# Redesigning democracy for the Network Society

Catherine Howe / 29th April 2012

This article proposes reframing the discussion of use of ICT by Government within the context of social change and the emergence of a more networked society. It suggests three ways in which this social change relates to government; the blurring of boundaries, a greater requirement for openness and a pressure for more direct forms of representation and goes on to suggest some practical steps for realising these cultural adjustments.

# A new context

EParticipation, developed to explore the belief that technology can be used to reduce the democratic deficit, is a relatively new discipline. I am arguing that its time is already over. We now live increasingly digital lives with social interactions in networked publics (Boyd 2010), which mean that we are persistently connected to our network. We have immediate access to information and with the growth in the use of mobile devices we are making our digital networks part of our constant everyday existence (Castells 2001). Rather than building specific tools to attract citizens online Government must understand the social change that is happening and redesign itself to be part of the Network Society. The vital question of how to connect, empower and engage with Citizens needs to be addressed in the context of social change and not kept restrained within the context of technological capability.

While the field of eParticipation is concerned with the problem of democratic deficit and seeks to use to technology to address this deficit its focus on Government as a platform means that it perhaps adopts a deficit analysis of participation - it looks at the undisputed drops in formal participation and asks how to reverse this decline. Instead I propose examining forms of participation which are growing and ask whether these can be used to reconnect citizens to formal decision making.

In saying this I am suggesting that the nature of participation has changed with the advent of a more digitally connected and networked society and that there is an upward pressure for change on Government in order to respond to these social changes. By framing the need to transform engagement with Citizens as a technological rather than a social challenge we risk failing to transform the culture of government towards something which is more meaningful and ultimately more engaging for Citizens.

> Faced with low participation rates, many e-democracy programs have fallen back on the argument that numbers do not matter and that it is the quality of political deliberation that counts. The best-known formal deliberative schemes have never grown beyond communities of a few hundred. To revisit a point made earlier in this chapter, critics have questioned the reliance by interest organizations on form emails and Web templates that enable many thousands of citizens to send comments to policy makers (Shulman 2006). But should we devalue large numbers of individual citizen actions, even if those actions carry very little cost? Web 2.0 environments are significant because they enshrine participation by thousands or even hundreds of thousands in scalable ways. The most powerful Web 2.0 applications—particularly at online social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter—derive their value from the predictable network effects associated with large numbers of participants. Because they are not tied to a heavily deliberative model, political networks in Facebook and Twitter are able to grow comparatively quickly, and as more people participate, there is more value is in the network.(Chadwick 2011)

At the same time as government has been wrestling with the problem of how to adapt to the Network Society the public have just been getting on with it and exploring ways in which these new tools can be used in order to express opinions and viewpoints and to gather energy behind campaigns that have in many cases gone straight to the heart of government. Digital activism covers a range of activities, usually focused around single or at least tightly focused sets of issues. It has come into being over the last few years as numbers of people online has steadily grown and is now one of the first responses to an issue. The UKUncut movement was a hashtag on twitter before it was a movement and the 'hackergate' scandal which saw huge public outcry at the news that News International had hacked into peoples voicemail saw a petitioning site set up and collecting thousands of signatures within hours of the news breaking. While these movements have been examined extensively (Leighninger, Shirkey,

Karpf, Gibsen et al) the context of analysis is often of mainstream media or political parties rather than as a social movement.

There are some key differences between the nature of these new forms of participation and the way in which we have designed our traditional democratic structures and processes:

- Open - there are no limits on who can participate and there is an emphasis on access to information and open systems and networks
- Personalised - the online experience is highly customised (some would say too customised (Sunstein)) and is designed around convenience for the participant
- Direct - you can see the output of your participation and you are usually automatically updated as to the progress of the issue you have engaged with
- Immediate - via phone, tablet or PC you can chose when and where to participate

How many of these qualities are afforded by our traditional democracy?

It is not so much the fact that Government is failing to embrace these new technologies. Within the Communication space we can see many examples of government using social media to broadcast messages or to enter into some kind of conversation with the public. However while this use of new technologies fails to address the nature of democratic participation and to systemically effect the relationship between the Citizen and their Representative we further build the tension at the heart of the issue of democratic deficit - a disconnect between Citizens and Politicians.

ICT, and particularly in the form of the social web, provides opportunities for the public to interact freely with each other. It provides the potential for profoundly different forms of deliberation or discussion, for example the UK Government's use of Crowdsourcing in the Treasury[1] or with tools like Debate Graph[2]. However without democratic reform which changes the nature of representation and starts to address the social changes which mean that we are more likely to vote in a reality TV show than a general election (Coleman 2006) then we are not realising the true potential of ICT to address the question of democratic deficit.

---

[1] http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/spend_spendingchallenge.htm

# Cultural change

There are a number of ways in which we might consider this social shift as relevant to the nature of Government.

**Blurring of boundaries**

One of the effects of a more Networked Society is the blurring of organisational boundaries and roles which effects the relationships between actors. Collaboration happens spontaneously between actors and one of the expectations that is created by new technologies is the ability to connect directly to the person or organisation of interest. The networked citizen, for example, is more informed and as a result has more power than her standalone equivalent (Coleman 2004). This citizen is able to express themselves more directly and to connect to others directly and publicly with respect to issues and ideas that are important to them without the need to go through the hierarchal structure of the representative democratic process. In order for this power to be realised with respect to effecting decisions our process of government may need to change in order to rethink the role of this new networked citizen in decision making.

Another sense in which relationships are affected is with respect to culture as the behavioral norms of the Social Web start to diverge from what we observe offline (Donath, Ito & Horst) and takes on different cultural patterns. For example the social web is also a natively meritocratic place, reaching back to the hacker antecedents of the Internet to result in power and influence being related to your audit-able contribution and not to your conferred power. Castells describes reputation and power online as being in a state of constant renegotiation:

> "The community accepts the hierarchy of excellence and seniority only as long as this authority is exercised for the well-being of the community as a whole, which means that, often, new tribes emerge and face each other". (Castells, 2001)

Power operates different within networks compared to how it works within hierarchical organisations and one of the culture clashes that we face is the highly agile and networked digital activists outpacing the maneuverability of the traditional politicians. Politicians, and

---

[2] http://debategraph.org/

administrators, will need to learn to use networked power and to have a clear idea of their own contribution and relevance in order to be able to operate effectively in these new environments.

**Open by Default**

In the last section I introduced the idea of the digitally native participation being open. This is a quality that requires greater examination as it is crucial cultural element of participation and engagement in a network society context. I propose that the meaning breaks down into 5 different aspects:

### 1..Open information – not just data

Open data – the idea that government originated data should be in the public domain in an accessible and useable way is now a fairly established idea even if its implementation is as yet rather uneven. The Oxford Internet Institute[3] now has a dedicated research programme examining this aspect of Government and it is seen as an essential element of many eGovernment programmes. There are two motivations behind open data, the first is a desire to make government more accountable. This would be enough of a reason in its own right as without transparency its very difficult to imagine how we will rebuild trust in the democratic process without a shift away from the idea that information is something that needs to be controlled in its contact with the public. There is a second motivation with respect to development of a post-industrial economy which is considers data to be the raw material for this value creation.

### 2. Open process

Again, there are two senses this is important firstly with respect to trust in the democratic process and secondly with respect to the benefits of more open processes generally.

Trust in a process is created by being clear about what the process is. A good democratic experience is one where you are happy that the outcome is fair even if it

---

[3] http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/

isn't your preferred outcome. At present many of our decision making processes do not feel open to the public as they assume that the public have access to the only through their representatives and the public do not feel connected to politicians. We have a choice – amend the process or improve connections between citizens and politicians. The answer may be a combination of the two.

More generally, open processes enable far wider participation and also build in the possibility of creativity and innovation far more effectively than a process which assumes that the process managers have all the answers in advance. Look at events like CityCamp Brighton[4] to see what happens when you bring interested people together with no agenda and some basic resources.

### 3. Open access

Open access is really about making sure that Government is 'available' to the public – as are politicians. This means taking the conversation, and the decision making process, to the places where people are and having the debate on their terms not at the convenience of government. Its also about using new channels to make it possible for far more people to connect directly to politicians. There are some things which need a face to face conversation but new technologies and the social shift around the way in which we use them means that we should insist that politicians and government actively engages with us using these channels – this is an entirely solvable problem.

### 4. Open standards

Technical standards allow interoperability and ultimately support collaborative behaviour online. By adopting an open, by implication shared, standard the developer is open to the idea of wider connection and cooperation between their work and others. Quite apart from the practical benefits this is a cultural statement. Taking this further and adopting open source licence models which encourage reuse and further development the use of open standards is a power – if technically sent – message. The Public Sector often talks of open source as being a cost saving measure with very limited understanding of the whole open source lifecycle and the real costs for making

---

[4] http://ccbtn.demsoc.org/

it successful. The real benefit of open source and open standards in my mind is the design signal that it sends in creating online experience.

If we want to be "open by default" then we need use open standards to build our civic architecture.

## 5. Open mind

There is a final sense in which I think we need to consider 'open' and ask ourselves how open we are to new ideas. One of the side effects I believe, of living a more digital and as a result public life is that your thinking is exposed. If we are open by default we have to be open to external influences as well as being open with our thought processes. This is not just a cultural change, the fact that our previous opinions and earlier held views are available online means that it is not possible to move seamlessly from opinion to opinion as the connections between these thoughts are increasingly documented. Our digital footprint reaches back in time and can illustrate the influences which led us to a particular view. We can either react to this defensively or we can embrace it and use it as an opportunity to create a more discursive and fluid debate.

**The relationship with the media**

Perhaps the greatest challenge to the cultural transformation of Government and Democracy is the parallel transformation of the Fourth Estate, or as Dutton discusses the emergence of a Fifth Estate in the form of more networked and independent media (Dutton 2007). The media landscape has been permanently disrupted by the rise of digital technologies and the ability to for the public to tell their own stories and major news organisations though still of pivotal importance to the democratic process are struggling to uncover viable business models for the new era (Castells 2001). Even where the claimed 'victory' is by older media as was the case with the 2010 General Election in the UK where the focus was on the first televised Leaders debate the impact of social media and the changes which this brought alongside the mainstream media were substantial (Chadwick 2010).

The relationship between politics and media has taken on some of aspects of social change with a removal of deference for example, but it has not taken some of the more positive aspects nor has it absorbed the effect of long term digital audibility. At present we often see

two established elites continuing to focus on each other and in many ways oblivious to the social change around them (Flinders 2012).

# How to respond?

In this article I am arguing that in order for Government to best utilise the opportunities for citizen engagement which are afforded by new technologies it is essential to view this in the context of a social shift towards a networked society rather than a technological influenced reinvention of the status quo.

I have discussed three cultural qualities which I suggest should be responded to; the blurring of boundaries, a change in the way which power operates the effect of greater openness. I have also suggested that the relationship between government and media may be a significant 'drag' with respect to this cultural change.

Accordingly I have three suggestions for Governments in order to start meeting the challenge created by the emergence of a more networked society:

- Reframe the consideration of eParticipation as a response to social change rather than an exploration of technological possibilities
- Explore and embrace more open forms of engagement and participation
- Challenge your politicians to develop more direct forms of connection with the public and develop their ability to listen to the many voices you can hear online

**Reframe eParticipation**

Using technology to engage citizens in democracy should be considered a matter of service redesign rather than a layering of technology on top of current processes. Responding to the more co-productive and collaborative nature of the Social Web I suggest working with Citizens to redesign engagement and participation activities from the bottom up.

In the UK NESTA (National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts) and the Local Government Association are supporting a programme called Creative Councils[5] in order to look at radical service redesign in Local Government. Three of these projects are looking at new forms of engagement:

- We Live Here: Brighton and Hove City Councils[6]
- Big Design Challenge: Cornwall[7] Council
- Genius York: York City Council[8]

Each of these projects focus on the idea that engagement needs to be at the convenience of the citizen and that the power within the relationship needs to be shifted in favour of the public. What is not yet fully explored but is emergent is the fact that all the projects reflect an asset based approach to engagement - rather than assuming that the public are 'failing' to participate or 'need' government to help them do so these projects look at the public as being contributive assets to the engagement process.

**Become open by default**
Becoming more open is, as discussed in the last section, is about more than simply embracing open data. Open data is however a fundamental building block of more open government and is therefore an essential element of an eGovernment strategy. The work of the London Data Store[9] is the best exemplar of this in the UK. One of the critical elements of its success is the fact that it brings regional data together into one location rather than keeping it within organisational boundaries.

Another arena in which to embrace more open forms of engagement is events. The CityCamp Movement [10]is an example of this . CityCamps are 'unconferences' aimed at creating open innovation and participation in a City. Unconferences are a form of open space events which are convened rather than planned with the participants taking responsibility for the planning and management of the event once it starts. First developed by Howard Owen in

---

[5] http://www.nesta.org.uk/areas_of_work/public_services_lab/creative_councils
[6] http://blog.public-i.info/2012/04/we-live-here-what-its-all-about/
[7] http://www.shapedbyus.org/#!/home
[8] http://geniusyork.com/
[9] http://data.london.gov.uk/
[10] http://citycamp.govfresh.com/about/

1983 open space events rely on participants attending with a common theme or purpose and then proposing sessions that they will run. Only sessions that attract and audience will run and anyone can apply 'the law of two feet' and leave a session if they are neither learning nor contributing. The onus is very much on the participants to make the event happen.

CityCamps have been held in numerous countries and have common elements in that they seek to unlock latent participation within the community. In the UK CityCamps have been held in London, Brighton[11] and Manchester with others discussed around the Country. The strength and weakness of the City Camp model is that it is citizen led. Where the CityCamp gets strong support and help from the Municipality (as was the case in Brighton) then this is proving to be an effective model to create a nascent movement of engaged citizens within the City.

Even without the CityCamp approach by embracing the unconference or open space approach to community meeting you are able to shift power within the encounter and create more open and dynamic public meetings.

**Create a more direct representation**

The question of democratic engagement cannot be answered without the participation of the Politicians however there is little direct incentive for them to change as their event horizon is often simply that of the next election. If we accept Coleman's argument that we need both to encourage Politicians to listen more effectively and also create more opportunities for direct connection between the public and their representatives then we need to look at ways to shift the ways in which our Politicians communicate.

Some Politicians are already embracing new forms of communication and are moving towards a more direct relationship with their communities. However where Politicians are not keen to make this shift it is often simpler to focus on other areas of engagement and to assume that this is an issue that will resolve itself. This may be the case. However, this is a big risk to take as the public start to embrace other forms of participation and become less connected to their representatives. Structural issues within the organisation can also inhibit

---

[11] http://ccbtn.demsoc.org/about/

these shift as Social Media becomes the province of a specific department rather than there being the general acceptance of a social shift which I am advocating.

With respect to politicians I suggest the focus should be on making this social shift clear and unavoidable to them rather than explaining the tools and techniques of social media. These are not difficult skills to learn once the user has the motivation.

# Conclusion

I am not advocating a purely digital democracy and I am not underestimating the challenges of digital inclusion or the importance of face to face contact. I am suggesting however that the social shift represented by increased take up and penetration of digital and networked technologies is effecting a social change which is present offline as well as online and that an understanding of the nature of this social change should be at the heart of any consideration of the use of ICT in order to engage citizens in the democratic process.

There are many challenges within this suggestion. The role of the media in the network society is emergent and will continue to create an uncertain landscape for politicians and government. The nature of the political cycle makes it difficult for representatives to react to long term challenges and the sheer speed of technology change makes it difficult for hierarchical traditional organisations to respond.

However there are many opportunities that the new social values that we see emerging can offer. By embracing more open approaches across government we are to connect to the public is new and energising ways and by bringing this openness to our data and practice government can be a central part of this change.

Exploring more direct forms of communication between Citizens and Representatives can also help to bring the gap between old and new ways of working and can be done without the need to do anything other than change the approach taken when training and enskilling Politicians.

By reframing the debate about the use of ICT in Government as a cultural and social rather than technological question allows us to address some of the fundamental structural and behavioural issues which inhibit the effective use of technology in Government. By making this change we can create a platform for the systemic process reform which is needed alongside technology design in order to create a system of government which is relevant for a networked society.

## Bibliography

Boyd, D. (2010). Social Network Sites as Networked Publics : Affordances , Dynamics , and Implications. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *Networked Self: Identity, Community and Culture on Social Network Sites* (pp. 1-18).

Castells, M. (2001). *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society (Clarendon Lectures in Management Studies)* (p. 304). OUP Oxford. Retrieved from http://www.amazon.co.uk/Internet-Galaxy-Reflections-Clarendon-Management/dp/0199241538

Chadwick, A. (2010). Britain's First Live Televised Party Leaders' Debate: From the News Cycle to the Political Information Cycle. *Parliamentary Affairs*, *64*(1), 24-44. doi:10.1093/pa/gsq045

Chadwick, A. (2011). Explaining the Failure of an Online Citizen Engagement Initiative: The Role of Internal Institutional Variables. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, *8*(1), 21-40. doi:10.1080/19331681.2010.507999

Coleman, S. (2004a). Whose Conversation? Engaging the Public in Authentic Polylogue. *The Political Quarterly*, *75*(2), 112-120. doi:10.1111/j.1467-923X.2004.00594.x

Coleman, S. (2004b). *THE NETWORK-EMPOWERED CITIZEN How people share civic knowledge online*. *Pain* (pp. 1-23). Oxford. Retrieved from http://www.ippr.org.uk/uploadedFiles/research/projects/Digital_Society/the_networke mpowered_citizen_coleman.pdf

Coleman, S. (2005). New mediation and direct representation: reconceptualizing representation in the digital age. *New Media & Society*, *7*(2), 177-198. doi:10.1177/1461444805050745

Coleman, S. (2006). How The Other Half Votes: Big Brother Viewers and the 2005 British General Election Campaign. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *9.*(4), 457-480.

Coleman, S., & Shane, P. M. (2011). *Connecting Democracy*. The MIT Press. Retrieved from http://www.amazon.co.uk/Connecting-Democracy-ebook/dp/B006NY53VS

Donath, J. S. (2007). Signals in social supernets. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *13*(1), 231–251. Wiley Online Library. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00394.x

Dutton, W. H. (2007). Through the Network ( of Networks ) – the Fifth Estate. *Technology*.

Flinders, M. V. (2012). You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows: a response to Peter John on the relevance of political science. *LSE Politics Blog*. Retrieved April 20, 2012, from http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2012/04/25/john-response-flinders/

Gladwell, M. (2010, October). Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted. *New Yorker*. Retrieved from http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell

Ito, M., & Horst, H. (2008). *Living and Learning with New Media : Summary of Findings from the Digital Youth Project. Digital Media*.

Karpf, D. (2010). Online Political Mobilization from the Advocacy Group's Perspective: Looking Beyond Clicktivism. *Policy & Internet*, *2*(4), 7. doi:10.2202/1944-2866.1098

Leighninger, M. (2008). *Creating Spaces for Change : Working toward a "story of now" in civic engagement*.

Shirky, C. (2009). *Here Comes Everybody: How Change Happens when People Come Together* (p. 352). Penguin. Retrieved from http://www.amazon.co.uk/Here-Comes-Everybody-Happens-Together/dp/0141030623

Shirky, C. (2011). The Political Power of Social Media. *Foreign Affairs*. Retrieved from http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67038/clay-shirky/the-political-power-of-social-media

Sunstein, C (2009).  Republic 2.0, *Princeton University Press*

Swedish Association
of Local Authorities
and Regions

# Are we living in a network society?

ICT on its own is not able to empower Citizens

Only by understanding the social changes which are happening can we understand the potential of ICT to change the nature of democratic participation

Swedish Association
of Local Authorities
and Regions

# What are these cultural changes?

Boundaries are blurred

Power operates differently

Open is the new default

Citizens want more direct representation

Swedish Association
of Local Authorities
and Regions

Start redesigning processes rather overlaying technology on the old way of doing things

Become more open – in terms of data and process

Create ways for politicians to connect directly to Citizens