NEW FORMS OF ORGANIZING IN TIMES OF CRISIS:

A HACKATHON TO PROMOTE OPEN SOCIAL INNOVATION

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INTRODUCTION

Our societies face unprecedented challenges as regards its future viability. COVID-19 has further revealed this circumstance and in many ways aggravated existing social problems, or made them particularly urgent. COVIC-19 is the archetype of a crisis: A crisis is an exogenous shock. It is a complex, overwhelming event affecting all societal domains and questions practices we took granted. High uncertainty accompanies any resolution of the crisis, and the actions societal actors take constitute a turning point – for "the better or worse" (Coombs, 2010; Fink, 1986: 15; Micellota et al., 2017). As a crisis rips apart the fabric holding society together societal fabric, the urgency and stakes may cause actors to draw on alternative and novel forms of organizing to mend holes in the fabric if not alter its shape and function (Mair and Rathert, 2019; Rao and Greve, 2017).

This urgency also applies to governments, whose actions are critical for resolving crisis. The German Government accepted a proposal of arms-length governmental and civil society organizations to organize the #WirVsVirus [#WeAgainstVirus] hackathon. Germany's lack of progress in digitalization and agencies' embodying the ideal type of Weber's bureaucracy constitute a fertile soil to experiment with this novel form of organizing mobilizing a large number of diverse actors to rapidly enhance social problem solving. The results: 42.968 signed up for the hackathon and 26.581 participated – the largest hackathon the world has seen to this date. Participants generated 1.494 project ideas, from which a jury pre-selected a best project list of 197 entries and awarded 20 projects from this list. The hackathon has now been completed, the best projects have been selected and now is the time for them to develop further, establish formal structures and create real impact.

Arguably, the idea that governments can on open up to collaborating with civil society and business is not new. Indeed, open government and innovation literature documented that formats such as innovation tournaments are viable instruments to arrive at solutions (Hilgers and Ihl, 2010). The advantages: First, mobilizing external actors allows for rapidly scanning the solutions space (Afuah and Tucci, 2012). Second, opening up in times of crises enables government to mobilize societal resources which would otherwise remain idle (Bauer and Gegenhuber, 2015). At the same time, screening of ideas comes with considerable costs and organizations often face the challenge to absorb ideas outside their organizational boundaries (Lifshitz-Assaf, 2018).

Hackathons are fluid forms of organizing emphasizing flexibility and self-organizing to rapidly develop prototypes (Trainer, 2016). While originating in the private sector, also governmental agencies use hackathons foster innovation. For instance, the NSF used a hackathon bring together cyberinfrastructure/data visualization with polar research communities (Johnston, 2014). However, utilizing hackathon beyond pure technological domains is less explored. As this organizing practice expands into civic domains, critical questions arise. Vakil (2018) document how a hackathon aimed at resolving societal issues reproduced equality; i.e. despite having similar solutions, the solutions of less privileged kids were neglected in favor of a solution from kids with privileged background. Another source of criticism whether applying organizing practices originating in Silicon-Valley to other domains (Bodrožić and Adler, 2018) are suitable for resolving societal issues at all. The concern is that the mindset that technology can resolve everything is too narrow to come up with solutions for complex societal problems (cf. Schrock, 2020).

Although the social innovation literature has paid such forms of "Open Social Innovation" (Chesbrough & Di Minin, 2014), this literature lends a repertoire to assess the viability for hackathons in general and the #wirvsvirus hackathon in particular for solving societal challenges. First, the Hackathon is a prime example of why "going it alone won't work" in social innovation (Phillips, 2017): it is likely that different viewpoints, competences and social contacts need to be brought in by the participants to move beyond solutions that we already have. Second, in particular the further development of potential social innovations will depend on an iterative process, in which new practices emerge, which shape the structures they are embedded in (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014). Third, as social innovations evolve the actors engaging in the process and the roles they are taking are likely to revolve. Civil society organizations are particularly important at the beginning of the process to sense needs and broker connections between actors, but as innovations mature often "more resourceful" actor from government or business are stepping in. Said differently, governmental agencies need to proactively embrace solutions to allow for scaling-up and transfer (Krlev 2018; Ometto et al., 2018).

Juxtaposing the insights from the openness literature (i.e. open government and innovation) with the social innovation literature, we set out to explore #wirvsvirus hackathon. We understand it an open social innovation process that begins with the open call for action, to the generation of ideas at the hackathon, the selection of the best ideas followed by the implementation of ideas. From being messy at the very beginning into a consolidation phase in which the best projects crystallize. We broadly ask, *how did the #wirvsvirus team organize the open social innovation process? What were challenges in this organizing process and what were the outcomes of this hackathon?*

The lack of research, combined with the unprecedented scale and urgency of the #wirvsvirus hackathon, warrants a qualitative, explorative grounded theory approach. Note that the object we study is still a moving target, as the post-Hackathon phase is still ongoing (e.g. the institutionalization of projects). Nevertheless, we think we can generate (preliminary) insights to our research question. In our analysis, we draw from a variety of data sources. These include our observations, online documents (e.g. announcements of organizers in the Slack Channel, video material released by the conveners on Youtube and Twitter communications),

media (i.e. reception from various media outlets) and internal documents the convers provided (e.g. results of the survey).

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