

EDITORIAL

From smart cities to wise cities

In February 2020, the International Data Corporation (IDC), an influential market research firm, predicted that global spending on smart cities would reach \$124 billion by the end of the year. The company noted that this represented a 19% increase on 2019 spending and that the priorities for investment were expected to include ‘advanced’ public transit, intelligent traffic management, smart lighting and data-driven public safety.

In a more recent study of tech trends, one that notes an overall increase of 12% in self-reported consumer spending on tech products during 2020, the IDC claims that ‘2020 was a year of fascinating change in the tech space as COVID-19 ... benefitted tech at every turn’. It seems clear that with lockdowns and numerous restrictions on face-to-face meetings internet-enabled devices became a lifeline for many people.

So there we have it. Global spending on smart cities, already soaring upwards, has now been given a rocket boost by the COVID-19 pandemic. This shift has encouraged enthusiasts for Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to wax lyrical about the way the increasingly sophisticated Internet of Things (IoT) will transform cities in the next few years. What's not to like?

1 | ARE SMART CITIES DELIVERING WHAT WE WANT?

It may seem churlish to question these developments. However, given the astonishing sums involved, not to mention the rapid pace of technological change and uncertainty about the impacts of IoT on the quality of life of people actually living in cities, I want to encourage more critical reflection on what being a ‘smart city’ might now mean.

Are the benefits of smart cities strategies all they are cracked up to be? Who is gaining and who is losing as a result of these innovations? More ambitiously, do we need to move beyond traditional smart cities thinking?

In raising these questions I am following in the footsteps of David Cleevly who asked the following question in these pages last year: ‘Why are smart cities proving to be so hard to deliver?’ [1]. He makes a number of thoughtful observations

and rightly highlights the need to pay more attention to the development of suitable governance arrangements and business models to guide smart cities efforts.

2 | REVISITING THE MEANING OF SMART CITIES

Readers of this journal know well enough that the term ‘smart cities’ can be confusing and that it is certainly contested. It follows that it is useful to revisit a fundamental question from time to time and ask: What do we actually mean by smart cities?

Some may claim that a smart city is simply one that uses electronic methods and sensors to collect data that can then be used to guide decision-making. Critics of technology-driven change will view such a stance as naïve, betraying at best a poor understanding of power relations in the modern city. Some of them will argue that the phrase smart city is best understood as a clever marketing concept designed to promote the interests of the major ICT companies who have a vested interest in selling their products and capturing personal data about citizens.

These concerns about the role of big ICT companies in smart cities initiatives cannot be readily dismissed. For example, in her book, ‘The Age of Surveillance Capitalism’ (2019) [2], Shoshana Zuboff shows how enormously powerful high-tech companies, such as Google and Facebook, have developed sophisticated ways of extracting profit from our personal data.

In relation to smart cities initiatives, Zuboff is particularly concerned that Alphabet Inc, the parent company of Google, is now actively working to introduce ‘for-profit’ models of data gathering in collaboration with particular cities. She fears that, quite apart from the worrying invasion of privacy arising from the introduction of hidden surveillance systems in some cities, public assets and government information are being reborn as raw material that can be exploited by commercial companies for private gain. In essence, she fears that the digital public realm is being manipulated and misused by private power.

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3 | DIGITAL DANGER ZONES

Chapter 11 in my book, ‘Leading the Inclusive City’ (2015) [3], unpacks smart cities rhetoric and identifies a number of ‘digital danger zones’ that need to be avoided. Allow me to mention just three of them here.

First up, as already mentioned, is the invasion of privacy. The COVID-19 pandemic has, unfortunately, heightened concerns about this aspect of smart cities practice. Across the world there has, during this last year or so, been a remarkable upsurge in digital surveillance. It is not just civil liberties campaigners who are concerned that steps taken to enhance citizen monitoring during a crisis can result in intrusive surveillance being left in place long after a given emergency has passed. Can policy makers come up with robust safeguards to protect our rights to privacy?

Second, where is the evidence showing that smart cities efforts have improved the quality of urban democracy? On the plus side there are now many studies showing that e-government has delivered significant benefits for citizens—for example, improved public access to public services and online access to city council and other public meetings. However, evidence demonstrating that e-democracy is strengthening citizen empowerment still appears to be thin on the ground. This becomes a more important issue when it is recognised that public trust in governments appears to be in decline in more than a few countries. Can new smart cities initiatives be developed that strengthen the role of citizens in policy formulation? Can situated software be co-created with local actors in a way that strengthens the decision-making power of place-based communities living in particular neighbourhoods within cities? In short, can smart cities initiatives be developed that help to revitalise local democracy?

Third, we have the acute problem of the digital divide. Again, the calamity of COVID-19 has exacerbated this concern. It has been well known for years that poor families and communities suffer a double digital disadvantage. As Karen Mossberger and her colleagues explained in their book, ‘Digital Citizenship: The Internet, Society and Participation’ (2008) [4], poor people tend to have unsatisfactory access to the Internet and, in addition, they tend to lack the skills needed to make use of online resources. This double disadvantage remains firmly in place in most cities and needs to be addressed.

4 | FROM SMART CITIES TO WISE JUDGEMENT

The discussion presented here is not intended to undermine the value of smart cities thinking or to discourage smart cities experiments and innovation. Rather, my aim is to encourage a more critical approach to the subject and, in particular, to stimulate more penetrating consideration of the question: Who is gaining?

The distributional effects of smart cities policies are not being given sufficient attention in academic research or smart cities practice. Worse than that, much writing on smart cities is dominated by case studies that appear, at times, to be little

more than place-marketing literature, almost in the category ‘Look how good we are’.

A possible way forward for scholarship and practice is for much more attention to be given to the governance of smart cities efforts. In my new book, ‘Cities and Communities Beyond COVID-19. How Local Leadership Can Change Our Future for the Better’ (2020) [5], I argue that the central challenge to emerge from the COVID-19 crisis facing societies today goes well beyond public health, economics or, indeed, any specific policy area—it concerns how to make radical improvements to the way we govern ourselves.

Advances in ICT can, in my view, make an important contribution to improving the quality of governance and, in particular, urban governance. But to do this, the focus of attention needs to be on judgement. Acquiring zettabytes, or even yottabytes, of data about human and technical interactions in cities is not going to enhance the quality of life in cities in the absence of wise judgement about what really matters.

Judgement involves thoughtful consideration about future possibilities. It needs to be informed by sound values, it requires imagination and creativity and, in a democratic society, it needs to be underpinned by inclusive, participatory decision-making processes.

The good news is that many civic leaders—in political roles, in public service positions, in businesses, in trade unions, in academia and in civil society more broadly—recognise the importance of reaching agreement on the core values that can then guide the development of their cities and city regions. The Bristol One City Approach, developed over the last five years, provides a good example of inclusive city governance in action [6].

Cities across the world now face four major challenges at once: (1) The COVID-19 health emergency; (2) A sharp economic downturn arising from the pandemic; (3) A growing climate emergency; and (4) An unacceptable growth in social, economic and racial inequality. To address these challenges successfully, we may need to step beyond traditional smart cities thinking and pay more attention to how to co-create wise cities.

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