Scaling Out, Scaling Down: Reconsidering growth in grassroots initiatives

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Abstract. In this paper, we reflect on how scaling out – recreating and reconfiguring horizontally the most promising practices across contexts (Manzini, 2015) – can help local, grassroots initiatives to grow in a socially sustainable fashion and to sustain their action over time. We ground our discussion on the case of Hoffice, a self-organizing network that is experimenting with an alternative social model for collectively organizing and supporting flexible forms of work. In a prior ethnographic study of the Hoffice network (Rossitto & Lampinen, 2018), we outlined the socio-technical practices and values that characterise this community. We complement this previous piece by zooming in on the community's struggles in the face of rapid growth. We conclude by proposing a way to rethink the challenges that growth can pose.

1 Introduction

Over the last years, research within Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) has addressed the role that digital technologies can play in enabling and configuring collective actions and community-led sharing practices. While global platforms like Airbnb have become emblematic of the sharing economy, emerging literature on the collaborative economy and grassroots initiatives investigates, instead, the role of digital technology in supporting care-based sharing (see, e.g. Light & Clodagh, 2019).

We contribute to this line of work by discussing the case of Hoffice, a self-organizing network that experiments with an alternative social model for collectively organizing and supporting flexible forms of work. In a prior ethnographic study of the Hoffice network (Rossitto & Lampinen, 2018), we outlined socio-technical practices and values that characterise this community. This article zooms in on the Hoffice community's struggles in the face of rapid growth. We reflect on how *scaling out* – recreating and reconfiguring horizontally the most promising practices across contexts (Manzini, 2015) – can help local, grassroots initiatives to grow in a socially sustainable fashion and to sustain their action over time. We conclude by proposing a way to reconsider growth in grassroots initiatives, with emphasis on experimentation and documentation.

2   Background

Prior HCI and CSCW research has outlined the social benefits of local sharing initiatives (Mosconi et al., 2017; Rossitto & Lampinen 2018) and how the design of socio-technical infrastructures can help mitigate the use of limited environmental resources (Light & Clodagh, 2019; Bjørn-Hansen & Håkansson, 2018). This strand of work illustrates how collective initiatives can reveal alternative narratives about sustainable cities and the role of technology, for instance, to collect and share knowledge about growing food and connecting people (Heitlinger et al., 2019). Designing for grassroots and community-led initiatives, or appropriating technologies into local sharing practices, requires attending to value tensions (Malmborg et al., 2015), conflicting motivations (Bellotti et al., 2015), and barriers that impede participation (Lampinen, Huotari, & Cheshire, 2015).

Increasingly, HCI and CSCW researchers have been concerned with the role of ICTs in making community-driven social change more resilient and impactful. Scholars have examined the role of *infrastructuring* participation (Le Dantec, 2016), both with respect to the creation of new communities and the sustenance of collective action over time. Recent studies have pointed out that the impact of local, grassroots initiatives and their desire to create change challenges the very notion of scalability and scalable platforms (Light & Clodagh, 2019).

The problem of scale is not new to HCI research – prior work has addressed, for example, the challenges that social networking sites and big data pose in managing millions of users and devices across disparate contexts of use (Brown et al., 2017). Scaling grassroots initiatives presents, however, a different set of concerns that problematize the very notion of individual growth. The notion of *scaling up* is entrenched with the idea of progress and described as the quality of a project to smoothly expand and grow without changing its organization and framing (Tsing, 2015). As opposed to this vision, Anna Tsing (*ibid*) has argued for a recuperation of nonscalable projects, while emphasizing that a too narrow

focus on scalability fails to account for the hyperlocal relations that connect practices to localities. This point is crucial in that it accounts for how and why specific work, or projects, happen and unfold. Resonating with this view, HCI research has drawn attention to the different stages of scaling up (Bjørn-Hansen & Håkansson, 2018), including sustaining, growing (enabling more people to take part), and spreading (e.g. creating new skills, ideas and knowledge). Moreover, it has emphasized the importance of scaling out social innovation, that is, adjusting it to local contexts (Manzini, 2015). Relatedly, Light and Clodagh (2019) have drawn on the notion of *meshing* to describe how physical places and people can be connected by creating the socio-technical infrastructures of sharing locally – as opposed to global platforms that homogenize interactions and promote *crisp* transactions.

A detailed account of transition studies falls beyond the scope of this paper, but we want to note here that this body of work also highlights the multifaceted nature of upscaling processes. Naber and colleagues (2017), for example, have distinguished different patterns of upscaling, providing a helpful vocabulary that distinguishes between growing, replication, accumulation and transformation. *Growing* and *replication*, respectively, relate to an increased number of actors participating in a given initiative and reusing the same concept in different locations. *Accumulation* and *transformation* are, instead, indicative of more qualitative changes: in the first, different initiatives are connected to each other, while in the latter, a given initiative shapes change at an institutional level.

3 Methods

The Hoffice network was founded in Stockholm, Sweden, in the beginning of 2014, with the main intention to facilitate the collective use of private homes as shared offices (Rossitto & Lampinen, 2018). The H in Hoffice stands for "Home" – the vision is to provide a framework for the creation of facilitated co-working events in homes both for flexible workers and other cohorts of people who do not have access to formal office arrangements or who wish to step away from them for a change. The main digital technologies used by the Hoffice network in Stockholm are the social network service Facebook and a website (hoffice.nu/en) that lays out basic details about the Hoffice concept and provides guidelines for organizing Hoffice days. The Facebook group is where most of the network's online activities take place. It is where events are advertised and organized. Currently, there are more than 2000 members in the Facebook group of the local Hoffice network. (Here, local simply relates to the city where the study was conducted).

The empirical material for this study was collected through an ethnographic approach, featuring interviews, group interviews, participant observation at Hoffice events, as well as two co-design workshops that were conducted between

spring 2017 and 2018. The three co-authors facilitated the workshops, taking turns in leading the discussion. Both workshops lasted for about three hours. Conversations were audio recorded and, later, transcribed verbatim.

The first workshop we include here for analysis had two aims: first, investigating opportunities and expectations for a new digital platform supporting the local Hoffice community and, second, exploring the challenges and possibilities in engaging with different stakeholders by scaling out the Hoffice structure and practices. A total of six people participated, including the co-founder of a startup that collaborated with Hoffice to tailor the prototype of their digital platform for the Hoffice community.

The latter workshop explored creative combinations of readily available tools and practices that could help to sustain the community and to address local needs and concerns in a nimble way. The discussion delved into aspects of technology design (tailoring existing social media to Hoffice needs) as well as rethinking some of the social practices around organizing Hoffice events (e.g. deciding on a pre-determined schedule of Hoffice events that attendees could plan for or taking turns in being an active host). In addition to the organizers, three people participated.

4 Findings

We now turn to two examples of taking the original idea of Hoffice further. First, we consider efforts to manage community fragmentation that was brought about by the rapid *growth* of the local network on Facebook. Second, we discuss an initiative to *transform* Hoffice by taking the concept from private homes to public settings in the form of events at a local library.

4.1 Managing growth with a focus on *context-within-context*

Using Facebook to coordinate the network's early activities was a pragmatic – and arguably successful – choice for Hoffice. As the network has grown rapidly, however, relying on the platform has proved more problematic. Despite aspirations to keep the community together and open to newcomers, active members have started creating local and thematic groups to better suit their own needs. For instance, local Hoffices limited to particular parts of the city and thematic Hoffices focused on specific activities, such as writing, have become common in the Facebook group. Moreover, a number of long-term members have started organizing Hoffice events that are not advertised on the Facebook group at all, restricting attendance to friends and close colleagues. During the fieldwork, the expression *"Dark Hoffice"* was often used to describe this evolution in how Hoffice events and activities were organized.

A (re)current concern of several Hoffice members is the relational and practical difficulty of using the original, now massive, Facebook group for organizing activities. In the latter workshop, the third author, one of the founders of the network, described how this has contributed to a fragmentation of the community: *"It seems like a lot of the people [who] were initially involved, they found smaller groups that are not open. [...] And when they want to work together at someone's place they send a message and they organize it that way. And they feel that it's been too difficult to administrate Hoffice events using the Facebook group, because there is too much people [...]"*.

While the troubles of rapid growth and community fragmentation are not due to any technology alone, key members of the Hoffice community consider Facebook one culprit for why activities stalled. As the third author put it in one of our meetings: *"Facebook is killing Hoffice."* A central concern here is that Facebook does not offer suitable means to connect *context-within-context*, that is, gather independent subcommunities under the larger, shared umbrella of the local Hoffice network. This has led to a search for an alternative platform.

During the second workshop, a prototype platform was presented, with a particular focus on how it could enable subgroups within the community to stay connected to one another. While the community never made the move to this new platform – one of the reasons being the shutdown of the startup company that had developed it – discussing the prototype was instrumental in surfacing participants' concerns and hopes about Hoffice. It helped in articulating the vision of *managing context-within-context*, along with the sentiment that subgroups need not be a failure or a problem. Image 1 illustrates the vision of various Hoffice subgroups that can be connected with one another to maintain an awareness of who the participants are, their interests, and their professional backgrounds. After all, there is nothing odd in people wanting to get together based on particular, shared interests or because they live in the same neighborhood. Moreover, there is no inevitable conflict with having such interests while also hoping to sustain a broader community that can facilitate the creation of new acquaintances, or the provision of help at opportune moments. However, as one of the participants pointed out in the second workshop, as the community grows, there is a need not only for mentorship structures and processes for onboarding newcomers, but also active, even blunt, efforts around communicating norms and expectations.
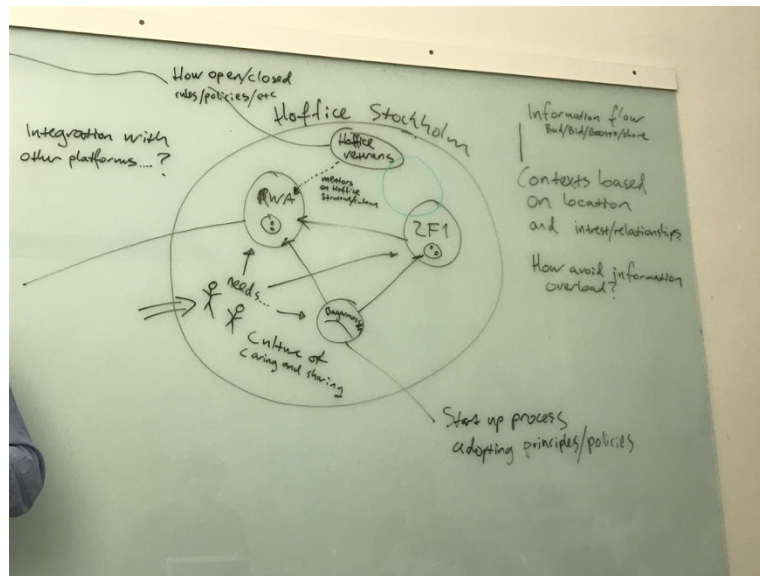
Image 1. Context-within-context vision from the second workshop.

To sum, the vision of managing context-within-context is indicative of the community's efforts to manage their growth by replicating the structure and activities of Hoffice events at a *smaller rather than a bigger scale*, while working towards a structure where smaller subgroups are connected to a larger whole. This entails infrastructuring the formation of local or interest-based groups, while at the same time staying connected to the broader network. This is regarded as key to establishing new, professional and personal, relationships, and to maintaining a shared understanding of the community's central values and norms. Participation in smaller groups makes it easier to balance the opportunity to establish professional connections while nurturing relationships based on mutual care and support. Finally, as frequently mentioned during our engagement with the Hoffice community, reconsidering and reimagining how Hoffice events are run would require a different platform, one that could more easily be tailored in line with the community's concern to sustain and manage its growth locally.

4.2 Transforming into Boffice

The term *Boffice* denotes an office at the library ("B" stands for bibliotek, the Swedish word for library). It indicates the attempt to spread and replicate the Hoffice structure in a public place. Ideally, this would serve as a first step of participation that lowers the threshold for newcomers to go to a stranger's home for a Hoffice event. Boffice is also a way to explore the role the public sector could play in facilitating encounters between people in the context of the collaborative economy. Boffice can be characterized as an attempt to scale Hoffice by transforming it: the involvement of the public sector was meant to

create a platform and a sense of community for cohorts of people who might need it (e.g. job seekers, groups of migrants, et cetera).

While Boffice is still running – now organized in a top-down fashion at the local library – the collaboration with Hoffice and its co-founder was limited to four months in the fall of 2017. During that time, all events were run by following the traditional Hoffice structure (see Rossitto & Lampinen, 2018) and facilitated by the third author. However, while Boffice days were organized in the local Facebook group, the library also advertised Boffice and invited participants by using its own communication channels, including mailing lists and flyers distributed at the library. A main concern for the library was to facilitate networking and the exchange of competence and expertise for small companies and self-employed people. This need not be in tension with the core values of Hoffice. Nevertheless, as we observed when attending Boffice, a mix of experienced Hoffice participants and newcomers took part in the events. While being welcoming towards new members is core to Hoffice, their lack of previous experience posed challenges to the tenet that being together also means supporting and caring for each other. As extensively discussed during the workshops, a failure to adhere to the basic norm of silence during working time and to participate in social breaks was perceived as undermining the collective atmosphere of Hoffice events whose success deeply relies on the active participation and mutual respect of all its members. This was characterised as new members' inability to grasp the meaning of the structure and its role in both providing a rhythm for co-working days and in embodying the norms and values that guide togetherness at Hoffice.

To sum, while becoming Boffice was part of the co-founder's vision to replicate Hoffice in different contexts and with different groups of people, it led to transformed outcomes. This is not necessarily a failure, but it is a clear example of how scaling can lead to a direction that differs from the original idea underlying a local initiative. The library's appropriation of the concept has resulted in events that are managed top-down, losing the grassroots agency to self-organize and create favourable working conditions that drives the original Hoffice vision. Boffice events have become two-hour monthly meetings with the explicit goal to network and establish business relationships, thus doing away with the co-working practices central to Hoffice. While we do not intend to disregard the value of networking for the self-employed and small businesses, this transformation overshadows the commitments to care, trust, and mutual support that many participants value in Hoffice (see Rossitto & Lampinen, 2018).

5 Discussion

In what follows, we reflect on how we might (re)think growth in community-led initiatives and design socio-technical infrastructures to sustain them. We discuss

possibilities and challenges for *(1) scaling up by scaling down*, that is, considering hyperlocal Hoffice groups as a way to involve more people in more active roles, and *(2) scaling out*, that is, encouraging people to take the ethos and practices of Hoffice and make it their own in line with their needs and desires.

When it comes to *scaling up by scaling down*, the bespoke platform discussed during the first workshop was seen as one way forward, as it would have been capable of handling context-within-context more effectively than a Facebook group. Here, the vision expanded from co-working days to a broader aim of engaging people with shared interests and promoting expertise sharing. However, given the technical and economic issues with maintaining a global bespoke platform for a self-organizing network, what seems to hold more promise for hyperlocal groups is infrastructuring a socio-technical *mesh* that works locally (Light & Clodagh, 2019). In parallel with our local fieldwork, we have learned that emerging Hoffice groups outside of Sweden use different technologies to organize events, including Meetup, the Kitchenapp, and Facebook's Messenger. For small enough groups, such basic tools may be enough. In our case, the migration from Facebook to other platforms remains an open issue. The closing down of the startup that was involved in the first workshop has forced Hoffice to consider alternative strategies regarding new digital technologies and how to fit the concern for openness to newcomers with the aim of providing a sense of community and shared values for regular members. Scaling up by scaling down is a way to manage growth by replicating events locally (Naber et al., 2017), but also an attempt to maintain a shared culture. Scaling social change needs to take into account knowledge, ideas, and values about alternative ways of organizing. This suggests that scaling can be regarded as a way to balance the replication and (re)design of practices with the original visions and motivations of collective initiatives. Ultimately, considering alternatives as livable and possible can make experiments of social change impactful.

Second, *scaling out* the Hoffice concept was part of the third author's vision to develop the network into an ecosystem of different Hoffice initiatives. In addition to creating a co-working community locally, active participants in the initiative have worked to document the structure and values so that others might take the idea and make it their own in their particular settings. Boffice is one example of efforts to scale out Hoffice by taking it to a different context – perhaps a telling one in illustrating how an idea can change in both form and meaning as it travels. While Boffice events have been successful enough that they continue to take place, the involvement of a local library has led to a qualitative transformation of the original Hoffice vision, including the sense of care that is integral to it. Our reading is that a key reason for this was the transformation from a self-organizing community activity to an event that the library organizes *for* participants. Taking out the participatory efforts of co-creating events has changed the outcome. As such, Boffice illustrates how scaling out encompasses not only adapting

technologies and practices to new settings, but also (re)negotiating underlying values and their transformation when engaging at an institutional level.

6 Conclusion

We have documented the Hoffice community's struggles with growth and discussed *scaling out* and *down* as potential ways forward. In highlighting alternatives to the kind of *scaling* familiar from global, for-profit initiatives and in shifting our focus to local *meshing* (Light & Clodagh, 2019), we contribute to broader discussions regarding the potential for designing livable, equitable futures with the help of non-scalable projects that are, by default, more diverse because they are not geared up for expansion (Tsing, 2015). We see value in efforts to adapt the Hoffice concept for changing circumstances and varied settings, even when the outcomes are not always as expected or satisfactory. Overall, we believe it is valuable to document these activities so that other grassroots and community-led initiatives can learn from them. As pointed out by a grassroots organizer in Schneider's (2018) book on cooperatives, "*[d]ocumentation -- can trump even failure; others can study the attempt, tweak it, and try again.*" Ethnographic and participatory methods have a key role to play in such efforts to document and disseminate lessons learned, and to assess the long-term impact of initiatives that strive for social change.

7 Acknowledgements

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