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To Slow Down or Speed Up? Uncovering the Pace Tensions in Systemic Design for Social Innovation

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Designerly approaches have long been appropriated for systems thinking and design. This appropriation brings with it tensions regarding the pace at which design is conducted. It is crucial to unveil and reflect on these tensions, particularly within a social innovation context. This is due to social innovation's unique complexities regarding stakeholder networks, sociopolitical influences and change management. This position paper discusses how these tensions become apparent at the two ends of the pace spectrum of doing systemic design. It examines the translation of these pace tensions to tradeoffs; both at the principles level (e.g. stakeholder engagement, project scoping and long-term commitment) and at the practices level (e.g. network building, prototyping's role and room for reframing). By doing so, this paper takes an initial, exploratory step towards explicating tensions regarding the pace of conducting systemic design for social innovation. It aims to spark critical discourse around such implicit and explicit pace tensions, with the intention to enable better resolution of these tensions in practice.

Keywords: social innovation; systemic design; rapid design; slow design; pace tensions

Adapting design for systemic social innovation

Social innovation and systemic design

Social innovation involves the design and implementation of novel solutions to social problems in a way that the value generated is meant to benefit society as a whole, rather than private businesses or individuals (Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020). Compared to other innovation paradigms, social innovation presents unique challenges. It requires an atypically extensive degree of involvement of public policy and a deep dependence on co-production by the various parties involved (Mulgan, 2006). It requires a heavy focus on approaches to enhance cooperation and communication of the involved multidisciplinary stakeholders, due to their highly complex networks with diverse viewpoints and backgrounds (Yang & Sung, 2016). Social innovation also often involves services comprising complex sociopolitical contexts with a need for focusing on effective change management (Mulgan, 2006).

Due to its unique nature, social innovation naturally requires an expansion of focus from traditional product design to designing complex service systems as a whole (Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020). This nature fits with the intentions behind systems thinking and design. Systemic design is intended for such complex, ambiguous situations with value conflicts between extensive stakeholder networks (Ryan, 2014). It can help design long-term processes that enable incremental transformations of existing systems, and can help construct wider contexts that these systems can be a part of (Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020; Ryan, 2014). This paper is embedded in this paradigm of systemic design for social innovation.

The need to adapt design

In practice, designerly approaches are not always able to drive social innovation due to certain tensions between them and what is required by social innovation. For instance, conventional design approaches cannot effectively deal with complex sociopolitical contexts and the associated change management (Mulgan, 2006). They might also not be suitable for driving implementation processes by enabling long-term commitment from stakeholders and might have superficiality pertaining to timeboxed projects (Mulgan, 2009).

As such, to make design thinking work for this paradigm, there needs to be a more nuanced and mindful appropriation of design to systemic social innovation: “if we want to solve big social problems, we need more than design thinking. Big social problems have many causes; involve real tradeoffs; and require solutions that can work with multiple user groups across multiple levels...” (Schulman, 2010). A similar sentiment is shared by Dorst (2015) and by Bijl-Brouwer and Malcolm (2020), who emphasize the need to not just adopt traditional designerly approaches to systemic design (for social innovation) but to *consciously adapt* them to this field.

Tensions concerning the pace of design

Adaptation of design requires management of various tensions within designerly approaches, and between these approaches and systemic social innovation. This paper focuses on critically explicating and creating discourse around one specific tension: the pace of conducting design. Design has become increasingly democratized through tools and methods. Many design thinking models and their associated tools (e.g. design sprints) are known for their iterative nature and especially their rapidness. A fast-track towards innovation and a rapid way to solve problems are marketed as typical characteristics of these processes.

Whilst this rapidness has proven significantly efficient and effective in certain contexts (e.g. UX design), there is a growing movement towards slower design in other contexts. Exploring and unpacking such tension between rapid design approaches and the emerging slower ones becomes especially relevant in the context of systemic social innovation, where Ryan (2014) shows that complex sociopolitical landscapes co-exist with pushes or needs for rapid systemic transitions. As a first step towards this exploration, this paper will consider two non-mutually exclusive paces for conducting (systemic) design and will try uncovering the tension between them and systemic social innovation.

Two perspectives on the pace of conducting systemic design

Doing design rapidly

Fast-paced designerly approaches are rooted in goals and evaluation criteria of economic success (Fuad-Luke, 2002) or of high productivity and return on participation (Jones, 2018). This pace emerges, amongst other reasons, due to a strong emphasis on material products and deliverables, due to a culture of timeboxed business agreements and due to a sense of time dictated by technological innovation cycles (Fuad-Luke, 2002). In the context of systemic social innovation, Ryan’s (2014) systemic design process also focuses on a high pace to create rapid transitions between creative ideas and tangible actions.

Regarding practices that exemplify such rapid design processes, the movement of design sprints stands out. It focuses on creating propensity for rapid action by condensing the traditional design process into a five-day format of: Understand, diverge, converge, prototype and test (Banfield, Lombardo, & Wax, 2015). In practice, this rapidness can reach the extent to which the design sprints merely involve available organizational participants and typically go ahead without user research or field studies (Jones, 2018). Despite its product-oriented roots, the sprint method has been applied to systemic social innovation as well. For instance, Valentine et al.’s (2017) work includes a case study that used design sprints to facilitate co-creation of pedagogy regarding social innovation in healthcare by bringing diverse stakeholders together.

On a more traditional side, Brown and Wyatt’s (2010) work is one of the primary examples of adapting conventional design thinking to social innovation. Their design process consists of inspiration, ideation, and implementation stages. Their process also emphasizes speed. They talk about how design thinking for social innovation enables companies to “bring their products and services to market faster”. Their process strongly emphasizes continuous iterations with the primary aim of arriving more rapidly at successful solutions. For them prototyping is meant to be a rapid process geared towards turning ideas into tangible products or services to test and refine them.

Doing design slowly

Unlike the productivity and deliverables focused aims of rapid design, slow design tries to reframe the role of time, scoping, prototyping and social relationships. Hillgren et al.’s (2011) work provides a starting point for this discussion. They provide two concrete strategies to make systemic design gentler for social innovation:

“Prototyping to reveal opportunities and dilemmas” and “Design as long-term infrastructuring”. The first strategy emphasizes that prototyping should go beyond a mechanism to test potential solutions through rapid iterations, to a mechanism for creating a space to enable various stakeholders to engage with opportunities or dilemmas that can have a long-term effect on social innovation. Such bottom-up collaboration can enable stakeholders to become co-producers and co-designers of social interventions (Chon, 2020).

The second strategy, long-term “infrastructuring”, unveils a unique perspective on design’s pace and scope. Within systemic social innovation, there is a need to move beyond the conventional “project-based” approach where: the pace is fast; the project’s timespan is well-defined; and the design brief defines the scope (Hillgren et al., 2011). Hillgren et al. (2011), therefore, define “infrastructuring” as a process that focuses on long-term commitment towards a social innovation; whilst providing an open-ended structure for a design process that does not have predetermined goals or a fixed timeline. It involves continuously building relations with a diversity of actors, whilst maintaining flexible time and resource assignments (Hillgren et al., 2011). Such an approach can enable emergence of possibilities and design opportunities along the way through a long-term, continuous process of designing networks and of matchmaking (Björgvinsson, Ehn & Hillgren, 2010).

Bijl-Brouwer and Malcom’s (2020) “evolutionary design approach” to systemic social innovation is linked to Hillgren et al.’s (2011) approach and is also representative of gentler design. It is about taking small, experimental steps to nudge a system towards a desired direction by looking for traction over time (Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020). This is done by giving prototyping a role that goes from merely testing ideas to also reframing problems; enabling coevolution of problem and solution spaces (Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020). Like infrastructuring, this approach focuses on continuous innovation that goes beyond individual project scopes and towards continuous (re)alignments between current systemic design activities and a future vision (Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020).

These evolutionary approaches align with Fuad-Luke’s (2002) slow design paradigm. Slow design explicitly removes time constraints imposed by economic growth, product lifecycles and technological acceleration (Fuad-Luke, 2002). It focuses on leveraging ‘slowness’ to balance human-centered, individual and cultural needs with the planet’s needs—all with the aim of creating a sustainable present and future (Fuad-Luke, 2002). Slow design explicitly de-commodifies time and its reflective practices align with Ryan’s (2014) perspective on reflection within systemic design. Ryan (2014) labels reflection as “the touchstone for all other activities within systemic design”, and the “most critical activity” to enable reframing and learning from generative actions in the field.

Bringing the two design paces together

The pace tensions in design principles and practices

Now that both fast and slow paces for conducting systemic design have been discussed, certain tensions become apparent—at the level of both their principles and their practices. Starting with principles, the faster pace aims for high productivity and return on participation to keep up with timeboxed projects and innovation cycles. The slower paces are more organic and ‘evolutionary’ in their aims, where they de-commodify time, explicitly think beyond project boundaries and flexibly manage open-ended design process structures that primarily focus on long-term commitment (and not on predetermined goals or timelines).

At the level of practices, the faster pace has a greater focus on output and the slower pace has a greater focus on building social relationships. Whilst rapidity-focused practices like sprints involve participation, the focus is on delivering output fast. In contrast, gentler practices are more focused on long-term infrastructuring by building and strengthening a diverse stakeholder network whilst continuously aligning the network’s efforts with the desired future system. There is also a clear difference between the two paces regarding prototyping’s role. The fast pace considers prototyping as a rapid, solution-validation mechanism for turning ideas tangible to be tested; whereas, the slow pace considers prototyping as a reframing mechanism to create a space to allow stakeholders to uncover dilemmas regarding long-term effects of a systemic intervention on a social innovation problem.

Resolving these tensions

The aim of unveiling these pace tensions is not to get bogged down by semantics but to pave way for flexibly managing them. It is not about choosing one pace over the other, but to have a critical and explicit look at pace and what it means in the context of social innovation and systemic design. For in this domain, such pace-related tradeoffs percolate to crucial tradeoffs regarding e.g. having enough scope for challenge reframing, building

diverse stakeholder networks, preventing the push for accomplishments from enabling groupthink and constructing strong, long-term systemic interventions (Jones, 2018). It is, therefore, important to critically assess reliance on methods—and their associated paces and timelines—as they can undermine systemic design by reducing it to highly constrained procedures that do not enable true innovation (Ryan, 2014).

This paper set out to uncover the tensions and tradeoffs concerning paces of conducting systemic design. The viewpoints presented indicate that this pace can be fast or slow. They show that systemic design can happen at varying paces which mean varying: project constructions, project scopes, stakeholder involvement, ways of working etc.—all dictated by and situated in varying paces, as is the case in Jones’ (2018) design model. This makes it important to manage or even acknowledge pace tensions, as each pace can have its own situations and impact requirements where it is most appropriate.

Regarding these tensions, this paper is a preliminary, exploratory step. There are several questions that are yet to be (empirically) answered: How and when are switches made between various paces, if at all? What tooling could be created to enable a flexible management of pace tensions? Can a mapping be created between systemic design paces and: project types, project needs, design phases, design tools, case studies etc.? Perhaps inspiration can be drawn from the classical Latin adage, “Festina Lente”, meaning “make haste slowly” (Tranquillus, 2016). What if “Festina Lente” became a part of the way we conduct systemic design? Could that help us acknowledge and somewhat resolve this tension?



Figure 1. Depicting a classic Festina Lente symbol: The hare in a snail shell.

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