The role of social platforms in transforming service ecosystems ☆

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to define and conceptualize the role of social platforms in transforming service ecosystems. The study explores how prime social movers use social platforms to enable transformation. The empirical context is Tunisia, a service ecosystem in transformation from repression to democracy. The study builds on ecosystems within management research and service ecosystem frameworks in service-dominant logic (SDL) and describe and analyze the process of institutionalization of social change. Using narratives from interviews, the research focuses on how people, especially social movers during the Arab Spring in Tunisia come together and integrate disruptive social resources to make a social revolution a reality. This study contributes with: (1) a comprehensive conceptualization of the role of social platforms in the institutionalization of a social change, (2) clarifying the change of social transformation that starts with people, evolves to meso and macro levels, and transforms society, and (3) identifying a new service transformation framework for service ecosystems.

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1. Introduction

Service ecosystem frameworks (Ben Letaifa & Reynoso, 2015) build on a socially embedded network perspective that includes different actors in the value co-creation process. Indeed, network interactions are neither top-down nor bottom-up (Ben Letaifa, forthcoming; London & Hart, 2011) as they suggest a systemic perspective of how actors coordinate and integrate their resources to co-create value for themselves and others (Edvardsson & Tronvoll, 2013; London, Anupindi, & Sheth, 2010). This systemic and dynamic view on ecosystems that build on the actors' activities and interactions may explain why and how an ecosystem can change. Indeed, ecosystems change when actors interact, share information, knowledge and other resources, and thus "contaminate" and even transform each other.

Recent studies highlight the role of social platforms and network effects in accelerating and liquefying the integration process, according to an ecosystem conceptualization of market opportunities or service transformations (Lusch & Nambisan, 2015).

In service ecosystems in the service dominant-logic (SDL) literature, actors integrate resources from multiple sources (private, market facing, and public) through service-for-service exchange (Vargo & Lusch, 2011). Recursive relationships between individual actions and the recreation of relationships and shared meanings (e.g., social norms and cultures) form and transform service ecosystems (Edvardsson, Tronvoll, & Gruber, 2011). The service-ecosystems perspective highlights the importance of institutions in value co-creation (Vargo & Akaka, 2012) and thus ecosystem transformation. Vargo et al. (2015, p. 66) argue for "institutionalization—the maintenance, disruption, and change of institutions"—as a central process of innovation and this study argues that institutionalization drives actors and service ecosystem's transformation. The cause of this institutionalization lies in the change on institutional logic of the macro level (see Fig. 1). Indeed, institutional change at the micro level (i.e., individuals) and at the meso level (i.e., networks of people) is not enough. The macro level includes formal organizations (i.e., public and private legal entities running socioeconomic activities) who, by laws, norms, rules, and values, decide whether to adopt the call for change from other layers of actors.

This study focuses on actors in the micro, meso, and macro levels and on how these actors transform themselves by using service and social platforms. Furthermore, information and communication technology (ICT) is a potentially useful knowledge, both an outcome and a driver of actors' resource-integration processes in their efforts to transform service ecosystems (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Thus, many interdependent factors shape and drive the integration process of both actors' own resources and resources they access in service ecosystems. Kleinaltenkamp et al. (2012) argue that researchers still need to learn much about these practices, and how and why do actors integrate
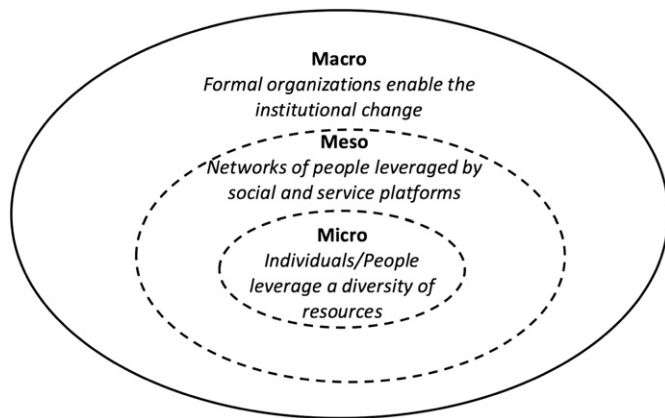
Fig. 1. Three layers/levels of actors in social change institutionalization.

resources. This study seeks to bridge this knowledge gap and to do so, this study discusses how and why service ecosystems transform, driven by social movers joining forces on social platforms and thus direct and coordinate their activities and interactions with the goal to change from repression to democracy/freedom. The service ecosystem transformation is particularly relevant in developing countries such as Tunisia, where the Jasmine revolution illustrates a social evolution, and where civil society is becoming more and more active and dynamic to solve social and economic problems. More specifically, this research shows how change in civil society (i.e., individuals) institutionalizes change through social platforms. Social platforms play a dual role: they are both operand resource (i.e., enabler for other actors in the service ecosystems) and operant resource (i.e., actor in the institutionalization of a social change) (Lusch & Nambisan, 2015).

The study of the transformation of Tunisia highlights the use of disruptive social tools but also creativity in framing a socio-political change. The findings reveal how these social movers transform during the process of social change institutionalization. This change is important because social interactions are loops: the changes start in the micro layer, continue in the meso and macro layer, and come back to the micro layer, enabling changes for the actors. These reinforcement loops change institutional logics from one layer to the next one, allowing mindsets and behaviors to change. The fact that institutions change confirms the transformation of service ecosystems.

After this introductory section, this study presents a literature review on service ecosystems and social platforms as enablers for change. Section 3 describes the method, and the results section illustrates: (1) how new paths of social transformation emerge, develop, and scale thanks to disruptive social resources; (2) the role of people, networks, and institutions in leveraging the social initiatives; and (3) a new service transformation framework for service ecosystems. This study also discusses theoretical and managerial implications, and provides suggestions for further research.

2. Theoretical framing

2.1. Service ecosystems

Many strategy and marketing researchers propose ecosystems as a theoretical framing to better understand current changes (Moore, 1996). This interdisciplinary metaphor offers a systemic and dynamic vision of socioeconomic exchanges among various interacting actors. More specifically, the ecosystem builds on the idea that nothing happens in isolation and that social platforms support social forces. Wieland, Polese, Vargo, and Lusch (2012) analyze value creation and extraction in terms of a network of actors rather than as a single actor, and

argue that value creation and extraction mobilize various shared capacities and skills.

This network of actors' perspective broadens the concept of value creation to also include peripheral actors (i.e., formal organizations) such as governments, universities, associations, and non-governmental organizations. This perspective acknowledges the complexity of reality and the importance of studying various levels of interaction to better grasp the socioeconomic processes that influence the development of services. Services require a balanced centricity instead of focusing on one specific actor (i.e., local or global, supplier or customer, firm or individual) (Gummesson, 2008). The shift to a more co-creative framework is an evolution to an inclusive ecosystem in which all socioeconomic actors can draw on their resources and capabilities to build sustainable service transformation (Rivera-Santos & Rufin, 2010).

The service ecosystem transformation is due to the interactions between socioeconomic actors who constantly use and coordinate their resources to co-create or co-destroy value. These interactions (like all interactions) are social and refer to the use of norms, habits, and values that actors share. Thus, researchers should look at the social process involving resource integration and management with a social perspective on services (Edvardsson, Kristensson, Magnusson, & Sundström, 2012; Edvardsson & Tronvoll, 2013). Social systems and platforms with social structures, including norms, rules, habits, and the creation of meaning for the engaged actors together with their agency, are transforming many service ecosystems (Edvardsson et al., 2011). However, researchers need more empirical work to illustrate how the institutional change takes places, and how actors are active operant resources in enabling or inhibiting this transformation.

The increasing adoption of new ICTs, in particular social media and social tools, bolster social systems and social interactions providing efficient ways of resource sharing and exchange (Skålén et al., 2015). The growth of the Internet, social media, and new networks and the advent of the Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 platforms facilitates service transformation (Williams & Tapscott, 2006). This shift favors the emancipation of an actor (e.g., customer) from a passive status and role (e.g., purchase and/or consumption of a product, duties, and rights as a citizen) (Wilkinson, 2008) toward a goal-directed, energized activist. These activists might act rebelliously and be politically assertive in their behaviors when facing mediocre services (i.e., for social, ecological, political, esthetic, health-related, or other reasons) (Zourrig, Chebat, & Toffoli, 2009).

This emancipation of actors as customers is also relevant to understand the importance of the transformation of social and political ecosystems since everybody is a social actor whose social beliefs and values influence his/her behavior (Edvardsson et al., 2011). Furthermore, such transformation is essential to promote inclusiveness, enhance human dignity, and alleviate socioeconomic gaps in more global service ecosystems (i.e., regions and countries). The accessibility and the rise of social and service platforms drive this emancipation of consumers, citizens, and individuals in general.

2.2. Social and service platforms

Ecosystems require open platforms to facilitate actors' interaction, resources integration, and value co-creation (Iansiti & Levien, 2004). These platforms can be online or offline, social, or service oriented. Whereas service platforms focus on the application of resources in the platform to create socioeconomic value, social platforms highlight the interactive human connectedness (i.e., social value), which is an outcome in itself. Yet, a service platform can also use a social design and foster connectedness, and a social platform can render services because users determine the potential online value, which might be augmented depending on the context. The Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia is a perfect example of an event scaling up through social platforms (Facebook mainly) and generating social, political, and economic values for the whole society.