

Letter to the Editor

February 2012

THE POWER OF THE FEW - RESPONSE

I read Professor Tucker's letter to the editor the same week that Eastman Kodak filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, and Apple introduced the iBookstore platform (a disruptive effort of disintermediation reducing the publishing business to the scale of "the few"). In both cases, we are witnessing two organizations dealing with the challenge of disruptive innovations in very different ways.

In his letter, Professor Tucker claims that my article – "The Power of the Few" – presents an either/or proposition between networks and bureaucracies. It does not. As stated in the article, I am convinced that "bureaucracies are good organizations for managing iterative processes that are subject to continuous improvement loops and must be executed every time in the same way... They are the best solution to the problem of containing the same level of quality in a repetitive process."

The real challenge resides not in this false dichotomy between networks or centralized bureaucracies, but in the innovator's dilemma and the need to create managerial tools for the homeland security enterprise to deal with the fundamental differences between sustaining and disruptive vulnerabilities.

In the same way that highly structured backbones seem to be an unavoidable necessity for an optimal response to most operational iterative challenges, innovation platforms (spaces created by managerial choices that are mostly free of standard operating procedure and adhocatic in nature) have proven their effectiveness to deal with disruptive innovation, both in the private sector and in the public administration.

If what Professor Tucker argues in his letter were true, and "new technologies empower governments already more powerful than 'the few' as much and probably more than they empower 'the few,'" then there would be no innovator's dilemma. Powerful actors would always become more powerful by adopting the new technologies. Eastman-Kodak would still be the dominant actor in imaging and photographic equipment, Internet Explorer would be a far superior browser than Mozilla's Firefox, DARPA would be a redundant use of DoD assets, and a "failure of imagination" – when "the few" terrorists found a new highly innovative, highly disruptive way of recombining the "airplane hijacking" meme on 9/11 – would have never occurred.

Professor Tucker fails to take into account that the few are not empowered by disruptive innovation "more" or "less" than the powerful dominant actors, but *differently*. Vertical structures need ways to process those changes beyond their normal patterns to complement their otherwise incremental learning process. Centralized bureaucracies are not designed to be creative or disruptive or, for that matter, to adapt to disruption.

Thus, if we accept the either/or fallacy of this critique, not only the existence of HSARPA might be called into question, as Professor Tucker concludes, but also the existence of DARPA, ARPA-E, HPlabs, the X-prize, or the 20-percent time for Google engineers. All these innovation platforms would seem to be unnecessary because vertical bureaucracies would be enough to prevent strategic surprise and the failure of imagination.

Instead, I am certain that homeland security would benefit from an institutional framework that can gain the initiative in the innovation process, embracing rather than resisting the uncertainty created by the commoditization of key technological resources that empower small groups of individuals to recombine technologies faster than ever before.

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