Digital urban development - How large digital corporations shape the field of urban governance (DIGI-GOV)

Project summary

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Digi-Gov is a research project that aims to understand (I) the role of large digital corporations (LDCs) in digital urban development, (II) how the presence of LDCs in urban planning practice challenges pre-existing modes of urban governance, and (III) how LDC-led urban development constitutes a new relational geography of digital cities. Digi-Gov is thus a chance to call international scholarly attention to, and raise awareness among local practitioners concerning, this critical shift in the ways that contemporary digital cities are constructed, planned, mediated, and governed. Digi-Gov expands on prior research that examined Alphabet Inc.'s digital city project in Toronto that raised a number of important issues for urban planners, development practitioners, and urban studies scholars— even if this particular digital city project was ultimately unsuccessful. Digi-Gov expands this research because the range of services that LDCs provide has increased in both volume and centrality; more and more public and private institutions rely on these for essential digital infrastructures. There is an urgent need to study the trajectories of urbanization that are rolled out under the leadership of LDCs and the tensions in urban governance that are unleashed. Digi-Gov will shed light on four further cities in addition to Toronto, which have been challenged by the presence of LDCs—namely, Seattle, Arlington, Bissen, and Eemshaven. The selected cities are some of the few exemplary cases available where LDCs have secured their position in the local urban field. Through qualitative methodological approaches, Digi-Gov will tease out how these cities are relationally connected through LDC-led urban development, and what scholars and practitioners can learn from these experiences. Examined together, one can scratch at the surface of, and unearth, this new emerging relational geography.

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Digi-Gov was conceived as an expansion to “Digital Urbanism and the Challenge of Urban Governance (DIGI_URBGOV),” a project led by Constance Carr and Markus Hesse that examined Alphabet Inc.’s digital city endeavors in Toronto. In 2017, the peri-governmental body, Waterfront Toronto (WT) (Desfor & Laidley 2011), announced that it had procured Sidewalk Labs (SL)—one of Alphabet Inc.’s moonshot companies and sister to Google—to build a state-of-the-art digital city along its quayside (figure 1). The announcement unleashed a media storm worldwide (Carr & Hesse 2018), DIGI_URBGOV examined how this process unfolded and what the impacts were on Toronto’s pre-existing modes of urban planning and urban governance (Carr & Hesse 2019). This work was generously supported by DGeo, and the CITY Institute, York University.

Digi-Gov expands on this research because the range of services, platforms, technologies, and innovations offered by LDCs is increasing in both volume and centrality, as more and more institutions, public and private, rely on these for essential digital infrastructures. This trend impacts not only the palate of technologies that the future digital city might provide, it also challenges both urban governance and socio-political and intuitional patterns that characterize contemporary urbanity. The involvement of LDCs in urban planning is not without risks (ibid. 2019d; Goodman 2020) and the ramifications can be severe. There is thus an urgent need to understand how these processes progress, the trajectories of urbanization that LDCs are steering, and the associated risks for urban society, especially in regards to protecting both open markets and democratic process. Digi-Gov will examine further into LDC-led...
Urban studies scholars address this turn not by simply evaluating the pros and cons of a particular technology or assessing needs and matching solutions; Rather, they focus on the socio-political patterns and consequences that constitute this turn. The aim is to understand the relationships of urban development, urban planning practices and politics, and technological innovation. This literature is booming (Ash et al. 2016; Barnes 2020; Carr 2018, 2019a/b; Carr & Hesse 2020a/b; Coletta et al. 2019; Glasmeier & Christopherson 2015; Goodman 2019; Graham et al. 2019; Hajer 2015; Hollands 2008 2015; Karvonen et al. 2019; Karvonen et al. 2020; Kitchin 2015; Raco & Savini 2019; Shelton et al. 2015).

One of the major outputs of this body is the understanding of unexpected externalities of urban digitalization. Some say that it raises questions about the fundamental organization of urban space:

"The creation of smart cities raises a whole series of social, political and ethical questions. These include concerns about profit being placed before people and the environment, widening of inequalities between citizens, a loss of rights, and the erosion of democracy, fairness, justice and accountability, the privatisation of public assets and corporatization of surveillance, the application of predictive profiling and social sorting to deliver differentiated services, and a transfer of risk and liability form the private sector to the public sector. In turn this raises normative questions about what kind of city we want to live in" (Graham et al. 2019).

Some would rush to call such a standpoint as anti-tech; Others snap "Luddite!" However, this position is both strategically inaccurate and misses the point: The triangle of technology, urban planning and politics is not new nor trivial.
cites under growth pressure where local governments play a central role in urban planning. Emsenhaven and Bissen are examples of the hidden side (second text) of LDC-led digital urban development. They are smaller municipalities on the countryside that either house, or will house, the data centres required to keep LDC's operating. DIGI-GOV will tease out the various experiences, the different lessons learnt, and compare them contextually with one another.

Feel invited!

DIGI-GOV also foresees a series of Deep Dives on Digital Urban Development (D4-Urban) to catalyse international and transversal geography of information exchange on the topic of digital urbanization on governance. D4-Urban aims to animate an international idea exchange, bringing policy-makers, technology innovators, and urban planners/developers into conversation, ensuring further that social scientific observations and interpretations are set against the latest developments in the field.

Funded by the Luxembourg National Research Fund (FNR), DIGI-GOV examines challenges that are recognized by policy-making, such as,

- the European Commission (EC) priority “A Europe fit for the Digital Age” (EC 2020a)
- the EC strategy of “Shaping Europe’s Digital Future” (EC 2020b)
- Luxembourg’s mission of “harnessing digitalization […] as foundation for the future” (Digital Luxembourg 2020a, 2020b).

And yet, the research team of DIGI-GOV will remain dwarfed by the magnitude of LDC-led digital urban development. The research team thus hopes to inspire fellow scholars, policy-makers, and practitioners to keep in contact, get networked, and engage with us on this exciting research path.

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About the Principal Investigator

Dr. Constance Carr is a Senior Researcher in the Urban Studies Group led by Prof. Markus Hesse at the Department of Geography & Spatial Planning, University of Luxembourg. She has further affiliations as a Visiting Scholar at the CITY Institute, York University, and Invited Faculty at Paris Institute for Political Studies. Her aim is to explore broad questions about how spaces and flows constitute contemporary urban processes, with particular emphasis on the urban governance of market-led sustainable development practices and contradictions with respect to the digitalisation and corporatisation of cities. Find publications in Regional Studies, Planning Theory & Practice, European Planning Studies, Journal of Transport Geography, Urban Planning, and Environment and Planning C.

References


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