

The Design Challenge of Bridging Bottom-up Initiatives and Top-Down Governance

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Abstract

When people encounter problems in everyday life, they endowed with design capability organize themselves to make their situation more favourable. Their creativity and experiences are important resources for public service management and local community. However, some innovative activities are regarded by regional authorities as deviant ones that challenge the regulation of public sectors. How bottom-up initiatives can be reoriented to the scenario that would be appreciated and supported by local authorities remains an open question. In this paper, drawing from a pilot design project of community-based farming in Lihu residential community in Wuxi China, we aim to reflect on the challenge that designers may encounter when trying to gain support from local authorities in order to promote bottom-up initiatives, and further to provide some implications for the new design knowledge that designers should acquire as the mediator between bottom-up initiatives and top-down governance.

KEYWORDS: grassroots innovation, social innovation, co-production, public service, design knowledge

Introduction

When ordinary people face problems in everyday life, they endowed design capacities organize themselves to make their situation better. Such self-standing initiatives indicate the explicit demands of these people that existing services fail to meet. The solutions responding to local situations and the value and interests of the communities involved offer a good opportunity for service designers to understand users more. Their creativity and knowledge opens up new possibilities for the public and mainstream society, and probably leads to new ways of being and living (Manzini, 2011). However, some bottom-up initiatives challenge the established regulations and fail to be compatible with the incumbent system of service design and delivery. How bottom-up initiatives can be reoriented to the scenario that would be appreciated and supported by local authorities remains an open question.

Traditional mode of service design and delivery should be altered responding to the grassroots innovation. A new concept in public service recently has swept all over the Europe. It is co-production that invites service users to design and deliver public service sharing the equal relationship with the professionals. This new approach is based on the ideology of democratic citizenship that encourages decentralized control by authorities, active participation of users, and mutual and reciprocal relationship between users and professionals. In China, a large amount of bottom-up initiatives take place in the places that lack desirable services. Some designers, who embrace the methodologies of *user-centered design* and *participatory design*, find where there are bottom-up initiatives, there are unfilled needs of users. And the creativity and knowledge of people open up new possibilities for local authorities who should learn from the people and encourage their participation. Therefore,

designers find it urgent and significant to build dialogues between users and authorities and to promote the bottom-up initiatives. However, local authorities are more dominated by central control and less attentive to the needs and capacities of users. Designers, serving as facilitators rather than sole creators, are suggested to bring the value of users to the authorities and public and to create democratic dialogue between authorities and users by using a set of design tools (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; Manzini, 2005). Many pilot design projects are illustrated that, by applying co-design design tools, designers succeed facilitating user participation and promoting dialogue among stakeholders (Meroni, 2007; Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011). However, the context of these projects is in European societies that may provide good conditions for citizen participation. As we know the political and social contexts of Chinese and European societies are different in many aspects. What would be the role of designers, in the interface between bottom-up initiatives and top-down governance, to orient the self-organized activities together with users to the scenario that would be supported by local authorities?

Based on this question, we piloted a design project of community-based farming in Lihu residential community in Wuxi, China. This project starts with the self-standing farming activities initiated by some elderly residents and later on forbidden by local authorities. Designers who were committed to design public service for Lihu community decided to develop farming service idea based on the bottom-up initiatives. Through co-design workshop, designers and some volunteering residents together oriented the bottom-up initiatives to a farming service concerning the shared interests of the public and authorities. And then designers communicated to local authorities the farming idea embodied with the value and capacities of residents. Unfortunately, designers neither succeeded to involve local authorities in the dialogue with residents nor to gain support for the farming activities.

The factors attributed to the failure of implementing the farming service, including the structure and system of current public sector and the limits of traditional design knowledge and skills of designers when they face the new challenge, are to be discussed in the paper. New design knowledge required in light of the communication with authorities and the complexity of public service design are to be suggested based on the project being discussed. Co-production approach with deep European roots provides a desirable picture of public service design and delivery for Chinese designers. However, regarding to the current political context in Chinese society, the application of the new approach requiring constant efforts could be started with small steps.

In all, this paper aims to reflect on the challenges that designers may encounter when trying to cross over the threshold of implement and further to provide some implications for the new design knowledge that designers should acquire as the mediator between bottom-up initiatives and top-down governance.



Figure 1 shows the design practices, significance and limits of designers during the process

Background

New public service

The concept co-production has swept in many European countries recently, which takes a marked turn towards ordinary people who are regarded as resources. People are placed as active contributors, rather than passive service receipts. It is not only about designing around the real needs of people, but engaging them to the service design and delivery. The game of innovation that alters from FOR people to WITH people implies the mindset that “celebrates the creativity of mankind by creating value at all levels”¹. Co-production concept regards ordinary people as the biggest untapped resources in the public service design and delivery systems. It is based on the belief that every human being endowed with a heritage of skills develops solution to deal with the problems of everyday life (Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011). People who pool different wisdom and skills based on individual lived experiences broaden and strengthen public services. It provides an alternative way that depends on the broader human capacities besides professional skills. In this sense, people are part of solutions rather than being part of the problems(Manzini, 2009).

The potential of co-production in service was realized in the late 1970s (Percy, 1984; Sharp, 1980; Whitaker, 1980). Recently, since the turn of 21st century, the interest in co-production of public services has reawakened in Europe, such as United Kingdom and Italy (Kelly, Mulgan, & Muers, 2002; Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011). Some London-based research and design institutions, like *Nef*² (Boyle, Slay, & Stephens, 2010) and *Red*³(Burns, Cottam, Vanstone, & Winhall, 2006), reported many cases about what they have done to tackle social and economic issues by involving citizens in the process of planning and delivering services in the fields of health care, education, judicial administration, and aging caring. The

¹ From Copenhagen Co’creation event 2009.[<http://copenhagencocreation.com>]

² Founded in 1986 by the leaders of The Other Economic Summit (TOES), *Nef*(the new economics foundation) is an independent think-and-do tank that inspires and demonstrates real economic well-being.

³ Set up in 2004 by the Design Council, *Red* has run projects focusing on preventing ill health, managing chronic disease, reducing carbon emissions from our homes, strengthening citizenship, reducing re-offending by prisoners, and improving learning at school, by working with government departments, Local Authorities, frontline providers, the voluntary sector and private companies

work illustrates how co-production results a strong sense of responsibility of citizens for their own well-being and brings “intrinsic value” where “the act of participation is valuable in itself, quite apart from any value it may have in helping to achieve other good things”(Osmani, 2006).

The New Role of Designers

In the arena of new public service, rather than the sole creator, some designers suggest the emerging role as *facilitators* supporting design initiatives and as *mediators* promoting dialogues between stakeholders (Leadbeater, 2010; Manzini, Jégou, & Penin, 2008; Zuboff & Maxmin, 2002). In the environment where promising ideas initiated by ordinary people are already emerging, designers should no longer take the monopoly on design. Instead, they should learn to embrace the new role by applying and developing new design culture. As Manzini et al.(2008) suggested, designers should provide and develop design tools and modes, in order to collaborate with a wider range of stakeholders and professionals, to evoke and promote dialogues among each actor. By bringing the design skills such as giving vision of the possibilities and building scenarios of potential futures, designers function as facilitators to provide *enabling platforms* allowing people to be the designers of their own solutions (Manzini, 2005). Being part of the complex designing communities composed of experts, local authorities, users and their community and enterprises, designers are able to facilitate the collaboration and exchange of knowledge and information among each contributor (Zahedi, 2008).

Context of the Design Project

Lihu community The setting of design project is Lihu residential community on campus lived more than four-hundred university employees and their family members. This community is initially built as a temporary living place for the employees who live far away or the ones who have not bought any apartment yet. Thus, infrastructures are not available for the social or recreational lives of residents. It becomes a problem that many elderly retired residents have very few things to do. Later, a group of elderly people tactically experimented farming in the vacant land near the river, aiming to change their existing lives into preferred ones. Imposed with the constraints of physical context, they selected the most possible solution by making use of the existing resources. Unfortunately, the bottom-up initiatives that challenged the strategy and tolerance of regional authorities had been forbidden. The residents planted vegetables in the land where rows of young trees were strategically planted. Also some residents used smelly organic fertilizers that other residents complained about. The authorities posed posters first to force residents to clear the land with simply claiming that using land without permission was illegal. Some residents still continued to farm. Later, guards were sent to pull out the vegetables without informing the residents. Due to such enforcement, the residents stopped farming.

China is undergoing intensive economic and social change in the course of urbanization and modernization. A large amount of new or temporary communities appear lived many migrants moving from difference places. Unlike the residents in a good neighborhood who have evolved a caring relationship for each other and a strong willingness of contribution to the common good of the community, the ones living in the new or temporary communities rarely know each other, have very weak bond and care little for the community. On the other hand, these communities often fail to offer adequate or desirable services in many aspects relating to residents' daily lives.

Lihu community is one of them. Therefore, it is extremely important to build a mutual supportive network where residents care for each other and for the common good with a

sense of responsibility and of community. This is exactly what co-design design process can achieve.

Local authorities in Chinese society European political culture based on the ideology of democracy and citizenship may provide good conditions for the new public service approach that trusts positive results from the collaboration with citizens and decentralized control. But in China, politicians and authorities are only familiar with the top-down hierarchy and central control. The concept co-production evolved from Europe provides an almost opposite way of thinking and doing for the Chinese authorities. They, who may not learn the idea of *citizen*, usually regard ordinary people as drains or trouble makers. The fear for the bottom-up initiatives or self-organized activities is deeply rooted in the minds of Chinese authorities who deeply persist central control. Therefore, the promotion and application of co-production approach in Chinese society will face big challenge and resistance, which are to be discussed later in this paper.

Designers in co-design process

Learning the interests of residents and authorities

The self-standing farming activities of some elderly residents were simply regarded by regional authorities as deviant behaviors. However, through interviews, designers with the traditional sensitiveness and empathy with users found the problem residents faced, the demands they articulated and the capacities they displayed. In addition, designers learned that farming activities brought them a strong sense of self-achievement that they were able to produce fresh and safe food for their families, to prove they were not useless elderly retired people, and to interact more with neighbors. One woman at her fifty told designers:

I was very lonely when I was moving here. I was watching TV all the day because this place had nothing. Later, I found some people were farming. So I started to plant some vegetables. I liked this way. Every day I had things to take care. I could prove that I was not useless. But now, I was watching TV again.

On the other hand, from the interviews with local authorities and Pan, the head of Logistics Department of the university designers learned the reasons why they forbidden the farming activities: the potential trouble of using the land by people, perceived considerable input on service management, and messy layout of the farming land that made the environment disordered. The concerns of authorities would be communicated in the co-design workshop so that participants could develop a farming service idea that would have more possibilities to get approved by authorities.

Co-design workshop: supporting and growing the capacities of users

One round of co-design workshop with facilitating tools was conducted by inviting seven volunteering elderly residents who used to farming in Lihu community. The ideal process is to invite regional authorities as well. Unfortunately, none of them was interested in communicating with the residents or developing the community-based farming service. Due to the absence of authorities, their concerns and value were communicated to the residents by designers⁴. During the co-design workshop, the main tasks of designers were to develop the shared value between each participant, to bring the concerns of authorities and public

⁴ Designers thought they understood the concerns of authorities from the interviews. But actually they missed the key points, which will be discussed in “designers in the threshold of implement”.

interest to them, and to facilitate participants co-designing the farming service with a boarder public perspective.

In the beginning of the workshop, designers explicitly declared the aim of the workshop was for residents designing the farming service that could be well accepted by authorities. The significant role of the participants, as service planners, was emphasized that they had rich farming knowledge and experiences that would be fully respected and appreciated. One flag with a number was distributed to each participant so that each had strong awareness of his/her independent expression. Given a sense of responsibility and respect, the participants gradually became active contributors providing opinions and ideas.

Serving in the interface between the residents and authorities, designers addressed the concerns of authorities toward farming. All the seven participants expressed their empathetic understanding of the authorities and admitted about the inappropriate things that they had done, such as using smelly organic pesticide and planting vine that would stretch out to other land. Residents' previous farming activities had been mainly based on their self-interests and rarely considered the public interests. When planning the new farming service, public interests were considerably considered. For instance, many agreed that the service should require the least input from the public sector; one woman suggested the farming land could be like a garden where residents became gardeners contributing to the community environment.

In order to facilitate participants contributing their knowledge and skills to farming service planning, some design materials were provided as facilitating tools, including a geographic map, vegetable pictures, a set of farming equipment pictures, and related infrastructure pictures. Designers analyzed the data collected from the interviews and framed the key points of the farming service relating to organizational behaviors and infrastructure development as follows: irrigation system, the access and distribution process to the limited land, the co-use of equipment, suggested types of vegetables to be planted, infrastructure for resting and socializing, and social events relating to farming and harvest. With respect to each point, participants discussed the best ways of doing in the possible scenarios with the shared value with authorities and the community. For instance, participants designed the irrigation system in the given context that would require the least input. For not making any trouble to the public environment, they together made the not-to-plant list, including vines and the plants that were easy to attract insects (*as seen in Figure 2*).



Figure 2 shows that participants were discussing about the not-to-plant list in co-design workshop

Prototype: materializing the capacities of users

Based on the ideas that participants contributed, designers developed a service concept *Farming Garden* (as seen in Figure 3) that the farming land is constructed in a garden style. The farming activities of residents are no longer deviant ones, but welcoming contribution to the community landscape construction. The authorities plan the general layout of the garden and build fundamental infrastructures. The residents who take the responsibility of planting become gardeners. In this farming garden service, residents and authorities share the equal and reciprocal relationship in delivering the service for the community interests. With traditional design skills, designers visualized the possible future and materialized the capacities of participants.



Figure 3 shows the prototype of the *Farming Garden* as residents suggested: the location is chosen near the river in the northeast of the community; two small pools are located in the center of the garden as part of the irrigation system; the land is divided with small pieces of plant beds that are planted with specific plant types; a semi-public resting space is constructed for residents resting and socializing.

Designers in the threshold of implement

Before launching the pilot design project, professor Gong, one of the authors, has talked with Pan, the head of Logistics Department of the university and managed to get approved for School of Design to design public services for the university, including Lihu community. Though authorities did not participate in co-design workshop, they expressed their concerns during the interviews in a very willing way. After the design phase, professor Gong, on behalf of the design team, went to present the farming service idea to Pan by bringing the prototype. Gong communicated the problems that some residents faced, the shared value participants delivered in the farming idea, and their considerable concern for authorities that this farming idea required the least input from the authorities. Gong described the future scenario with the prototype, with the hope that Pan would gain a more concrete and vivid picture of the value of farming idea.

Unfortunately, not appearing interested in the visual representation at all, Pan rejected the community-based farming idea again without hesitation just as he did in the interviews with the design students. Reasons were explicitly expressed that the potential trouble residents may make, the uncontrolled greed about the land that residents may develop after they use the land for a period of time, and the expected vast amount of investment on the

management. In addition, community-based farming was totally new for Pan who did not see any interests for him or his department to take risk to accept the new idea.

However, Pan admitted they failed to deliver service for residents regarding their recreational and social lives. He decided to choose the traditional and safe way that was to build the fitness equipments in Lihu community just like any other residential community did in China. And surprisingly, Pan offered an opportunity for Gong to use the vacant land in Lihu community for his experimental service design projects targeting the betterment of community. Even farming activities by School of Design was not discouraged as long as residents did not participate. But after one month, Pan realized it was too dangerous to authorize School of Design to use the land and withdrew his offer.

It is clearly noted that Pan held skepticism about the credibility of designers in the field of public service and deep fear of the participation of residents. We can see that co-production services can be very awkward for authorities because some key parts of the traditional public service like central control and clear hierarchy between authorities and citizen are missing. The factors of local authorities attributed to the failure of implementing the service idea are stated as below:

- **Distrust in people:** one main challenge is the fear and uncertainty of authorities about sharing responsibility with people who are more regarded as *mobs* or free-riders(Barnes, Harrison, Mort, & Shardlow, 1999; Boyle, et al., 2010; Joshi & Moore, 2003; Mulgan, 1991). It would be assumed as inappropriate or dangerous to invite people who have neither capacities nor a sense of responsibility. They partially focus on the negative aspects of citizen participation. And they are more familiar with controlling and steering society instead of collaborating with citizens(Bovaird, 2007; King, Feltey, & Susel, 1998).
- **Traditional missions:** due to the boarder political system in China, the missions of authorities to innovate or deliver certain service are often closely related to the willingness to please one certain superior, to reach political achievement, or to grab newspaper headline. These missions will all be distraction from being committed to placing users at the center. Thus, an idea with high user value is difficult to gain interest or approved from the authorities.
- **Traditional evaluation system:** the traditional model of evaluating the success of certain service may not be able to capture the full output of the new public service (Boyle, et al., 2010). The improved social and mental well-being of residents or the increasing coalition among community is not seen by public authorities who are more focusing on the visible numbers, such as the number of patients that the doctor has each day, or the number of students achieving from A to C grades.
- **Hierarchical mechanism:** the top-down control mechanism of bureaucracies is a closed system that does not welcome the collaboration with people outside of the organization. Not only residents, also designers are difficult to participate. Co-production approach is found difficult to be compatible with the ways of thinking and doing in the incumbent organizations.

In addition to the factors of authorities attributed to the failure to implementing the farming service, or we can say, the failure of the collaboration between designers and authorities, the limits of knowledge and skills of design professionals should be reflected as well:

- **The credibility of designers:** Pan agreed Gong to do pilot service design project for university mainly due to Gong's credibility as a professor rather than his trust in the credibility of designers in the field of public service. For Pan, design professionals are more related to form givers despite Gong showed him the design work done in

previous service design projects. To what extent designers are trusted is directly related to how much impact of designers in the service design system.

- **Lack of the understanding of established regulations:** several interviews with local authorities do not help designers to get full understanding of the existing regulations or to empathize with the concerns of authorities. In spite of being informed the illegal right of using land, designers insist on the farming service concept which is related to one of the most sensitive issues in China. Actually, we can see Pan and his fellows are not as conservative as assumed. Besides the farming concept, other concepts albeit with user participation in designing and delivering may have more chances to be accepted by authorities at least at some extent. In the design process, designers attempt very hard to reorient the farming activities in the way that the worries of authorities can be dispelled to the largest extent, such as the prohibition of using smelly fertilizers or dangerous plants, or the minimal input from the authorities. But designers miss the key point of the fundamental legitimacy of using land that can be easily defined as inappropriate. In all, by better understanding their ways of thinking and doing and their interests and value, designers are less likely to introduce conflicting ideas and approaches that would challenge their tolerance to a great extent.
- **Over-optimism about users:** designers, who trained to be sensitive with the needs of users, often highly appreciate the design concept with high user value while they may neglect other pros and cons of the concept. In the farming design project, the insights of designers are limited to the advantages of citizen participation in designing and delivering service just as what some design scholars have positively argued. They do not see, or are not capable of predicting, the risks that are seen by authorities, such as the potential chaos that may be finally caused and uncontrolled greed that residents may finally raise. The simplification of the complexity of collaboratively delivering public service and management may lead to a happy and yet naïve story.
- **The designerly way of communicating:** As mentioned above, designers have the capacities to provide visual visions of the possibilities and to create scenarios of future solutions. And these visual artifacts could be as communication tools to create dialogues between each stakeholder (Franqueira, 2009; Manzini, 2005). But from the case, we find authorities are not interested in the prototype that displays the concrete and vivid picture of the idea. Authorities are more familiar with the language of numbers. In order to gain support from the authorities, what percent of residents who want farming may be more persuasive than the beautiful visual artifact that displays the future scenario.

Discussion

From the Lihu project, we can learn that though facing the design problem at the levels of systems and communities, designers, with little knowledge and experiences relating to farming, develop a farming service concept with the collaboration of the residents. In the design process, designers understand the needs and interests of users through interviews; they involve users who actively contribute their knowledge and skills in the co-design process; they facilitate users developing a boarder perspective for the common good of the community; they visualize the future solution by making the visual artifact. These formal design knowledge and skills that are taught in design schools and have developed from years of practices enable designers to deal with the problems of complex scale.

On the other hand, formal design knowledge is not adequate for designers to gain the support from authorities in the threshold of implement. As described in the previous chapter, designers fail to fully capture the regulation of organizations and to emphasize with the concerns of authorities. And the designerly way of communicating and displaying ideas may be far away from the best way for authorities who are not familiar with the design language. The cultural and functional legacy should be updated and new design knowledge should be learned when designers take the new role as promoters or mediator. Due to the diversity of settings, we only provide some implications for new design knowledge drawing on the specific design project being discussed in Chinese context:

- **Promote the capacity of designers to the public:** promoting the capacities of designers themselves to the public should be prior to promoting the one of users. Designers are new in the field of public service, so authorities and other stakeholders will be hesitate about the credibility of designers and the concepts and approaches designers propose and will be reluctant to collaborate with designers. Design school should play the key role to promote that designers are capable of solving problems at the levels of systems and services. Due to the limited channels that authorities learn about designers, talking directly with the right person in the organization may be a good way.
- **Expand communication skills:** visual skills that are designers' competence may embarrass them when they communicate with other stakeholders, especially the ones whom are trained with quantitative methods. The vivid story about the possible future may be less interesting and less persuasive than a set of numbers for authorities or businessmen. Besides the visual skills, designers should at least gain a comprehensive picture of quantitative methods and learn to use some of the methods when needed.
- **Empathize with other stakeholders as well:** now designers work as part of a complex designing community composed by many stakeholders with diverse expertise. As the mediator who serve creating dialogue among stakeholders, designers should empathize with all the stakeholders in the way in which they are trained to do with users. A good concept does not merely have high user value, but is the balancing composition of all the values.

The concept co-production is entirely new for Chinese public sectors. It provides the ideology that is almost opposite to Chinese authorities' ways of thinking and doing. It will be radical transformation that requires constant efforts from a large amount of people. We suggest that designers can start with small and easier steps, like bringing the value of users into the public and authorities. If the participation of designers in public service design becomes difficult, designers can work in their own way to provide the alternatives for public sectors or to influence them.

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