

‘Comparing Smart City-Regional Governance Strategies in Bristol, Glasgow, Bilbao & Barcelona’

(Dr Igor Calzada, Future of Cities at the University of Oxford)

‘Smart city’ (Hollands 2008, Kitchin 2014 and Batty 2015) has already become a ‘fetish’ term to simplify complex urban debates in an uneven techno-deterministically-driven hyper-connected society. Therefore, a mainstream wave of urban standardisation concerning the ‘smart city’ (in-the-box) paradigm has been dominating policy agendas. Yet, this movement has failed to offer alternative efficient policy tools to better understand and intervene in our daily urban realities while considering the whole range of stakeholders that determine whether or not a common solution is a ‘smart’ one for the city. Moreover, it is arguable that the ‘smart city’ is already happening around us, but not in the way anticipated. Furthermore, the ‘smart city’ discourse has been shifted by academics in order to make proposals that produce realistic transitions in cities and to avoid a narrowly portrayed approach to governance and urbanisation processes.

However, according to previous research, the author suggests deconstructing the term ‘smart city’ to reach a holistic understanding from a critical urban transformation perspective. Therefore, this paper understands ‘smart cities’ as, in essence, entrepreneurial cities that respond immediately and efficiently – in imaginative, novel ways – to continuous, complex socio-technical changes caused externally by global market dynamics, and internally by unequal stakeholders’ power relations. Indeed, this paper compares strategically and ethnographically four specific city-region cases located in two European nation-states: Bristol and Glasgow in the UK, and Bilbao and Barcelona in Spain.

This paper presents some preliminary results regarding a research project entitled ‘Smart City-Regional Governance in Bilbao, Barcelona, Bristol and Glasgow’ funded by the European Commission, Marie Curie Actions, Cofund – Regional Programme. This paper will focus initially on how each case study has produced a particular discourse of ‘smartness’. Through this analysis, a stakeholder analysis and its unique configuration should be provided. Thus, a comparative analysis will proceed with multilevel governance and stakeholder analysis.

‘Smartness’ discourse has been embedded in the standardisation and homogenization of strategic practices in cities regarding, mainly, a particular set of actions to produce, or, at least, use, socio-technical systems. This paper challenges the existing widespread assumption of the so-called ‘smart city’ by emphasizing the uniqueness of each case based on their stakeholder composition and power relations.

It is noteworthy that scales of multilevel governance pluralise with intensifying patterns of European connectivity and accelerating economic restructuring. This gives rise to the notion of city-regional governance in nation-states. This may involve new concepts and narratives, mobilisation of different knowledge, and imaginative thinking about new governance strategies and use of institutions while employing more informal collaborative networks between regional stakeholders. Thus, in this paper, smart city-regional governance entail opening up and pressing for significant new ideas about democratic legitimacy and political inclusion.

Additionally, ‘smartness’ should be taken as an outcome of regional urban transformations in governance, reconciling seeming contradictions between established growth agendas and a rising concern with a broader range of qualitative parameters, such as societal and territorial cohesion. Nevertheless, considering the nation-state’s limited capacity to manage conflicting patterns of urban growth and decline, political demands regarding devolution of metropolitan and regional powers should be smartly taken into account.

This common trend remains crucial in four cases. While local governments increasingly are in charge of their own economic destiny, this paper compares city-regions to understand better stakeholders' dynamics in each socio-communitarian location. Socially and politically innovative processes are occurring at all scales, from neighbourhood participation interventions (micro) to city-regional strategic logics (macro).

Hence, this paper establishes the 'smart city-region' term both as a unit of analysis and a mode of production between stakeholders. However, one must acknowledge the particular histories, unique geographies and diverse power relations between stakeholders in different city-regions.

This comparative analysis of the four cases will enhance two dimensions of the 'smartness' for each city-region. On the one hand, the focus will be on the metropolitan governance dynamics and the stakeholder interactions. On the other hand, it will tackle a special consideration to the devolution dynamics between the city-region and each referential nation-state.

In summary, this paper emphasizes that each case follows a diverse strategic momentum and stakeholders' dynamics.

For a long time, Barcelona¹ has been investing and promoting itself as the first Spanish Smart City, the fourth in Europe and the 10th in the world. At present, due to a new city major – Ada Colau, who represents a radical new citizen platform ("Barcelona in Common") – an initial smart city strategy has been shifted towards an 'open source' strategy.

In 2013, Glasgow² won £24m of funding from the UK Technology Strategy Board (TSB) to explore ways to use technology and data. At present, the strategy is being reviewed based on the demonstrator Project, which focuses on four main areas of urban infrastructure: health, energy, transport and public safety. The question here is whether the 'urban governance' model has integrated the city-regional scale as suggested by The Scottish City Alliance.

By contrast, Bristol³ received £3m from the UK TSB, but its approach has followed 'open innovation' principles by its flagship operational organisation called "Bristol is Open." The university is playing a remarkable role in engaging stakeholders at the metropolitan level. However, how the city-regional devolution affects Bristol's smart-city strategy remains uncertain.

Finally, Bilbao, according to the Guardian, depicts an outstanding context to be rebranded as a new modern icon of the smart urban renaissance, though this ongoing research shows a paradoxical situation. The institutional fabric is very dense, considering its spatial dimensions, and it is currently fragmented, but a potential could be foreseen in the short-term regarding the active dynamism and openness shown by these institutions.

This paper depicts different ways to understand and implement urban governance strategies based on 'smartness' by unevenly offering forms of participation in cities and regions.

¹ <http://smartcity.bcn.cat/en/smart-city-areas.html>

² <http://futurecity.glasgow.gov.uk>

³ <http://www.bristolisopen.com>