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# Innovation hesitancy: exploring reluctance to digital innovation in the Swedish cultural sector

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## Abstract

**Introduction.** This paper explores a challenge for any novel digital intervention: the hesitancy or reluctance among the designated user group.

**Purpose.** The overall purpose is to better understand the hesitant reception of digital innovations through a specific case study. The aim is to further our understanding of resistance towards digital innovation as well as reflect upon the pro-innovation bias of digital development projects.

**Method.** Multiple sources were combined: data collected within the case project and conducted document analysis of project documentation.

**Results.** Labor and maintenance were the main reasons behind stakeholder hesitancy, as well as concerns regarding the hosting, funding, and local relevance of the proposed innovation.

**Conclusion.** The assumption that digitization is inherently beneficial shaped the direction of the case project. Yet ongoing cultural changes and current adaptations must be understood to ensure a new digital solution is actually needed. As researchers we must pay enough attention to relevant local conditions by critically engaging with the innovation process of the project itself. This requires looking past the pro-innovation bias.

## Introduction

This paper explores a challenge for any novel digital intervention: the hesitancy or reluctance among the designated user group. The paper carries out this exploration by analysing feedback from preliminary studies in the course of developing a digital platform aimed at the cultural sector in Sweden.

Since 2023, a Swedish co-creation research initiative set out to explore information sharing practices of cultural sector actors in Småland, a region in south-eastern Sweden. The aim of the project was to develop and introduce innovative tools and methods for collaboration between various cultural sector actors. One of the initiative's six subprojects – referred to hereafter as 'Project X' – was devoted to digital innovation, with a focus on developing a shared platform, equipped with functions for searching for, discovering, and sharing information about cultural events across the region (and possibly beyond). This was in response to the lack of such a service in Småland, with information regarding local cultural events (performances, exhibits, demonstrations, public talks, fairs, educational events, special showings, etc.) being dispersed across various institutional sites, municipal event calendars, commercial marketing services, and other local sources (e.g., newspaper listings). Furthermore, end-users (the general public) were underserved by the limited functionalities of the various platforms carrying the relevant information, such as of the municipal calendars and social media sites used to publicize cultural events.

Project X identified this disaggregation as a missed opportunity to inform end-users about cultural events, potentially resulting in their non-participation. Such outcomes could have negative implications not only for cultural event providers but also for the broader local community. Cultural events, after all, play a crucial role in enhancing the attractiveness of a region, fostering social interactions, improving quality of life, and stimulating local economies. Additionally, the objective of ensuring that arts and culture are accessible to all as a public good is a central tenet of both national and local cultural policies in many European countries. Providing up-to-date and easily accessible information about cultural events to both residents and tourists is important for both economic development and the promotion of democratic engagement.

While some cultural sector actors expressed interest in the platform being developed within Project X, it was also received with a fair degree of hesitancy – at times elevated to disinterest or outright suspicion – by several cultural sector actors in Småland. In this paper we examine this hesitancy, applying critical innovation studies (e.g., Godin and Vink, 2017) and the concepts of pro-innovation bias and innovation resistance (cf. Fornstedt, 2021) to possibly explain these responses among the stakeholders as well as to critically reflect on the assumptions driving innovative interventions like Project X.

## Purpose

The overall purpose of this study is to better understand the hesitant reception of digital innovations through a specific case study. Reporting on the initial findings of a larger research project, this paper examines innovation hesitancy expressed by actors who publicize cultural events. These actors included staff from cultural organizations (museums, libraries, archives, galleries, theatres, cultural festivals, cultural organizations, etc.) as well as regional coordinators (municipalities and their cultural departments/units). The object of study was the hesitant or reluctant attitudes of these actors expressed towards sharing information on local cultural events through a new digital platform. By critically engaging with these findings, our aim is to further our understanding of resistance towards digital innovation as well as reflect upon the pro-innovation bias that frequently seeps into digital development projects.

## Perspectives on innovation

Resistance to and rejection of innovation have been studied from various perspectives. As pointed out by Fornstedt (2021), scholarly research on innovation resistance primarily focuses on identifying and understanding such aversions in order to assist managers and other stakeholders in mitigating or overcoming them (e.g., Stucki, 2019; Thomä, 2017). The bulk of this research focuses on private sector companies, commonly perceived as the primary drivers, incubators, and beneficiaries of innovation. The majority of this research adopts a pro-innovation perspective, with many studies linking the value of innovation to its capacity to enhance corporate survival and success (e.g., Heidenreich & Kraemer, 2016). Following this line of thought, there is also a prevailing tendency to categorize phenomena perceived as progressive under the term "innovation," while framing resistance to innovation as a reactionary opposition.

By contrast, critical innovation studies (CIS) questions the widespread tendency in contemporary society to understand and describe innovation as unequivocally positive. CIS critically interrogates how policymakers, businesspersons, researchers, and educators portray novelty and innovation as central components for virtuous societal improvement (Hallonsten, 2023; Pfofenhauer & Jasanoff, 2017). This perspective, referred to in CIS as the '*pro-innovation bias*', conceptualizes innovation as inherently and universally beneficial to the context in which it is introduced (Godin & Vinck, 2017). This value is frequently articulated in economic terms, which are assumed to yield broader benefits, such as the enhancement of people's quality of life. Consequently, solutions to various societal challenges are primarily sought in technological innovations; meanwhile the potential drawbacks or even harmful effects of innovation tend to be overlooked (Fougère & Harding, 2012; Fornstedt, 2021) and resistance – even within the scholarship – is problematized and deprecated (Fornstedt, 2021). Opponents of digital developments, for instance, are frequently dismissed as regressive or ignorant (cf. Wormbs, 2010). However, from a CIS perspective, resistance is instead viewed as a source of knowledge that enables a critical examination of the particular innovation at hand and of innovation more generally (Fornstedt, 2021). Hesitancy and resistance may even introduce the friction necessary for a more robust and inclusive approach to studying and implementing innovation.

This is particularly relevant with regards to the needs of marginalized groups whose voices are often neglected or even silenced in design and implementation processes of new innovations. This is often the case even in instances where they are directly affected by the outcomes of those processes (cf. Du, Xie & Waycott, 2020). CIS thereby seeks to move beyond a simplified narrative of innovation as quick fix to resolving structural power dynamics.

It is with this in mind that we turn the spotlight on the instances of hesitancy and rejection which greeted Project X's proposed innovation and how this hesitancy was framed by the cultural sector actors participating in the research.

## Method

For the analysis we have combined multiple sources to explore the framing the innovation of Project X. We have analysed data collected within the project (essentially user studies) and conducted document analysis of project documentation, including the project application, plan, and description, along with notes from project meetings.

Insights on stakeholder hesitancy were gleaned from a survey, followed-up by a focus group interview. The initial step in Project X involved mapping relevant stakeholders within the cultural sector of Småland, encompassing both private and public entities, as well as those within the tourism industry. A total of 100 actors were identified through this process. In the second step, these actors were invited to complete an online survey consisting of 22 questions, which 34 respondents did. The survey solicited responses on various topics (e.g., marketing practices, digital events) as well as attitudes towards a new, wide-scale digital platform for advanced,

comprehensive, and up-to-date information on cultural events. To gain deeper insights into the survey responses, all participants in the survey were also invited to participate in a focus group. Although seven respondents accepted the invitation, only four attended. Participants were from the private cultural sector, tourism, and the public cultural sector. The interview lasted 40 minutes and was conducted via Zoom, with one researcher facilitating the discussion while the other took notes. No recordings were made due to restraints in the ethics approval. The emergent discussion shed further light on the basis of the innovation hesitancy observed in the survey.

For the analysis, central concepts from CIS were used in order to critically reflect upon the positions taken by the cultural sector actors participating in project.

## Findings

### Project documents

A review of the project application and plan for Project X reveals that its goals and motivations are strongly aligned with ideas and values characteristic of the pro-innovation bias. The idea of innovation as inherently and universally beneficial to the context in which it is introduced (e.g., Fougère et al., 2017) is illustrated in statements such as:

*The project will demonstrate how to embrace digital change and encourage partnerships that foster innovation, also making it easier for people to use culture for education, research, creation, and recreation.*

Furthermore, the project attempts to provide solutions to societal challenges, in this case public access to culture, by means of technological innovations. Thus, potential drawbacks or even harmful effects of the suggested innovation are downplayed in the project documentation.

*The project will therefore set out to invent new ways to collect, promote, and analyze information about cultural events, using relevant digital technologies to make cultural events more accessible to the public on the one hand while providing insights to event organizers on the other.*

One such harmful effect mentioned by the participants in both the survey and the focus group is the issue of labor and maintenance.

### Stakeholder survey

The survey response rate was 34%, with half of the respondents (53%) representing municipalities while the rest were from diverse cultural organizations (e.g., museums, venues, galleries). Results showed that the most common platforms for publicizing cultural events were social media accounts, local websites, and municipality websites.

Platforms for publishing cultural events	
Social media accounts	97%
Local websites	82%
Municipality websites	70%

**Table 1:** Choice of platforms

When asked if respondents were willing to contribute information to a joint platform, approximately half of the respondents gave an affirmative. However, a nearly equal amount provided reasons for hesitancy or reluctance on their part, such as ‘the need for more information about the platform’ or ‘not having the resources to contribute’ (Interestingly, even a respondent

expressed unequivocal willingness to participate in the proposed platform gave reason hesitancy). One respondent succinctly stated: ‘*I don't believe in the idea.*’

Reasons for perhaps/no	Count
Need additional information to make a decision	10
Do not have the resources to contribute	7
Existing platforms are sufficient	1
Other: ‘ <i>I don't believe in the idea</i> ’	1

**Table 2:** Reasons for hesitancy

### Focus group interview

The hesitancy and reluctance expressed in the survey was sizeable and a focus group interview allowed us to discursively explore this beyond the restricted format of an online questionnaire. Whereas the survey indicated interest among the respondents in a joint platform, the focus group participants exhibited more vehement reluctance. The participants expressed varying needs but unanimously conveyed little interest in a joint online platform for providing an overview of regional cultural events. They cited several reasons for this, the central ones being the related issues of timing and insufficiency of resources. Furthermore, participants revealed that – based on a failed previous attempt to centralize cultural event information – several local cultural sector actors in Småland had already transitioned away from using regional/national portal or database solutions. This shift was prompted by the perceived high costs and risks of obsolescence of centralized systems. As a result, institutions made significant investments in new commercial services and local solutions which they perceived as effectively meeting their needs for digital marketing and event communication. Moreover, that investment into local solutions and organizational-managed social media channels left no further resources to be allocated to a novel venture. Therefore, the participants expressed concerns regarding the hosting, maintenance, and funding of a joint platform aggregating regional cultural events. Nor did they express any interest in assuming responsibility for these aspects: as one participant simply put it, ‘*what's in it for me?*’

Interestingly, the focus group saw the virtue of the fragmented information landscape, expressing concern that a platform aggregated cultural events information from across the region would risk an information overload for end-users. It was doubted that the platform could appropriately filter an expansive list of events for the general public, or the public's ability to apply such filtering mechanisms. But there was another value seen in the fragmented and siloed cultural sector: the internal competition within Småland. The participants described their experience using the region's joint service for international marketing, and noted that once tourists arrived, the local actors were more likely to view one another as competitors for visitors and audiences rather than collaborators harmonious working towards a common and idealistic goal (e.g., ‘*cultural enrichment*’). There was therefore a pragmatic self-interest which also motivated the current, fragmented information ecosystem.

### Analysis

Labor and maintenance were main concerns among the stakeholders of Project X. While the pro-innovation discourse focuses the development of always newer products, within CIS there is a growing attention to maintenance and repair (Graham & Thrift, 2007; Russel & Vinsel, 2018). This strand of research questions the innovation-centred discourse of technological development by highlighting the importance of repairing infrastructures and the work of maintaining digital

services. Project X offered to develop a free platform for circulating information about cultural events. However, it became evident that the primary costs associated with disseminating information did not lie in the development of a digital tool, but rather in its ongoing maintenance and the continuous input of information. Even if this information is free, the creation of it is cumbersome and costly. In the context of digital technologies, much of the labor required for a service to function is often obscured and black-boxed. Data needs to be cleaned, edited and errors checked (cf. Jarlbrink, 2020). Such digital labor was left out of the promises of Project X but was recognized by the cultural sector actors who were reluctant to take on any additional tasks beyond their existing efforts dedicated to local solutions and social media activities, which were themselves implemented due to the inadequacy of previous innovations.

Furthermore, the social challenge that the innovation of Project X sought to solve was not a challenge identified by important stakeholders. The idea of a joint platform for cultural events in Småland was built on an implicit comprehension within Project X of this region as an imagined community with mutual goals and interest in terms of sharing and disseminating information about culture. However, Småland encompasses a vast area, comprising three counties, two provinces (with Öland being part of Kalmar County), and 33 municipalities, each characterized by significant local variations and numerous potential cultural sector actors operating at various levels. These actors, in turn, cater to diverse audiences and pursue differing, sometimes conflicting objectives with respect to a digital platform for sharing information about cultural events, often prioritizing communities outside of Småland as their primary focus. Whereas Project X built the innovation on a presumption of collaboration, the actors were just as much competitors, or coopetitors (e.g., Gnyawali & Park, 2010).

## Discussion and conclusion

Research and universities are distinctly embedded within the pro-innovation discourse. The research policy direction at both Swedish national and EU levels clearly delineates this trajectory, further reinforced by the growing dependence on external funding, which prioritizes innovation-oriented research projects, often aimed at producing and commercializing a product. In this context, research outcomes are framed in terms of innovations that are to be capitalized upon by being converted into continually new and improved services and products. Project X, as analysed in this paper, was born out of such policies. It was also funded by a funding agency that specifically endorses values deeply rooted in the pro-innovation discourse. Hence, it is not surprising that the project goals sought to fit the market- and product-oriented approach associated with such values and ideals. This resulted in attempts to develop a one-product-fits-all digital platform along with refining a best practice for information-sharing presumed to be universally applicable across Småland. Hence, the view ingrained in the pro-innovation discourse made it easy to overlook specific conditions and contexts (cf. Fougère et al., 2017).

The assumption that the digitization of objects, practices, and processes is inherently beneficial and will lead to enhanced efficiency and overall improvement shaped the direction of Project X. Yet ongoing cultural changes and current adaptations must be understood to ensure a new digital solution is actually needed and this requires looking passed a linear, deterministic trajectory dictated by solely technological advancements. The costly maintenance of novel products and services is all too often black-boxed in the ‘innovationism’ (Valaskivi 2012) of today.

The market- and product-oriented approach towards innovation involves a temporal dimension that influences the focus and outcomes of research, and Project X is hardly exceptional in this regard. Depicting innovation as a competition or a race, characterized by an imagined need to maintain a high pace puts an emphasis on speed. In Project X, such incentives meant that slower processes allowing for relationship-building, reflection, and deeper insights were set aside. By critically reflecting on this process, we have sought to further on avoid reproducing the top-down innovation practice described by Varoufakis (2024), where innovations are created by a select



privileged few for consumption by the many. As researchers we must pay enough attention to relevant local conditions and key contextual aspects by critically engaging with the innovation process of the project itself. In this analysis of Project X, we have sought to reverse the top-down approach, to recognize the knowledge contributed by the various participating actors (cf. Fornstedt, 2021), and not allow instances of innovation hesitancy get overshadowed by pro-innovation bias or selectively attending only to the affirmations from more supportive stakeholders. Thereby, the project has yielded valuable insights that can be of use for understanding the actual needs of cultural sector actors with regards to digital innovation and information sharing. Nevertheless, this issue warrants further discussion and exploration.

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