

## **Bas Boorsma on Smart Cities Week 2017 and the Evolution of Smart City Technology**

Smart Cities Week is one of the most exciting events for anyone involved in building smart cities, with speakers drawn from a selection of top international experts. This year's theme was smart infrastructure, and following on from his panel on Bridging the Digital Divide at the event, we're delighted to interview Bas Boorsma about his vision for cities of the future.

Bas is the Director & Digitization Lead (Europe) at Cisco, where he directs innovative 'smart city' engagements, especially where it concerns Internet of Things related infrastructures, networks, solutions, business architectures, and innovations. He has also recently published a new book, *A New Digital Deal: Beyond Smart Cities*.

### **First of all, what were the most interesting takeaways from your Bridging the Digital Divide roundtable at Smart Cities Week?**

Digital divides are not the same thing as they were 20 years ago. This is not about young versus old, with the young being connected and the old not being connected. Digital divides and digital literacy is about much more than providing basic access, although it does start out with that.

In a large country such as the US, there are so many people in rural areas, for instance, that simply have very, very little access. A broader range of access technologies can typically be leveraged in order to make some of that happen. Then you have other ways of providing access, like public Wi-Fi, and typically this is part of the range of instruments that those public-sector leaders have.

Where the discussion has really evolved is to underscore the very fact that digitization is about more than providing basic access. So digital literacy is not just about having some access, but actually being able to fully leverage digital skills, the skillsets of the future, future jobs and for people to be able to stand more or less of an embrace of, let's say, the culture that emerges off the back of the digitization. That is a culture which is not always embraced by everyone in society.

Many leaders at the conference are already working on programs that address exactly these several shades of grey when it comes to digital literacy.

### **Were there any other standout talks during the week?**

I'm a fan of the CTO of Philadelphia, Mr. Brennan, particularly his comprehensive perspective across the value chain, across all the layers of how to get this right.

Instead of starting with artificial intelligence and other future-focused projects, Mr Brennan says, *"I start with a robust broadband infrastructure for my city, because if you have that you can build any vision, but if you don't have that then you have a challenge now or in the very, very near future."*

I was also impressed by the very high quality, progressive visions that I saw from cities like Orlando, which are connecting up the Internet of Things to green emissions and solar power.

## **Moving onto your book, *A New Digital Deal*, you use the term ‘community digitalization’ as the focus of the book. What does this term mean and how does it relate to smart city development?**

The term ‘smart city’ is problematic for a couple of reasons.

‘Smart’ is a challenge because it’s almost impossible to define what you mean by ‘smart’ and what was smart 10 years ago will not be smart today. It’s become sensitive on a level of political correctness in the sense that if you’re not smart then what are you? Are you stupid? Would that imply that if you do not have some type of smart city pilot that you a stupid city? The answer, obviously, has got to be no.

The other issue is the word ‘city’. Quite simply because digitalization does not just apply to cities, it can apply to any community. I think that as smart cities evolve in terms of not just being infrastructure-heavy projects but more about cloud-based services, data and how you leverage it, there will be a much lower threshold for smaller communities to get involved.

So this is where I strongly object to the term ‘smart city’ but then still in my book I can’t escape it. I resort to it but not before I have firmly shaken up the term.

## **What does this new phase of community digitalization look like?**

There are three premises of what I call the new digital deal for communities. If you want to avoid a further enlargement of digital divides then you absolutely must arrive at a new digital deal.

First, digitalization continues to hold an enormous promise for our communities and in almost any public space. Secondly, you’re not going to get that digitalization fully realized by default. You’re going to need a plan, with social stakeholders coming together, bringing the best minds, skills and thinking to get this right.

The third premise is that if we don’t get to that new digital deal then we are going to see a wild growth in digital divides. We’re going to see disruption without an agenda, and grey innovations may simply get stuck in incrementalism. That’s the worst-case scenario in all of this.

We need to avoid situations where it becomes cities versus rural, or people with skill sets of yesterday versus the people with the skill sets of tomorrow – with a lot of people being left behind, assuming that they’re not going to be part of this next chapter of digital evolution.

## **As a subsection of this community digitalization, what do you think are the most exciting innovations happening at the moment?**



First of all, public space is a great point of convergence for all types of data — where a lot of public and private data meet. Right now, although we assume its powerful, we are under-leveraging all that data. We hear lots of wild claims about data being the new oil, but it will only be enormously valuable once we have the full package: capturing it, analyzing it, cross-referencing against other data sets, securing the data and consequent applications, and ensuring the entire value chain.

Digital displays are a great way to start addressing this. We can start experimenting with that far more efficiently as we understand the technologies and they're well proven. We take them from a broadcasting perspective to a unique casting perspective, where you take the individual as a starting point, with responses governed by hyper-local data.

### **Do you have any examples of projects where this is already happening?**

I'm fascinated that using dynamic data in the street automation space is a reality now. One of the front-runners of this is the Kinetic for Cities platform which is being created by Cisco and is live on 35 plus cities worldwide and implemented at a citywide basis in Jaipur, India and Adelaide, Australia, for instance.

### **How do you think tech companies should be working with public bodies to facilitate this innovation?**

Technology companies have been and continue to be crucial in all of this. Even five years ago there was the assumption that very big technology companies could essentially provide a smart city.

I think that both the cities and tech companies have learned that this isn't possible. This is much more of an ecosystem play where public meets private, municipalities meet technology companies, but also where small meets large.

You need to have the disruptive energy and innovation of start-ups along with larger companies who bring staying power, their ability to scale and the ability to provide post-sales service environments. Most importantly, big companies are good at building interoperability and open industry standards, especially considering we're dealing with the Internet of Things where standards have been lacking.

Finally, as I say in my book, technology companies will have to step up their awareness of the societal leadership role that they now have.

### **How can the digital signage industry help bridge the digital divide?**

Design Thinking is one of the essential smart city building blocks that I mention in my book. You should have elements that people want to and can interact with, and this is where the digital signage industry is essential.

Mistakes—like having a touchscreen that doesn't respond very well—mean you immediately lose 95% of your market. I think Samsung has got a great track record and great designs, but when it comes to the smart city space I think the entire industry has got a lot to do still. We should start with Design Thinking and then put engineering into it, rather than the other way around.



You can buy Bas Boorsma's [A New Digital Deal](#) on Amazon and other bookshops, and find him on [LinkedIn](#) and [Twitter](#).

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