

1 CHALLENGES

WE ARE NOT SOLVING OUR PROBLEMS ANYMORE

Look at the news this morning. If we put aside the inevitable natural disasters and the usual gossip, what stares us in the face is an endless succession of reports showing us how much trouble we have dealing with the complex issues of contemporary life. There seems to be no way out. Companies and government organizations alike are swept up in a comedy of errors, and a world of missed opportunities lies mute in the background. Sociologist Hans Boutellier has captured our current predicament well:

In today's world we have difficulty formulating grand comforting ideas. We hear a cacophony of voices and opinions, see rage and frustration, and observe a lot of ad hoc policy and tentative management. There is a lot of fumbling around without a guiding concept. ... A great deal of tinkering and muddling goes on within politics, educational institutions, the business community, retailers, the self-employed. ... If nobody knows the answer, then we choose what seems to be "best": good practices, effective interventions, evidence-based policy. We formulate a politics of risk management and crisis management. ... We let ourselves be guided by effectiveness and efficiency, preferably demonstrated by performance indicators, guided by supervision and control. (Boutellier 2013)

This is not because we are particularly dumb or inept, but because we are collectively being tripped up by today's problems. As I argue in this book, this difficulty is the result of the emergence of a radically new species of problem: problems that are so open, complex, dynamic, and networked that they seem impervious to solution. What all the news stories show us is that it makes no sense to keep trying to tackle these problems the way we used to. The trusted routines just don't work anymore. These new types of problems require a radically different response.