lessons learned from a case in Helsinki and open questions for discussion regarding some of the identified challenges and potentials.

Author Keywords

Toolkits; tools; urban; sharing practices; communities; self-organization; commons; DIT

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

Self-organized urban communities face many challenges when it comes to pulling together a set of relevant digital tools to support their activities: What tools out of the plethora of existing ones should they use? How not to reinvent the wheel every time they need a new feature or tool, while at the same time operating with scarce resources (time and money)? How to deal with issues of autonomy, privacy, maintenance and sustainability? Sharing tools, or even

simply information about them and the know-how associated with using them and tinkering with them would make sense. However, this is not an easy task. I report an attempt by the Helsinki Neighborhood Association (Helka ry¹) and researchers from the Aalto University at setting up a Citizen Toolkit in Helsinki. The project didn't succeed for several reasons, but it enabled discussion around the challenges and potentials of sharing tools and know-how for and by self-organized communities. I will present the main issues brought up in the project: 1) the issue of maintenance and sustainability, and 2) the need to define and better conceptualize what is needed. Both issues imply addressing the challenges of working together within and across communities as well as the need for boundary crossing between self-organized communities and authorities.

The Citizen Toolkit experiment in Helsinki

The project started with minimal external funding to enable Helka ry to set up a Citizen Toolkit on their Helsinki neighborhoods portal, kaupunginosat.net [2]. The aim of the project was to consolidate a collection of existing, freely available tools that support active urban citizenship and YIMBY (Yes In My Backyard) movements, such as the ones that have lately emerged en force in Helsinki (urban gardening, Cleaning Day, food sharing groups etc.;[1]). The collection of tools would be useful for citizens to self-organize around their issues of interest (e.g. by creating collections of locative information, documenting their environment, creating an augmented reality view of it). This collection of tools would complement the existing tools

¹ Helka ry is a NGO that provides a free platform on which many of the local neighbourhood websites in Helsinki run.

offered by the City of Helsinki, which caters for formal citizen participation, for example in urban planning.

A working version of the Citizen Toolkit [3] was ready at the beginning of 2013. The funding did not allow for much other than setting up an area on the kaupunginosat.net portal with a collection of five tools that Helka ry and researchers could quickly put together because they had documented cases of their use and sometimes even their design. Each tool had its own page on the toolkit with a link to its URL. Its use was explained as well as references to cases where it had been used. The toolkit would have a possibility for users to add new tools. However, because of the scarcity of the allocated resources and the limited IT personnel at Helka ry at that time, the feature was just advertised but not implemented. Later, we also quickly set up another prototype using the online content curating Scoop.it platform [4] to propose a way to overcome the challenges the kaupunginosat.net platform had related to maintenance and the addition of new tools. We also organized a series of workshop where we invited city activists and representatives from the City of Helsinki. The workshops were always built around the Citizen Toolkit prototypes, which we used as props to stir discussion. We later also interviewed some of the activists.

The issue of maintenance and sustainability

Maintaining any kind of toolkit is difficult. It requires people who would take it as their responsibility. Even more difficult is to document one's use of the tools and the lessons learned. As many of the activists have said, these things require time, and time is scarce for the volunteer. One of the city activists interviewed mentioned that if he would come to need a particular

In parallel to our work on the Citizen Toolkit, a group of city activists, Prototype Helsinki, had received funding to create what they have labeled "The Guide for City Activism"[6], where they presented information and advice on how to engage in citizen activism in Helsinki. The guide was published as an online PDF document and contained a foreword by the deputy mayor as well as links to the kaupunginosat.net Citizen Toolkit. In turn, we included the guide as one of the tools in the Scoop.it Citizen Toolkit prototype.

tool for his community activism work, he would just write a post on Facebook asking his network there for suggestions. This led us to speculate in one workshop on having a toolkit that would be distributed over social media. Such an approach can be supported by the use of hashtags, as a means of categorizing posts where relevant tools are mentioned. A #DIYcity was proposed by the participants of the workshop, but even after some test uses, the hashtag was not adopted.

Defining what is needed

The city activists that we have interacted with said that having a place where all relevant tools are listed, and where new tools can be easily added is good and relevant, so they did see a need for something like the Citizen Toolkit. At the same time, they had trouble relating to many aspects in both prototypes. First, for many of them, the use of the term "citizen" was problematic. They don't refer to themselves as "citizens" and felt that it is a term that authorities use (or indeed us researchers). They rather saw themselves as urban culture activists who are contributing to changing Helsinki for the better. No definite alternative for the name was suggested though.

Second, it became clear in the workshops and interviews that even though the activists we interacted with (local neighborhood communities, the Cleaning Day initiative, Helsinki time banking, Prototype Helsinki) do need tools for supporting their self-organized activities, they also very much need a better understanding of the way city authorities work and how their own work can interface with existing official processes. They all wanted some kind of collaboration with authorities, especially to overcome the difficulties many of them had encountered so far. Often authorities

don't know how to deal with or even categorize these 'new' actors. What is then that should be shared and for what purpose - tools that support self-organization or/and information about the way the city works, or something else? Who is involved in sharing - city activists along with authorities?

Discussion

Despite the shortcomings of our top-down Citizen Toolkit, we can pinpoint the following results. First, there is a need to develop sustainable practices related to knowledge sharing within the self-organized urban communities and across them. The Guide for City Activism (see info box on left) and the information in the Citizen Toolkit prototype are not enough as they remained in the domain of time-constrained funded projects and did not feed the development of practices. Maybe we could think of a combination of developing a network of self-organized communities (as with the activist asking for suggestions on Facebook) and finding ways to make it easy to find information shared within this network (e.g. through the use of hashtags or similar means of easy categorization) as a way to conceptualize the required sharing practices? It is however still unclear if a network of like-minded communities can emerge around the issue of sharing tools and know-how. How to seed and maintain the required collaborative practices of sharing? Can the practices be created or helped to come to life, and if so, how? How to archive the shared information and know-how so that it can be easily accessed by others later on? Does it always in this day and age have to be yet another Facebook group, or a Twitter hashtag?

Second, the expressed desire to interact with authorities and the need to understand one's activities

with respect to official processes prompt us to suggest a role for collaboration across the citizen/authorities boundaries when it comes to sharing tools and know-how related to acting in and for the city. This is challenging as it means the need to develop the bigger picture of how this engagement with one's city can take place: it can either be introduced by government and is then a top-down invitation for participation, and it can also happen at the grassroots level, through citizen self-organization. These two approaches can meet in the middle if a co-governance model is followed[7]. However, how can the sharing of information, know-how, and even tools happen in practice across the authorities/citizens divide? It is now difficult for authorities to define what self-organized urban communities are and how they could act as partners instead of just being 'citizens'. What types of legal and organizational structures (e.g. similar or beyond companies, not for profit, co-ops?) are needed for sharing and do-it-together (DIT) to happen? Could there even be a role for authorities (albeit in democratic settings), e.g. as providers of infrastructure or building blocks for urban communities to operate with? Most importantly, there is a need for a change in mentalities on both sides in order to view the other side as equal partners with whom to work collaboratively.

Active and self-organized communities are at the forefront of testing new grounds when it comes to choosing, testing, and even specifying new mundane technologies. However, sharing digital tools and know-how about them is not really taking place in Helsinki, even though it is something that would be needed as all kinds of ways of operating in the world now take place in the digital realm and we need to learn together how

to operate there. Design for sharing is a relevant area of investigation if we keep in mind the need to engage communities as well as authorities, and that the object of such design is many. There is a need to explore the design of technologies of/for sharing, but also the design of practices and even a culture of sharing. A 'commons' approach might provide a relevant framework for exploring the conceptual and operational space of design for sharing by providing insight into the successful and collaborative sharing of any type of shared resources [5].

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