

Chapter 72

Civic Technology and Data for Good: Evolutionary Developments or Disruptive Change in E-Participation?

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ABSTRACT

Governments have long dealt with the issue of engaging their constituents in the process of governance, and e-participation efforts have been a part of this effort. Almost all of these efforts have been controlled by government. Civic technology and data4good, fueled by the movement toward open government and open civic data, represent a sea change in this relationship. A similar movement is data for good, which uses volunteer data scientists to address social problems using advanced analytics and large datasets. Working through a variety of organizations, they apply the power of data to problems. This chapter will explore these possibilities and outline a set of scenarios that might be possible. The chapter has four parts. The first part looks at citizen participation in broad brush, with special attention to e-participation. The next two sections look at civic technology and data4good. The final section looks at the possible changes that these two embryonic movements can have on the structure of participation in government and to the nature of public management.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-3706-3.ch072

INTRODUCTION

Governments have long dealt with the issue of engaging their constituents in the process of governance. While there have been many attempts to strike the perfect balance between citizen input and management requirements, no perfect system has been developed. Citizen participation and engagement are major concerns of political scientists and public administrators (Verba, Scholzman & Brady, 1995; Schlotzmann, Brady & Verba, 2018) and substantial work has been invested in addressing this need over many years.

E-Participation efforts have been a part of this endeavor. These attempts have met with success in some quarters and have had a less positive impact in others. The emerging developments in smart cities devote considerable effort in how the voice of citizens can be heard in the electronic agora (Desouza & Bhagwatwar, 2012; 2014).

Sadly, not all is well in the virtual town hall. Almost all major e-participation efforts have been at least somewhat controlled by government and at least part of the discussion focuses on ways that government can limit or structure participation rather than promote it. While this makes excellent sense from the perspective of minimizing the effort needed to deal with citizen pressures, but does it really solve the problem? Citizens who do not feel that their voices are heard will not support the government and may very well resort to other means to secure their ends.

New efforts to use the power of technology to promote citizen involvement emerge on a regular basis. While many take the traditional route of soliciting opinions, others move toward a deeper level of involvement.

This chapter discusses two emerging movements that could change the focus of the debate about who can and should control e-participation. They represent a middle ground between e-participation efforts to secure and control public participation and outright alternatives to public efforts. These two movements are *Civic Technology* and *Data for Good*. Both movements are powered by data, technology and the spirit of shared collective intelligence. As such, both have a significant relationship to the rise of open government and governmental transparency (Lathrop & Ruma, 2010) and movements such as Smart Cities. This pushes beyond how many have seen public involvement and brings with it the promise of innovation.

This theoretical chapter will explore these possibilities and their implications for public administration paradigms. The chapter has four parts. The first part looks at citizen participation in broad brush, with special attention to e-participation. The next two sections look at civic technology and data4good. The final section looks at the possible changes that these two embryonic movements can have on the structure of participation in government and to the nature of public management.

Public Management, Citizen Participation and the Growth of E-Participation

The involvement of citizen's Citizen participation and citizen has always been an interesting issue for public management. It reflects the political nature of public management and the relationship between organizations and their environments. Brainard and McNutt (2010) observe that public managers' orientation toward public engagement is informed by the theories that advise their management practice. Their findings support the idea that technology use reflects different theoretical traditions in public administration as expressed by different organizational units. They point to three approaches--Old Public Administration, New Public Management and The New Public Service—that influence public manager's thinking about public participation today.

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