

Growth Entrepreneurship at the Margins: Digital Production and Innovation in Low-Income Contexts

Session Organisers: Nicolas Friederici, Mark Graham (Oxford Internet Institute)

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The geography of the globalized digital economy is “double-edged”: creative and coordinating functions of production are shaped by centripetal forces and are highly clustered (usually in Silicon Valley or urban centers in developed countries), while other value creation and distribution processes benefit from dispersion economies and can stretch across the globe (Malecki and Moriset 2007). This has led to vastly divergent geographies of digital consumption and production: most of the content and applications that are used in developing countries are actually produced in the Global North (Graham 2014).

Recently, however, low-income contexts have seen significant upgrades in Internet connectivity that has been paralleled by economic growth and a rising middle class. This has revived efforts to create local digital innovation and production centers, even in places with a weak incumbent digital economy.

While planning interventions such as technopoles, ICT incubators, and science parks have a history of several decades and are still favored in some policy circles, what is new is an increasing dominance of grassroots, entrepreneur-led, and urban approaches to local development. Success stories of fast-growing clusters, such as in Israel and Taiwan, have inspired a narrative that sees small communities of motivated, educated, and experienced entrepreneurs as drivers of regional and even national growth, while policy is relegated to a supporting and enabling function (Saxenian 2006; Feldman, Francis, and Bercovitz 2005).

This is not so different from the trajectory that innovation discourse has taken in countries and regions in the Global North. Technocratic and policy-oriented notions in national and regional development (such as knowledge spillovers, innovation systems, and clusters) dominated the 1990s and 2000s. But recently, academia and practice have instead become more interested in the individual- and local-level underpinnings of innovation. Concepts such as “buzz” (Storper and Venables 2004), the creative class (Florida 2005), entrepreneurial ecosystems (Pitelis 2012), startup communities (Feld 2012), or innovation districts (Katz and Bradley 2013) have gained in popularity far beyond scholarship, and it is safe to say that the “in” topics for geographical perspectives on innovation have become entrepreneurship and the city.

This session seeks to clarify where this leaves our understanding of where, why, and how digital innovation happens at Global Margins. Can we translate theories and concepts developed in the context of buzzing urban centers in North America and Europe to places like Harare and Kathmandu? Where do driven entrepreneurs come from if there is no legacy of entrepreneurship? What kinds of innovations and businesses can we expect to succeed? Does the potential of local digital production and innovation lie in job creation and economic growth through startups, or rather in small-scale, targeted innovations that are not commercially viable but fulfill an unmet user need? What is the role that development organizations play in this mix? Will we continue to see a highly uneven global digital innovation landscape, or rather a more evenly distributed one, with specialized, complementary production centers in different places?

We invite both theoretical and empirical contributions, ideally bridging multiple disciplines such as economic geography, innovation management, and development studies. Our focus is not squarely on developing or low-income countries, but generally on 'Global Margins,' that is, the people, places, and processes that have not been able to occupy central positions in transnational networks of digital production and value creation. Submissions discussing the African context are particularly encouraged.

Potential themes include but are not limited to the following:

- Comparative theories and concepts for geographies of digital entrepreneurship and innovation at Global Margins, capturing differences between cities, regions, and nations
- Legacies, path dependencies, and lock-in effects for digital innovation and entrepreneurship
- Differences in dispersion and agglomeration effects for distinct digital business models, innovation stages, specializations, etc.
- Evolution of entrepreneurial capacity and competence
- Dynamics of serial entrepreneurship, spin-offs, and role models
- Ecosystem perspectives; in particular tackling divisions of roles between investors, universities, innovation hubs, government agencies, etc.; and dynamic approaches studying effect chains and the chronology of ecosystems
- The effects of co-location and urban geography on knowledge exchange; and on sources, networks, directions of knowledge spillovers
- The role of the incumbent educational system and knowledge base
- The role of returning diaspora
- The role of entrepreneurial and labor mobility, and cross-cultural and transnational learning
- The roles of innovation interventions and infrastructure, such as broadband, tech innovation hubs, incubators, accelerators, makerspaces, co-working spaces
- Interplay of different sectors with digital economies, and the existence/role of a creative class
- Entrepreneurship culture and social desirability/acceptance within established socio-cultural norms
- Rural-urban divides in digital entrepreneurship and innovation
- Discourses of entrepreneurship, innovation, and "ecosystems" and the policies and practices that they drive
- The promised versus practiced effects of local digital production in global margins
- The types of exclusionary or inclusive development brought into being through digital innovation
- Reflections on the connections or discontinuities between entrepreneurship and innovation discourses and theories produced in economic centers and practices in economic margins

Please send your abstracts (no longer than 200 words) to Nicolas Friederici (nicolas.friederici@oii.ox.ac.uk) and Mark Graham (mark.graham@oii.ox.ac.uk) by April 15, 2015.

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