Urban narratives of the Smart City: the case of Hong Kong

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Defining urban narratives

- In Europe (especially) and the US, there is a narrative turn in public policy

- Terms such as *story-telling, narrative, discourse* are used interchangeably
  - *story-telling* is defined simply by the Cambridge dictionary (2020) as the 'activity of writing, telling, or reading'.
  - According to Patterson and Renwick (1998) a *narrative* 'is essentially a story, a term more often associated with fiction than with political science'.
  - However, *narrative* also refers to 'the ways in which we construct disparate facts and weave them together cognitively to make sense of our reality'.

- This conception encompasses social actions as discursive as they are *meaningful*, that is, organized by human values, norms and 'representations of human needs and aesthetics' (Wetherell et. al 2001).

Urban narratives and the City

- Urban narratives are often a combination of (new) images and discourses dealing with *marketing and branding issues* (Colomb, 2011; Vanolo, 2018).

- Urban geographers use narrative as a key-tool used by cities in order to attract investment capital and the so-called *'creative class'* (Florida, 2002) in the context of global and neoliberalised capitalism.

- Urban narratives are underpinned by the objective of *'selling places'* with a focus on various realms of public policies: planning (Sandercock, 2003; Mager and Mathey, 2013), culture (Watkins and Herbert, 2003; Richards, 2004) and/or economic strategy (Greenberg, 2008).

- There is also an emerging literature taking into account the *role of narratives and their processes within urban governance* (Oosterlynck *and al.*, 2018).
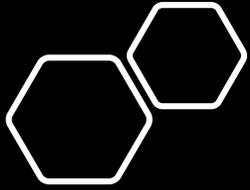
3 questions common to Hong Kong and to other cities

In which contexts do urban narratives emerge?

What are their salient features and aims?

Is there a diversity of narratives behind strong common themes such as that of the Renaissance of cities?

Can we identify urban coalitions that underpin specific narratives?

Who are the actors or coalitions of actors (re)inventing them?

How do cities organise their own urban narratives?

Attention will also be focused on the potential tensions that urban narratives may generate:

Is there room for alternative narratives and in what contexts?

From whom and where do potential contesting narratives arise?

Urban narratives and the Smart City

- Urban narratives are omnipresent and accompany the (re)development of cities. These include, *inter alia*:
  - ➢ Narratives about the ability of cities to *offer their inhabitants* a pleasant place to live
  - ➢ Narratives about the importance of cities in *economic development*
  - ➢ Narratives focusing on the ability of cities to be *collective actors* (for example, to play an important role in global governance, alongside states);
  - ➢ Narratives focused on *size*, notably the claim that "small is beautiful", or that "large cities are dynamic engines of growth";
  - ➢ Narratives framing cities as *central vectors of urban, national and international networks*, or as a focal for public- private interactions;
  - ➢ Narratives presenting cities as *places of hospitality* (with, notably recently, numerous cities claiming their willingness and ability to welcome migrants and refugees)
- **Narrative of Smart, Sustainable cities, our concern here**

This *exploratory* paper sits at the confluence of approaches:

- Is Smart City mainly as a tool of urban marketing: which actors lie behind the evolution of the HK Smart city strategy?
  - ➢ How original is the HK blueprint?
  - ➢ Where does it come from?
  - ➢ What are the main precepts?
  - ➢ Which are the key interests?
- Can we identify coherent narratives in our purposive interview sample?
- Do they tell the same stories about the city, its identity, its history, its development path and future prospects?

Early Appraisal

- HK Smart City blueprint is an externally delivered urban narrative – one classically designed by marketing and promotion agencies, rather than developing endogenously.

- HK Smart City blueprint: drawn up by external consulting agencies.

- Interview findings:
    1) If the SCBP drew on expertise from various departments, there was little overview (silos) or coordination *between different bureaux* within the HK government. Very little evidence of joined-up decision-making.
    2) From the perspective of actor-based sociology: evidence from interviewees outside of the HK government of a silo-based public administration *(traditional hierarchical public service ethos)* rather than an enabling, facilitating one.

Findings and interpretation:

NVivo: the overall word cloud

CLUSTER (1-5)	CLUSTERED WORDS (NVIVO)	TWINS AND TRIPLETS (CHILD NODES)	INTERPRETATION
1 SMART	Smart, Private, City, digital, innovation, Blueprint, Industry, Development, challenges, Public, Services	Smart + city Digital + public + services Development + challenges	INTERPRETATIVE (* is associated with [Pearson correlations])
2 SUSTAINABLE	Successful, Research, World, cities, system, Trust, Area, Companies, Mobility, Living, Environment, Place, China, Product, Company	Cities + Trust Companies + environment China + company	INTERPRETATIVE (* is associated with [Pearson correlations])
3 SENSE OF PLACE	Hong Kong, sense, people, sector, policy, Singapore, government, mainland, data, open, things, time, thing, department, technology, information,	Hong + Kong Policy + Singapore Government + mainland Open + data Technology + information	INTERPRETATIVE (* is associated with [Pearson correlations])
4 SERVICE	Service, Identity, Card	Identity + card	FACTUAL (*symmetrical): ID as one of the case studies
5 GLOBAL	Waste, France	Waste + France	FACTUAL (*symmetrical): French companies expert in waste management

Thematic overview

Three – contrasting - urban narratives from fieldwork

Core interview themes

3 x thematic maps

Individual interview logics

Interviewee 1: *International business community*

Key thematic clusters

- Companies (and their relationship to the Smart City)

- Smart City performance of Hong Kong (compared to other administrations)

- Public policies of the smart city: cars, transport, waste management, mobility, airport, banking

- Data and data security issues

- 'Process' issues

Interviewee 1: *International business community*

Bank
- Bank statement
- French banks

Car
- Electric car
- Smart car yeah

Company
- French company name
- Human resources company

Enough budget
- Enough budget

Mobility
- Mobility transport
- Smart mobility

Process
- Tender process
- Strict process

Right
- Right talents
- Right student
- Right place
- Right directory
- Apps right

Smart city
- Smart city objectives
- Smart city advocacy

Transport
- Mobility transport
- Really transport

Waste Management
- Waste Management

xxxxx voyage
- xxxxx voyage

Interviewee 10:
Former Hong Kong government

Key thematic clusters from auto-code

- Government – Smart City – public policy – audiences

- Innovations – ideas – think-tanks

- Smart City blueprint (HK) – Smart governments

- Narrative and strategy

Sunburst for interviewee 10

Interviewee 6: *Policy agent/agency*

- Trust and technology: Health tracking and uses of Health Apps

- Trust and mistrust of public data: need for trust, otherwise data will be lost; Thin trust essential for digital public policy; But mistrust over digital sharing of health records; Location services absolutely essential for, e.g., mountain rescue; But mistrust remains

- Hong Kong and mistrust of data: survival of the e. cheque and reluctance to entrust automatic transfers, FPS, etc.

- Public Administration dimension - Persistence of silos in the HK administration - Weight of past decisions.

- Role of mainland China: technically in advance of many issues, not confronted with the same level of mistrust

Core themes for interviewee 6
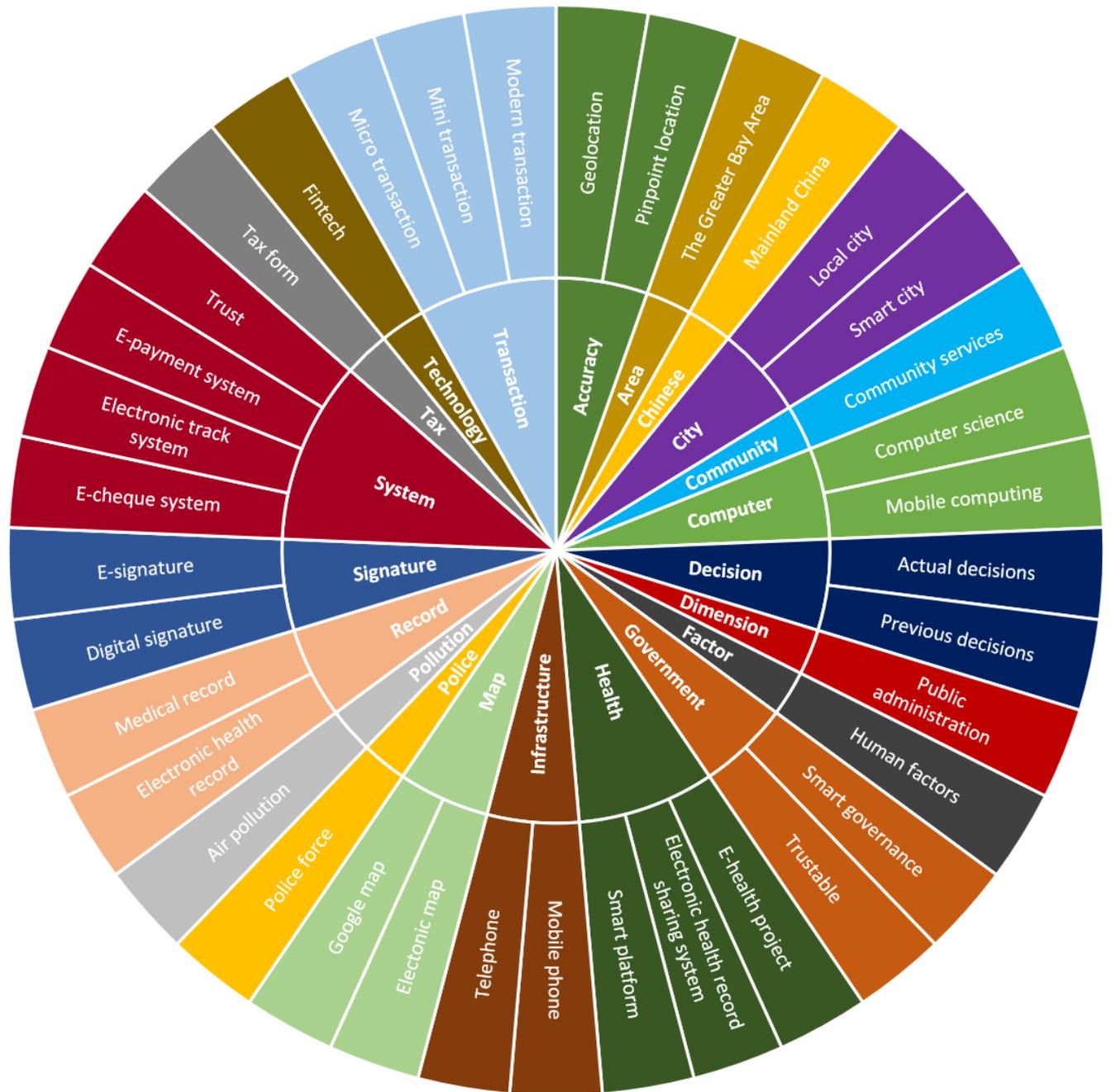
Conclusions

- Trust and the Smart City: explicit positioning by NGOs, to a lesser degree multinational companies, less a concern of HK government

- Types of narrative: sectorally-based (Mobility, Transport, Health, etc.)

- Not much evidence of narrative as a *persuasive form*: no strong steering in terms of identified causes and solutions, no real investment as an overarching *referential*, or policy frame

- Sectoral narratives – *e.g. in Energy, as a form of sustainable form of development*

- Alternative narratives: not so much in relation to Smart City, or even Hong Kong as a metropolis – though they are present at another level

- Caught between: administrative silos, lack of responsibility, audit culture and role of international consultants (e.g. PCW)