

Value and Values: The Political Economy of ICT Enhanced Collective Behaviour for Sustainable Degrowth

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visions or strategies for transformation

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Drawing from the ecological economic literature, Daly and Cobb (1994) identify three components to sustainability: sustainable scale, efficient allocation and equitable distribution. While the market can reasonably manage allocation, it cannot establish sustainable scale or equitable distribution.

While generally beneficial in limited context, most applications of ICTs operate within the prevailing socio-cultural context. The generation of collective behaviour, conversely, has the potential to transgress that socio-cultural context to operate on the ebb and flow of value structures and global relations of power and wealth. It is at this level where there exists the greatest potential to generate transformational change from ICTs.

At this level a significant groundswell of new and innovative approaches to apply ICTs for sustainability has emerged. Similar in approach yet divergent in objectives, collective awareness, collective intelligence, conscious awareness, planetary nervous system, human ecosystem, collective creativity, collective contagion, urban computing and other such terms are being widely, sometimes randomly, applied to activities that involve digital communications' ability to enable, facilitate and generate social group activity. An important factor that differentiates the applications of digital technologies to generate collective behaviour is the perspectives held by their users; the values applied and the objectives and goals which users seek to achieve.

At this higher-order level of operation, technologically-mediated collective behaviour has significantly more potential to affect human behaviour, and intends to operate on human values. A shift in these higher level structures will have a greater influence on lower level structures than the converse. Accordingly, a shift in values and social processes will have a greater impact on behaviors than a behavioral shift will have on values and social processes. However, that impact may be either towards or away from sustainable degrowth, depending on the values and goals applied to generate the collective behaviour.

Economic growth is an increase in the production and consumption of goods and services and is a function of population times per capita consumption. Growth inherently raises the concept of scale, particularly sustainable scale and at what level this might be realised. Evidence strongly implies the current scale of the economy must be reduced to achieve sustainability.

Furthermore, data and information is never value neutral. It may serve to inform and

enlighten...or it may serve to discredit, confuse, misdirect, mislead, or promote one specific social objective or another. Those with the greatest power and wealth, for example, may use information to maintain the status quo and their positions of prestige.

Market globalisation is the increasing creep of market fundamentals into the globally pervasive allocation and distribution of societies wealth. In this environment, dominant social messages reinforced by powerful political interests encourage materialistic values. These messages reflect beliefs in the mechanistic predictable functioning and control of the natural world, social relations and economic structures. Structures that support competition, greed, individual self-interest, materialism, inequality and hierarchies are rewarded. This has led to the perverse behaviour of economic growth as its own objective, resulting in accelerated material and energy demands along with increased social disparities between and across nations.

Under market globalisation, a dominant class appropriates a disproportionate amount of social wealth and exercises this in the form of political power to strengthen their position. Simultaneously, materially affluent nations expropriate a similarly disproportionate amount of natural wealth to perpetuate fundamentally unsustainable (both in a material and social sense) lifestyles.

There is now rising concern that the advance of ICTs has continued to focus on specific technologies, efficiencies and industries to stimulate these wealth inequalities to more or less perpetuate the status quo. Despite expectations for the widespread application of ICTs for sustainability purposes, key messages and social structures function to reinforce the status quo.

In a study of 1800 students across 15 nations, Grouzet et al (2005) mapped the importance of a variety of life goals. They found that the goals of financial success, popularity and image tend to cluster together. Schwartz (2006) has found similar relationships to power and wealth. The implication is that if one of these extrinsic or materialistic goals is prioritised, so too are the other goals in that quadrant. Similarly, the goals of community, spirituality, sharing, universality, benevolence and cooperation also tend to cluster together, with the subsequent outcome by prioritising any of these goals.

It is hypothesized that as ICT-generated collective behaviour emphasises materialistic goals such as financial efficiency, growth or competition, the result will be to generate behaviour consistent with other extrinsic goals and therefore produce outcomes that reinforce the status quo. Conversely, if the goals promoted are values related to sharing, cooperation and equality, the derived behaviour may function to support degrowth. In either case, the collective behaviour response, as it is acting on higher level values, could be very powerful indeed.

ICTs inherently enable openness, distributiveness, efficiency, sharing, cooperation, complexity, collaboration and empathy. Simultaneously, there is no reason ICTs cannot be applied to enhance competition, materialism, financial gain, image and market efficiency. Indeed, we can identify many cases where both sets of values have been successfully promoted (although not necessarily simultaneously) through ICT-mediated collective behaviour.

Values of market globalisation include competition, hierarchy, control structures, growth, proprietary self-interest, rationality and objectivity. However, these values operate in conflict with degrowth - whether ecological sustainability or social equity. It therefore seems reasonable to assume ICT-mediated behaviour that intends to achieve the values and goals of market globalisation will lead away from degrowth, while ICT-mediated behaviours that promote and prioritise community, universality and benevolence may help foster degrowth.

If collective behaviour is to support degrowth for ecological sustainability and social equity it may have to embed key values, including distributiveness, sharing, collaboration, equity and sustainable scale. While the market can reasonably navigate efficiency, it has only weak ability to address scale and distribution (equity). Therefore, a market globalisation approach to collective behaviour is unlikely to provide much progress towards degrowth.

The emergence of ICT-mediated collective behaviour provides a potentially powerful force to generate a rapidly diffusing global sustainable degrowth behaviour. However, there remains no cohesive structure to the set of values that will help guide that behaviour. This suggests ICT-mediated collective behaviour presents both a huge opportunity and a risk to sustainable degrowth - with solutions that rest more in social discourse and political economy than in technology.

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