

ADDRESSING THE PRIVILEGE PROBLEM IN INNOVATION

Alf Rehn explains why the discourse around innovation needs to change and how the industry can begin to address inherent bias

Who doesn't love innovation? For years we've been taught that it is a magical engine of goodness, bringing amazing technologies and wonderful services to one and all.

For many of us it has been a cornucopia, a horn of plenty, always ready to make our already comfortable lives a little easier, a little smoother, a little more amazing. No wonder we have celebrated it as much as we have. It has brought us great things and promised us even more to come.

That said, not everyone has benefited equally from what some have called the golden age of innovation. Today, if you are a well-to-do urban professional, there is no end to the things you can beckon at the tap of an app button – food of all kinds delivered, a chauffeur to your door, and as many handymen and cleaners as you like. Nor is there an end to the noise-cancelling headphones or smart home technologies you can buy. Feel like having an apartment in Paris or a villa in Tuscany for a while? Tap, tap, tap, done. Don't feel like walking, but want some fresh air? Here, have an e-scooter. Don't worry, you can dump it in any location when you get bored with it.

At the same time, there are a growing number of people who are subject to food poverty – more than 4 million adults and children in the UK alone. This year, more than 700,000 children will die globally

from diarrheal diseases – illnesses we've long been able to efficiently and cheaply combat. Or, if these examples seem too radical and unpleasant, consider the now very normal case of single parenthood. How many innovations, apps and new services are directed towards this group, particularly when compared to the number of such that are targeted to people like, well, me – middle-aged, middle-class, melanin-poor but means-having men?

SELECT FEW

The fact is that although we rarely discuss it, innovation isn't free from bias, nor is it unaffected by privilege. Venture capital flows most freely to white or Asian young men with engineering degrees from the top schools in the US and the UK. The attention economy of innovation is focused on a select few cities deemed most innovative by way of self-fulfilling prophecy.

While inequality deepens, the world's most innovative organisations (selected by the business journalists who would very much like to join one) battle for the attention and the Apple Pay wallets of

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the top 15% – and those willing to get payday loans to emulate them.

In part, all of this is understandable. Companies have to go where the money is and prefer customers who have plenty of it. Young men create start-ups that solve the problems they themselves see and experience, or create products that they themselves would wish to use and buy. On a micro level, there's little to criticise, as companies should be allowed to target the clients they want to target and work on the solutions they wish to work on. The challenge is how we, as a society, deal with such skews and biases.

Innovation is a human system that commands great resources and a lot of



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Twitter. Curiously, when it comes to innovation we've been very quiet.

What the world needs now, then, isn't just innovation-as-usual, but rather innovation critique. Not the wholesale condemnation of innovation, as this is still our most potent weapon in the war against the wicked problems that challenge our life, our societies and our world – and this makes innovation far too important not to discuss, not to critique, not to take to task. Not just because we spend so much time and money on it, but because it has the potential to truly help us to survive as a species. Yet, if we keep believing in it as a god, and trust blindly in it, we're not doing it justice.

We mock the cargo cults of Melanesia, who built make-believe airports to try to attract more care packages dropped from US aeroplanes. Yet our way of talking about innovation is very similar. We think that all we need to do is to go through the motions, repeat the incantations to St Jobs and St Musk, do the rituals of the business model canvas and present offerings to the lean start-up methodology, and that good things will come to pass. Yet innovation cannot be conjured simply by repeating the motions that books from US business schools prescribe.

Still, what countless corporations and society at large seem to have missed is that by doing so, we've abdicated our innovation agency to supposed experts who have no understanding of the context we're in. Nor, necessarily, a desire to make the world a better place for anyone except themselves.

What we need is not more talk about innovation – there is plenty of this already. Too many books, too many tweets, too many inane LinkedIn groups. What is needed is a better innovation discourse. One that doesn't just celebrate everything that everyone else is celebrating. One that takes inputs into consideration and looks critically at issues such as who people are trying to innovate for. Not to condemn or belittle, but in a way that requires a living, vigorous conversation about what innovation can be, at its very best.

FINDING BALANCE

We need innovation. As consumers, as organisations, as a society. Yet we also need to see that not all innovation is created equal. There is bad innovation out there, and pointless innovation, and worthless innovation to boot. There's innovation that costs a lot, yet only benefits a tiny minority of humanity, all while far more deserving groups remain marginalised and unserved. Our world today requires an innovation discourse that owns up to this fact and can be honest about the challenges that remain.

It is easy to love innovation. Today, however, this love needs to be tempered with a seriousness of purpose. Innovation is too important to be left only to the pundits, and too consequential to be squandered on only those privileged few who are already living lives of luxury.

There are simply too many problems that are going unsolved, too much value left to be created, for us to be content with an innovation discourse focused on self-congratulation and hailing yet another e-scooter start-up. We can do better – for ourselves, for our societies and for innovation. Innovation critique, and a more rigorous debate on what innovation resources should be focused on, will be the first steps taking us there. ●



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attention. Even though it's exceptionally difficult to exactly assess the total amount of annual global innovation expenditure, I have taken available data, from sources such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and come to a minimum sum of \$3trn – about £2.5trn. The actual sum is in all likelihood far greater than this.

The attention innovation garners, be it in politics, media or any other arena, is likewise massive. For any comparable system, it would be natural to have a rigorous, probing debate about the impact it has, particularly if unchecked. Just compare the debates we're currently having about Facebook and