

Doctor of Media and Communication Studies

'Should There Be an App for That?'
Public Value Creation from 'Smart' Mobile Application Initiatives for Brussels and Local Governments'

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Promotor: Prof. Pieter Ballon, PhD

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on the Brussels Engineering, Sciences & Humanities Campus of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels in Brussels in Building D, level 2, room D.2.01.

Abstract:

The year 2008 signified a tipping point in the field of Smart City and mobile research for three reasons. For the first time (1) there were more mobile than fixed broadband subscriptions active, (2) more “things” than people were connected to the internet, and (3) more than half of the world’s population lived in cities. These three shifts are indications of the fact that the smartphone is - for now - the predominant “interface object” that mediates a growing range of urban tasks and provides primary access to Smart City services. The main layer between the end user - citizen in this case - and the smartphones they use are the applications and services running on these devices. They are the connection between the physical location someone is in and the virtual and social information that can be linked to it. In turn, these applications can be based on *and* generate large amounts of data related to the urban sphere, which can provide policy makers with new insight. As such, today, mobile services are a core part of moving towards ‘Smarter Cities’ and the reason a closer investigation of what these shifts mean for cities has proven timely and warranted.

Today, local governments struggle to create and capture value at the pace of the

industry. The hypothesis of this thesis is that applying business model and value network thinking to the role of the city in mobile application creation and distribution, allows for the development of strategies for local governments that are better adapted to market conditions. The main research question to be answered by this thesis is:

Learning from international cases and its own current initiatives, what are policy strategies and recommendations Brussels - and other local governments - can apply to maximise (public) value creation from 'smart' mobile apps?

By using a multimethod approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, 37 mobile application initiatives are analysed and compared. From the mapping of these cases using a business model lens, a number of policy recommendations are formulated that can provide policy makers with more insight in developing a Smart City vision, as well as four strategies local governments can follow to positively stimulate the creation of public value. The thesis concludes that cities can particularly play a role in the creation and support of apps that address long-term and collective challenges. It offers cities an operationalised method that can guide the development of a Smart City vision, thus aiming to make both a contribution to theory and practice.