MOOC

Innovating in a Digital World

Lesson: Digital third places

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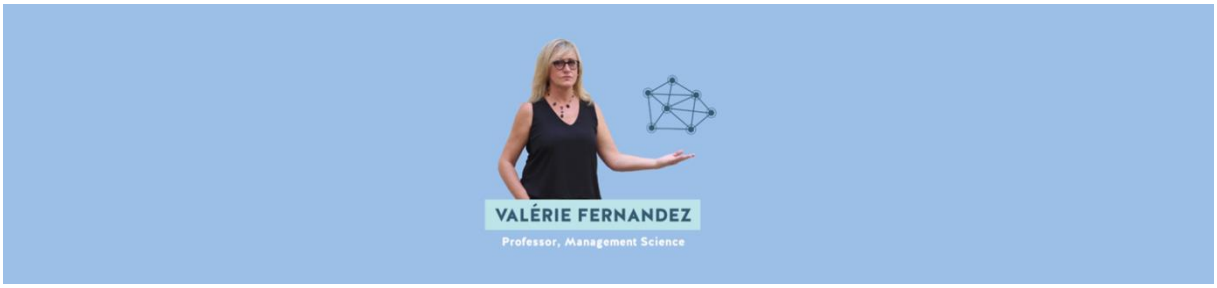

Introduction

The digital era is all about the virtual. Yet fablabs, hackerspaces and coworking spaces are opening all over the world. These are the “third places” of our digital society. They are physical meeting places where people can share ideas and swap skills around innovation projects and where they can create product prototypes using digital machines like 3D printers or laser cutters.

In a digital world of virtual exchange and social ties, what can we make of these physical meeting places?

Social worlds

The concept of “third places” was first coined by urban sociology professor Ray Oldenburg. It refers to places distinct from the home and the usual workspace, to which people don’t have to go. In those places, the norms governing their private and professional lives don’t apply.

The first Fablab, a digital manufacturing laboratory, was created in 2001 at the MIT Media Lab. Fablabs have since spread across the world.

In digital third places, individuals share and use knowledge, know-how and digital machines to create differently, inspired by open-source digital culture. These new social worlds are shifting the boundaries of knowledge. They promote learning by doing and “face-to-face” discussions that complement access to knowledge codified on the web.

Third places can be self-managed or self-funded, but also supported by large companies. Techshops, for example, are private organizations that charge a fee for access to high-performance equipment to manufacture industrial-size products. Their main targets are start-ups and large companies. Ford has partnered up with Techshop, so that its engineers can develop ideas that would not be pursued in the company’s more traditional labs.

Created by a start-up in a Techshop, Square, the bank-card reader enabling anyone to collect a payment via smartphone, has revolutionized the online payments market.

The digital “commons”

Digital “third places” were spawned by the development of “commons” on Internet.

Examples of “commons” are open-source software, OpenStreetMap mapping data under a copyleft license, and the Arduino electronic circuit under Creative Commons licenses.

The notion of open-source is well-known in the software world. It now applies to material with a license that respects the possibilities of access to the source code, free redistribution, and creation of derivative work. These are “commons” because they are produced by peers, and their management is shared and collective. Digital goods are non-rival and their dissemination creates value. As Elinor Ostrom, the first woman to receive the Economics

Nobel Prize, in 2009, pointed out: they can be subject to specific governance outside of the market or the State.

The digital commons are grounded on the hacker ethic. They promote individual empowerment processes and open innovation for companies, in both developed and emerging countries.

A new post-industrial model?

Digital third places convey new innovation models.

They provide laboratories not only for ideas and creativity, but also for quick prototyping. Makers are industrializing the DIY (Do It Yourself) or DIWO (Do It With Others) spirit. They are turning it into an innovation movement that is artisan, responsible, high-tech and low-cost.

They promote a frugal innovation model, like the TataNano the world least expensive car, or the incubator developed by Stanford students which costs only one percent of traditional incubators…and enable rising innovations to be crowdfunded.

How can one go from a prototype to manufacturing several units?

Some support the ephemeral factory model. Some see manufacturing production as a “cloud” service. Factories everywhere are opening up and offering manufacturing on demand through the web to anyone with a digital model and a credit card. And others envision a post-industrial production system, in which goods are produced locally, while knowledge is exchanged freely on a global scale.

Online retail, from Amazon to eBay or Alibaba, has proved the relevance of long-tail strategies. These strategies consist in maximizing turnover by selling a wide variety of products, many in small quantities. Open source and democratized production tools are paving the way for long-tail strategies in industry.

What should we make of the “third places” of our digital world?

Are they home to a new digital humanity, halfway between a liberal and a libertarian ethic? Or are they conducive to post-industrial revolution?