

Title: Mobilising the values of citizens in grassroots innovation: the case of online free reuse groups

Summary

New conceptual tools are needed within socio-technical transitions theory to explain the role of values in the development, diffusion and impacts of grassroots innovations. We report ongoing research developing a framework for analysing how citizen's values are mobilised within grassroots innovations, drawing on an empirical study of free reuse groups. The case study applies a mixed-method approach integrating insights from a survey measuring the values of citizens participating in free reuse groups and an ethnographic study of how these values are mobilised. We find that free reuse groups mobilise citizens with diverse values, including citizens with pro-social values that are typical of the general population. This in turn has implications for theorising the role of values in the diffusion of grassroots innovations. Furthermore, we believe the role of values merits closer attention in transitions theory: values underpin agency and can have a powerful role in motivating and hindering change.

Extended abstract

It has long been recognised that the systems of production and consumption in industrialised consumerist societies are unsustainable. However, many questions remain regarding how and why we are locked into these unsustainable systems, what a transition to more sustainable systems might look like, and how such a transition might take place (Vergragt et al., 2014). Research in the field of socio-technical transitions has tended to focus on the potential of technological innovations and the market economy to drive the transition to a sustainable society (Markard et al., 2012, Smith et al., 2010). However, there is now growing interest in civil society as an overlooked site from which grassroots social innovations may emerge (Seyfang and Smith, 2007). Existing socio-technical transitions theory does not address the central role played by values in the processes of grassroots innovation. Hence, we suggest that new conceptual tools are needed to explain the role of values in the development, diffusion and impacts of grassroots innovations.

Seyfang and Smith (2007: 585) "use the term 'grassroots innovations' to describe networks of activists and organisations generating novel bottom-up solutions for sustainable development; solutions that respond to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved". To date grassroots innovation research has focussed on the dynamics of international and national networks of social economy and civil society actors engaged in societal experiments (Vergragt et al., 2014). Such societal experiments explore alternative configurations of production and consumption systems and include local grassroots action to establish community energy systems (Hargreaves et al., 2013), cohousing provision (Boyer, 2014), community currencies (Seyfang and Longhurst, 2013a, Seyfang and Longhurst, 2013b), local food production systems (Kirwan et al., 2013) and transition towns (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012). Grassroots innovation research has tended to draw upon frameworks from socio-technical transitions theory originally developed to explain the dynamics of technological innovation - e.g. niche development theory (Geels and Raven, 2006) - in terms of selection pressures and competitive performance within the market economy.

Hence, it is unsurprising that the central role of values in grassroots innovations has been acknowledged but remains to be explicitly conceptualised. As Seyfang and Smith (2007: 599) note “Grassroots initiatives exhibit their own micro-politics and can be exclusive to some and inclusive to others. Much work needs to be done regarding ‘whose’ alternative values are being mobilised in niches”.

In our ongoing research we develop a provisional framework for analysing how societal experiments within grassroots innovations respond to and mobilise the values of the citizens involved. This framework necessarily spans two scales of analysis: (1) the individual scale – exploring which values are held by citizens participating in societal experiments; and (2) the collective scale - at which citizen’s values are mobilised within societal experiments. In the provisional framework we integrate established theory from social psychology on basic values (Schwartz et al., 2012) and sociological theory on the collective enactment of values (Chen et al., 2013). We apply and evaluate this framework through a case study exploring the role of values in online free reuse groups such as Freecycle. These groups have millions of members across the world (Freecycle, 2014, Freegle, 2014) and enable people to freely and directly give unwanted items to others in their local area (rather than throwing the item away). Furthermore, online free reuse groups enable a form of collaborative consumption (Botsman and Rogers, 2011), and hold potential to reduce consumption and waste by promoting reuse and extending product lifetimes.

We applied and evaluated the provisional framework using a mixed methods approach integrating two parallel strands of research activity: (1) the measurement of the values of citizens who participate in free reuse groups using an online survey; (2) an exploration of how values are mobilised within free reuse groups using an ethnographic approach. The survey ran in October 2014 and received 2692 responses. The central component of the survey was the Portrait Values Questionnaire (Schwartz, 2006) consisting of 21 questions which measure the emphasis placed by an individual on ten basic values. We conducted the qualitative strand of research between May and November 2014, collecting and analysing three datasets: (1) recordings of 13 semi-structured interviews with the activists who facilitate and promote free reuse groups; (2) online observations (Boellstorff et al., 2012) made by the first author who acted as a volunteer within a free reuse group ; and (3) online data from free reuse groups.

We are currently in the process of analysing the data collected. If this abstract is accepted we will report the final results and conclusions at the Ecological Economics conference. However, based on our initial analysis we find that free reuse groups mobilise citizens with diverse values, including citizens with pro-social values that are typical of the general population. This in turn has implications for theorising the role of values in the diffusion and adoption of grassroots innovations. Inferring more generally, we believe that the role of values merits closer attention in transitions theory: values underpin agency and can have a powerful role in both motivating and hindering change. For example, future research might consider which values are enacted and propagated by the prevailing regimes (Geels, 2005), and explore how these dynamics might limit or open up opportunities for grassroots and other forms of innovation.

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