FRAMING CONTESTS IN CIRCULAR INNOVATION ECOSYSTEMS: THE CASE OF VALORIZING HUMAN WASTE

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ABSTRACT

Ecosystems are communities of hierarchically independent yet interdependent heterogeneous participants who collectively generate a value proposition. In an 'innovation ecosystems' multiple actors work together to create and capture value from collaborative innovation activities. Agreeing on a common goal, however, is fraught with tensions as partners typically have diverging ideological and moral assumptions about what the purpose of the ecosystem should be. In the case of 'sustainability focused innovation ecosystems', such challenges are typically exacerbated as partners may weigh environmental, social, and economic value differently and therefore have conflicting views about what it means to gain sufficient value to remain active in the ecosystem.

In this paper, we are interested in better understanding how participants come to play specific roles and the impact of this on the construction of a shared purpose and ecosystem emergence. More insights into this process may explain how actors in an innovation ecosystem can collaboratively develop a viable sustainable business model. To do so, we study the early development stage of a 'circular innovation ecosystems'. The ecosystem in our study emerges around the valorization and circularization of human excreta in France and involves government, citizens and start-ups that have divergent interest but aim to align around a sustainable value proposition. To better understand the socio-cognitive aspects of the emergence of a shared purpose, we build on the framing literature as it provides insights about ecosystem actors' interest in promoting a certain vision of an ecosystem's value proposition. We, thus, seek to better understand how ecosystem participants frame the ecosystem's initial value proposition, how these frames may change when participants interact, and how participants use framing to convince others in the ecosystem. Ultimately, we set out to explore framing contests – i.e. struggles over meaning-making amongst ecosystem participants. We advance research on ecosystem emergence by delving into the nature of these framing contests, and the role of ecosystem orchestrators in aligning contesting frames. Second, we also contribute to better understanding circular innovation ecosystems by outlining the characteristics that give rise to such framing contests, and the overall role of framing and re-framing in creating value from waste.