

Editorialⁱ

Norms, Values And Innovation



Too often innovation is simply thought of as a matter of technology. Of course, this is true to some extent in that technology is at the core of most, if not all innovations. But innovation goes way beyond that. Contemporary innovation literature conceptualizes innovation as a process of knowledge creation, which invites us to look at the role of individuals in the innovation process more closely as knowledge creation is an act of individuals rather than companies. Ultimately,

knowledge creation comes down to communication, and since the seminal work on the management of innovation by Burns and Stalker (1961) from half a century ago, we already know how complicated communication can be between different departments of the same organization. That is because the individuals within these departments hold different norms and values, different belief systems about how to do things. The problem magnifies as we move from the organizational to the network level. It is important that companies increasingly work together on innovation in networks, as no single firm has all the knowledge necessary for innovation.

There is a substantial literature on the role of norms and values in relation to innovation. Generally speaking, this literature strongly suggests that openness for and tolerance to new ideas, new views, and new behaviours facilitates innovation, while traditional norms and values tend to produce the opposite effect (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). It is not surprisingly, therefore, that the cosmopolitan cities of this world, where people from all walks of life meet and thrive, are also the innovation hotspots of the knowledge economy of the 21st Century (Florida, 2002).

This raises some compelling questions about the nature of innovation that mainstream innovation literature has thus far barely touched upon. With its focus on companies and networks of companies, mainstream innovation literature is poorly equipped to look at norms and values, as they are enacted on the level of individuals and networks of individuals. Taking an individual perspective allows us to see the effect of norms and

values on innovation more clearly, but it also complicates matters. Norms and values can make communication, and thus knowledge creation, among individuals either easier or more difficult, depending on the kind of norms and values that dominate. The problem is that the norms and values that individuals bring to work are not only those of the company in which they work. Individuals have their own often deep-felt norms and values that are in turn affected by the society in which they live.

It is therefore not enough to promote innovation-related norms and values at work. Of course it is necessary for companies to encourage openness and tolerance for experimentation and the inevitable failures that this will bring. In such an environment, individuals are motivated to be creative, share and create knowledge and thus contribute to innovation. However, it is also important to understand how their personal norms and values and the norms and values of the society in which they live shape their behaviour. This goes beyond the traditional scope of innovation studies but to me, it seems to be a necessary effort to understand how innovation in modern societies can benefit from the social and cultural diversity that they harbour.

This is the aim of a new research network that I have started in Europe; to understand how norms and values contribute to innovation by the effects they have on how individuals share and create knowledge. Thus, I am looking forward to an opportunity to studying this in the developing economies of South-East Asia. Today, South-East Asia is a fascinating region to study the relations between norms, values, and innovation. On the one hand, South-East Asia is rapidly catching up with the developed economies of Europe and North America and modern cosmopolitan (though not necessarily Western) norms and values are proliferating into South-East Asia in the wake of this process. The effect of social network technologies on how young people communicate with each other, for example, will also affect relations at work. The work environment of the future will be much less hierarchical than it is today; which is a good thing for innovation. On the other hand, the nations of South-East Asia are keenly aware of their traditions and cultural heritage. The norms and values flowing from them will continue to shape economic life in these nations to a substantial degree. The meeting of modern, cosmopolitan and traditional norms and values in South-East Asia brings with it opportunities and threats for innovation in this region. The outcome of that process depends very much on the degree in which individual people in the nations of South-East Asia succeed in marrying the two sets of norms and values. This is all the more reason to adopt an individual perspective to the study of innovation.

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