

New spaces, different people

Catherine Howe / 26th May 2014

Introduction

Government can be said to operate at a different timescale to the commercial or social world. Our biggest challenge over the next 5-10 years will be in bridging this gap. This change is not simply the development of new technology, it can be argued that we are seeing the biggest shift in the nature of our society since the industrial revolution and while attempting simply to keep up with the technology we risk missing the fact that people are living their lives and working together in completely different ways. We are in the process of evolving the network society and central to this should be the question of how we evolve our decision making processes - our democracy - to continue to be relevant in this new context. This paper explores how changes to government can support the emergence of new forms of democracy.

10 years is such a short period of time in terms of government. Change is measured in terms of parliaments rather than in terms of years and it can be argued that the system of government has an inbuilt inertia to resist changes to its underlying design principles - it exists to preserve the status quo. While there are countless innovative projects and programmes within government we have not yet achieved a sense of systemic change which could form a response to the challenge of social change.

The speed of change in our wider society far outstrips the ability of government to adapt and we see evidence of this in a widening democratic deficit and increased pressure of services that are designed to suit a society that to a great extent no longer exists. Over the next 10 years our challenge will be to evolve our whole system of government to be fit for purpose for the network society and ensure that our democracy has evolved to create more networked forms of governance.

The suggestion within this paper is that in order to bridge this gap and create systemic change policy makers and politicians should focus on two things:

- Creation of digital civic architecture which supports rather than conflicts with democratic principles
- Re-skilling of our elected representatives in order to make them leaders not followers in the network society

At a local level these two priorities must rapidly manifest themselves in a new kind of relationship with citizens that should enable local areas to work more co-productively to deliver local solutions.

Reframe the debate: Answer the right questions

Within Government it is sometimes easier to face the immediate challenges rather than step back and reframe the debate. In the May 2014 European elections in the UK you could see this happening - we have seen an increase in vote share going to UKIP, a party based on Euro-skepticism which has been dismissed by the political mainstream as being 'loony' or 'fascist'. It may be both of these things but its persistent growth (albeit probably overstated in the media) over the last few years cannot be denied and while there are many and complex factors surrounding this growth the fact remains that they have become a part of mainstream politics.

The reaction to this from that political mainstream is fascinating with the underlying analysis seeming to be split between two very different ideas; The first analysis is that they have 'got it wrong' on immigration and that they need to respond to this concern. This is a policy-based response and suggests a belief that if you get the policy and manifesto right and you will solve this problem. The second analysis points out that for many people UKIP appear to be the only 'real' people in the political conversation and that this is a wholesale rejection to our way of doing politics and as a result democracy.

I tend towards this second analysis and in doing so I think highlight one of the biggest challenges facing government - **are we addressing the right problem?** In focusing on immediate issues and addressing the immediate political cycle we lose our ability both to plan effectively for the future but also to step back and react to wider social shifts and trends. In this case, we are focusing on policies and the way in which the media reinforces the adversarial style of politics we are familiar with rather than addressing the underlying change in what people want from their politicians.

Government is only one part of a complex global system but it is a crucial part as, along with the legislature, it has the potential to shape much of the context for the future. Another key challenge for government will be to accept this role more fully online as well as offline and to start to **grasp the challenges of creating sustainable infrastructure in the digital as well as physical realm.**

The final challenge is that of behaviours. As William Gibson is famously claimed to have said “*The future is already here – it’s just not very evenly distributed*”. This is as true for behaviours as well as technology and while much work has been doing looking at the way in which, for example, the Millennial generation behaves when contrasted with older cohorts the real differences are more subtle and connected to personal preferences, aptitude for learning and adaptability. I have met 65-year-old councillors who are perfectly at home on social media and 25 year olds who have to be persuaded to use a smartphone. Resistance to change is coming between ‘social’ generations of industrial and networked behaviours and if we wish to actively shift our democracies to better align with the pace of social change **we will need to renew the behaviours of our politicians as much as the digital infrastructure they will operate within.**

Theory of change

The idea that we need to shift behaviours and context is linked to the underlying theory of change that I am presenting which is briefly outlined here.

The first aspect of this is to acknowledge the need for systemic change. By considering system dynamics we are able to appreciate all actors in the environment, including the infrastructure, and as such the complexity of what is needed in order to do things differently. The theory of change that I am working to, not as yet well articulated, is to first expose the desired values of the system - its moral compass - and then describe both the behaviours and context which are needed for these values to be best realised. This work is the backdrop against process redesign can be carried out.

However, this is not a linear process but one of contestant, experimentation, refinement and essentially co-production with change being shaped over time rather than being a desired state which is never reached.

Once this approach is in place then the work needs to progress in stages with system interventions being planned in order to provide 'moments' when the changed system is evident. This approach requires that we answer the final challenge facing government - that of **creating collaboration rather than competition**. If we are shifting into more networked rather than hierarchal ways of organising then we will inevitably see established hierarchies struggling with networked behaviours. However one other observation which I am keen to discuss is the difficulty faced in creating collaboration within networks when many of the individuals are each convinced in the rightness of their individual approach and there is no clear evidence to shape 'truth'.

The proposals in this paper are both based on an assumption that any new system of government will be based on a more co-productive

relationship between citizen and state. The dilemma is how to model this outcome in the process of change.

Digital civic architecture

Space matters. The places in which we live our lives affect the way in which we behave and this is as true online as it is offline and while environments such as Facebook clearly act as ‘networked publics’ they are built on commercial rather than social principles and there is much in their design which contradicts a social purpose - the attitudes to privacy and data sharing being central to this.

Government is making steps in this direction and initiatives such as the adoption of open standards and an interest in open data is encouraging. However while we are still debating big data in terms of surveillance rather than looking to shift its usage to being more participatory there is still much to be done in this area. The challenge for government is how to stay ahead of the shaping activities of commercial entities who are seeking to create a very different public realm (think shopping mall rather than farmers market) and I argue that this will only be possible if government focuses its attention on infrastructure rather than functionality. This means the creation of an open architecture which reflects the values and behaviours that we codify in other ways in our legislation.

I propose five design principles for this architecture, outlined below:

1	Public	It should be a Public space that is available to any interested citizen.
2	Co-productive	The space should facilitate a co-productive relationship between citizen and Government.

3	Adopt a self-defined geography or topic	The geographical reach of the space should be self-defined by users with administrative boundaries being subordinate to 'natural place' described by the participants. Similarly, the topic should be defined by participants and not imposed by outside forces.
4	Open and information rich	The space should support the principles of open government with respect to data, process and transparency. This means, for example, that no information should be available by the space that is not available for all participants.
5	Able to authenticate identity	The space should be able to authenticate the identity of participants to a standard that makes their contribution available to consultation and policy-making processes.

These principles reflect my own western liberal values but also could be seen to reflect the public dialogue around desirable democratic qualities. The theoretical background is outlined in my doctoral thesis and more accessibly on my blog¹. It is worth noting that this approach has emerged from an examination of eParticipation approaches in parallel with study of the rise of civic uses of social media and is a result of the analysis of the weakness and opportunities prevalent in both of these fields. While we still focus on the functionality we miss the underlying architecture that shapes the experience of either social media or eparticipation.

¹ <http://www.curiouscatherine.info/category/digitalcivicspace/>

New skills for representatives

This next section is based on work being carried out with the East of England LGA which can be found on the project website². The Networked Councillor programme was created with three objectives:

- To help elected representatives to understand social media and explore new ways of working with their residents.
- To help them to build social media into their workflow, to choose the tools that fit with their personal communication style and help explore the 'why' not just the 'how' of new technologies.
- There is an underlying objective which is to help elected representatives to understand the way in which society is changing and to 'shift' them to network society thinking

The framework used for this work highlights four behaviour qualities needed by a networked councillor:

- **Open by default:** this is open not just in terms of information but also in terms of thinking and decision making
- **Digitally native:** not in terms of age but in terms of the individual adopting the behaviours and social norms of the digital culture
- **Co-productive:** an expectation that everyone in the conversation has power to act and the potential to be active in the outcome as well as the decision-making process
- **And as the name says, networked:** able to be effective via networked as well as hierarchical power as a leader

This attempt at behaviour change with elected representatives is in early stages however the initial workshops have been very successful with participants reframing their use of social media and starting to connect this with other changes that they wish to see within the context of their own environments. We will be gathering data on this process over the next 6 months and will be able to report back more systematically on results then.

The motivation behind this piece of work is outlined earlier in this article but is also a counterbalance to the work on digital civic

² <http://networkedcouncillor.wordpress.com>

architecture described in the previous section. The focus on elected representatives is tactical as they hold much of the power in the current system and could be pivotal in terms of future change if they are equipped with the right skills.

A new kind of democratic relationship

The last section opens up the final challenge to government - how to involve people in the process of change without tethering the conversation to old ways of working. There are few people who would deny the fact that the structures of government are under considerable stress, however too often the response to this is to suggest we revert to old ways of working - an unrealistic aspiration.

If we consider democracy, politics, bureaucracy and civil society as each being part of a system of government then we have to consider change as affecting each part of this system. This is a system which I believe now exists within the nascent network society and as a result we need to start to apply the principles of the network society to the design of our system of government. I am trying to describe a model of democracy with the following qualities:

- The system of representation is based around networks of citizens and reflects both place and topic. By embedding the idea of networks within the representative process we can move towards what Coleman describes as 'direct representation' with citizens feeling directly connected to their representatives
- Different democratic decision making models can be applied throughout the system. I am advocating a democratic model which offers the opportunity for more direct democracy within the hyperlocal context, for example, but embeds participatory and deliberative approaches for more complex situations
- The bureaucracy needed to support this system of government would be designed to support agile decision making and be responsive to persistent feedback

- This model would apply within other structures and not simply our formal democratic institutions

There are other cultural and social drivers which I also believe need to be accommodated in our democratic model, for example a desire for greater levels of openness and access to information (these are both qualities I have suggested as being design elements of digital civic architecture). I am tentatively thinking about this system as being one of 'network democracy'.

One of the issues which make a new model necessary, and which I believe is not yet addressed adequately in the literature, is the question of scale. We have created a democratic hierarchy based on the fact that our representatives cannot have a meaningful relationship with the full range of people that they represent but I think this is no longer a good assumption. In a more digital and networked world public opinion is both more granular and more 'knowable' and if we get the balance between surveillance and participation right then this is a huge democratic asset and one which should be a driver of democratic change. The public, not unreasonably, want their representatives to listen to them and not to the national newspapers. Scale is important because what works for 4500 people does not necessarily work for 45000 and we should build in the flexibility needed to enable meaningful participation in both contexts.

Much of this rests in the need to develop trust throughout the whole of any system of democracy. There is a great deal of trust involved in the surrendering of your interests to the common good - in many ways democracy is a way to ensure that this trust is balanced. This is a view that can be traced back to Hobbes' who asked what conditions are need to be in place to make this trust possible. However I am not sure that the rationality that he expects people to bring to this choice really expresses the personal nature of trust. This is where the need to feel connected to our representatives comes from I think - in the network society we seek to connect to individuals not institutions.

I think that this is a model of democracy which could be both tested and developed from the ground up - it is not a top down system of government but instead could be experimented with in hyperlocal and local contexts.

Conclusion

I have outlined a numbers of challenges here but each of them can be examined at local as well as national level. To separate government into local and national structures perhaps allows us to ignore the grey areas which unite the two around principles, policy and trade-offs. By focusing on the right questions we can start to look at how we can synchronise the process of change to the pace that government can operate at. Once change is in train it is easier to accelerate. This means that any attempt to reconfigure or adapt government, at any level, requires us to look at how to change the context and the behaviours with structural and process change coming as a result of that.

Neither process will ever be finished but by working interactively and with genuine experimentation we maximise the opportunity for system change to ignite and for a new relationship between citizen and state to become real.

In conclusion I suggest we need to move forward in small and manageable steps - perhaps by considering not perfect democracy but enough democracy - a minimum viable product if you like. In a complex world its realistic to aspire to designing to make many experiences, government, corporate and civil, *slightly* more democratic rather than simply focusing on making a single institution such as a parliament *much* more democratic.

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