Facilitating community innovation: The Outils-Réseaux Way

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INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, individuals, groups and communities are participating actively in the process of technological innovation. Indeed, the novelty of Web 2.0 technologies and platforms appears to lie in the fact that the user has the possibility to produce - and not just consult - a vast array of content and tools (O'Reilly, 2005; Proulx, 2007; Millerand, Proulx & Rueff, 2010). While users are becoming more and more aware of their ability to make and change technologies to better serve their needs or preferences, participation does not occur automatically for most people.

Embracing the 'participatory culture' associated with Web 2.0 tools and practices (Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b) implies not so much learning how to use participatory tools (like wikis) - since they are relatively easy to handle - as learning how to create, produce and work *collaboratively* in a networked environment. While traditional views of technology development suggest distinct roles for designers and users (i.e. developing the system *versus* using it), this conventional distinction tends to dissolve with Web 2.0 platforms and tools, as different applications and information from various sources are imported, personalized and combined by users themselves, leading to user-led or community-led innovations in which both the tools and their uses emerge simultaneously (Bruns, 2008; Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b; Mackay et al., 2000; Millerand & Baker, 2010; Millerand et al, 2010; Von Hippel, 2005). Thus, the potential of these new technologies and their uses for civic engagement and creative expression seems to rely heavily on the users' capacity (both as individuals and as a collective) to engage in collaborative practices as well as in a hybrid 'user-designer' role (Fleischmann, 2006).

This paper discusses the work of a group whose mission is to encourage the development and use of collaborative tools by associative movements. *Outils-Réseaux*'s approach to software and tool development focuses on accompanying and training the groups it works with rather than simply providing technical solutions. Use of collaborative tools by a group is viewed as secondary, and subsequent, to a group's experience with cooperation. The article focuses in particular on a recent experiment among a group of citizens in Brest, France.

Drawing on qualitative research inspired by the principles of grounded theory, we reflect on how an *Outils-Réseaux* training program for group facilitators participates in community innovation, where the community itself is an essential element of the innovation. We explore the coevolution of both technical infrastructure (tools for collaboration) and the community, and show how *Outils-Réseaux* mediates between the (social) world of users and the technical world of software developers in three ways. First, *Outils-Réseaux* uses a 'trickle-down-meeting-bottom-up' strategy in targeting group facilitators rather than the ordinary members of community groups for its training program. In this, it follows a two-step flow information model where facilitators are expected to share their understanding with the groups they guide. Second, training program participants are defined as 'codesigners', as they are trained to choose and customize their tools as well as to experiment with them in practice - following a learning by doing philosophy within a 'logic of attention' specific to *Outils-Réseaux*'s approach. Third, a 'lego approach' to systems development allows for modularity in enabling multiple combinations to fit the singularity of each situation, recognizing the diversity of competencies among participants on one hand, and a potential multiplier effect in networking singular pockets of innovation on the other.