17.10 Commentary by Marc Steen

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17.10.1 A social perspective: On empowerment, flourishing, cooperation and creativity

Christensen discusses the concept of disruptive innovation in detail and with eloquence. He convincingly argues that most firms tend to focus on sustaining innovations—incrementally improving their products and services, aiming to serve the attractive higher end of their current customer base—and that they thus unintentionally, create opportunities for new entrants or new ventures of other firms. These new entrants or new ventures can introduce new products or services at the lower end of the market—offering a 'good enough' product for lower costs and for lower prices, serving people that are currently over-served (*low-end disruptions*), or offering 'good enough' products or services for new customers or new situations for consumption or usage (*new-market disruptions*). These new entrants or new ventures start at the lower end of a market and progressively move up through this market, and gradually conquer the established firms' businesses. Not by attacking them head-on, but by first taking a piece of the cake that nobody is really interested in, and then a next piece, and a next piece...

In this chapter (above), Christensen adopts a business perspective and focuses on economics and market dynamics. But for those who feel less comfortable with such economic and commercial vocabulary, you may rest assured that disruptive innovation is also about empowerment and promoting development, freedom and well-being, and about promoting processes of design thinking, cooperation and creativity.

Below, I will adopt a social perspective on disruptive innovation. I am not the first to do this. Christensen and his colleagues have discussed the role of disruptive innovation in bringing about positive social change (Christensen et al., 2006), focusing on education (Christensen et al., 2008) and health care (Christensen et al., 2009). They discuss examples of entrepreneurship in education in health care in which 'good enough' services—based on relatively cheap processes, for example, by using ICT—are provided to people who can not afford or use current services. For example, by offering affordable and reliable basic health advice in convenience stores or by offering high quality and cost-effective online courses for distance education.

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Marc Steen works as a senior scientist at research and innovation organization TNO in the Netherlands. He earned MSc, MTD and PhD degrees in Industrial Design Engineering at Delft University of Technology and has worked at Philips and KPN before joining TNO. His expertise is in human-centred design, co-design, open innovation and innovation management. His research interests include p...
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17.10.2 Empowering people at the 'base of the pyramid' to flourish

This reminds me of *Design for the real world* (Papanek, 1991), the book that first made me think about the roles that designers can play in bringing about positive social change, by focusing on developing products and services that meet real needs of real people, rather than producing more stuff for the affluent.

And it reminds me of serving the 'bottom of the pyramid' (Prahalad, 2004), which refers to the provisioning of products or services to large groups of relatively poor people—typically in developing countries—in order to both support these people to flourish, and to enable companies to make money by offering these products and services. This is done, preferably, by promoting local and social entrepreneurship, so that 'poor' people can become producers and partners (Immelt et al. 2009), rather than be treated as receivers or consumers. Promoting well-being, sustainable economic development and commercial success go hand in hand in this approach. A relatively large portion of our attention typically goes to serving the top of the pyramid, rather than serving the base. Individual people at the base may not have much to spend but their large number makes them an interesting target group. Developing products or services for the base of the pyramid is often a good example of disruptive innovation, since these are typically produced for lower costs and sold for lower prices than existing products or services.

This notion of serving the base of the pyramid (BoP) can be further developed using the *capability approach* (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011; see also Dong, 2008; Oosterlaken, 2009), which presents a framework to evaluate to what extent a specific BoP project actually contributes to people's development and social change.

The capability approach was developed in order to design and evaluate well-being and development programmes in developing countries, and focuses on the empowerment of people—where empowerment is understood as an increase of certain important capabilities. The capability approach offers an alterative to approaches that focus on providing specific commodities (such as water wells or computers) in that it acknowledges that these commodities can only be used if a range of personal factors (such as personal skills), social factors (such as social norms) and environmental factors (such as infrastructure) are in place. It also offers an alternative to approaches that focus on promoting specific behaviours (such as using machines in specific ways) in that it acknowledges that people should have freedom to decide for themselves how they want to live their version of 'the good life', how they want to flourish. Freedom and development are intrinsically and intimately intertwined in the capability approach (Sen, 1999).

Those that are interested in bringing about positive social change can get inspiration from BoP and the capability approach literature, which suggest various ways to empower people to improve their capabilities—and to increase their well-being.

17.10.3 Design thinking, cooperation and creativity in public services

Disruptive innovation also reminds me of the application of design thinking in public services innovation (Brown & Wyatt, 2010; Thomas, 2008). People, for example, in the UK, found ways to empower citizens to co-create or co-produce public services (Cottam & Leadbeater, 2004; Boyle & Harris, 2009). In health care, one would, for example, promote relatively cheap, bottom-up self-help, informal care and prevention activities by citizens, rather than depend too much on relatively expensive, top-down care by professionals. Design thinking is applied to rethink and redesign public services— focusing on participation, cooperation and creativity—helping to develop services that are often cheaper to produce and offer the same or even higher social value for those involved.

Such efforts draw from diverse design disciplines and apply diverse design methods, perspectives and approaches to the development and implementation of public services. For example participatory design (Schuler & Namioka, 1993; Muller, 2002) or co-creation (Sanders & Stappers, 2008) methods, such as workshops in which citizens, civil servants and others jointly discuss problems and jointly develop solutions. Or service design (Parker & Heapy, 2006) perspectives, which focus on the needs and experiences of those people whom are most involved in the service, for example, exploring patients' needs and nurses' expertise and developing services that create a mach between these two. Or transformation design (Burns et al., 2006) approaches, in which people with different backgrounds jointly define the problem and jointly explore possible solutions at a systems-level, rather than at the micro-level of an individual organization—thus enabling radical and systemic innovations, rather than developing local or micro solutions, which can be sub-optimal. Moreover, transformation design helps the organizations involved to improve their capabilities for innovation, cooperation and creativity, so that these become integral parts of their ways of working.

In all these methods, perspectives and approaches the active and creative participation of citizens, as clients or users of public services, and of civil servants, as providers of these public services, and cooperation and joint creativity between people from different organizations, with different backgrounds are critical. Ideally, these methods, perspectives and approaches are concrete manifestations of a process of *design thinking*, a process which 'involves finding as well as solving problems' (Lawson, 2006: p. 125) so that the 'problem and solution co-evolve' (Cross, 2006: p. 80). Ideally, diverse people participate in a process in which they jointly explore and articulate the problem, and explore and develop possible solutions, in an iterative process.

Those that are interested in improving or redesigning public services can get inspiration from design thinking literature—on co-design, service design and transformation design—in order to more effectively organize cooperation and creativity.

Like Christensen et al. (2006; 2008; 2009), I believe that disruptive innovation can have a key role in promoting positive social change, by empowering people to flourish and by promoting cooperation and creativity.

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About Marc Steen

Marc Steen works as a senior scientist at Dutch research and innovation organization TNO. His expertise is in human-centred design (Steen, 2008; Steen, 2011a; Steen, 2011b; Steen, 2012), co-design and service design (Steen et al., 2011), and innovation management (Pals et al., 2008; Steen et al., forthcoming).