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A SHORT HISTORY OF GOVERNMENT 2.0: FROM COOL PROJECTS TO POLICY IMPACT

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This chapter aims to provide an overview of the progressive structuring of web 2.0 in government. The early phase was characterized by spontaneous bottom-up project, such as those of MySociety.org. More recently, several meso-level initiatives were launched, which proactively support and facilitate bottom-up projects. Finally, a new (macro) policy vision is now emerging and being embraced by some governments. This is a logical framework (micro-meso-macro), but reflects also a chronological development.

The figure below illustrates this (chrono)logical framework, although it is obviously a strong simplification. It illustrates how government 2.0 initiatives were born since the early days of web 2.0 – indeed sometimes before. While bottom-up project continue to grow, they were then accompanied by meso-level initiatives and finally by macro-level visions and government policies. The three

levels co-exist and co-evolve, and are not to be considered as successive phases, but as additional layers.

Gov 2.0	Macro-level							
	Meso-level							
	Micro-level							
Web 2.0								
		2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009

User-driven innovation in public services

The emergence of web 2.0 applications such as blogs and social networking appeared to many as the apogee of ego, vanity and navel-gazing. This perspective has now clearly been dismissed by the wide emergence of collaborative applications pursuing social goals, which create collective value and bring societal benefits from the users' perspective – the prime example being Wikipedia.

In the government context, projects such as PatientOpinion.org, FarmSubsidy.org and TheyWorkForYou.com seek to challenge, disrupt and improve traditional models of public service delivery from the outside, building on the web 2.0 principles of openness, transparency and sharing. Several studies¹ have started collecting and analyzing the innumerable initiatives in this field, but it was the election of Barack Obama and his first policy choices as president that placed web 2.0 at the centre of policy debate. The recent call from web 2.0 guru Tim O'Reilly to work on “stuff that matters” reflects this growing importance of the social dimension of web 2.0, especially in times of crisis².

These bottom-up web 2.0 projects share common characteristics. They emerge spontaneously, out of a problem-solving attitude or for the simple pleasure of a challenge. They tend to address one simple goal, like in the case of PatientOpinion.org in the UK, which allows citizens to comment and rate the UK hospitals. The websites are often developed in a very short time, with very little resources, and generally using open source software. Famously, the citizens-generated government portal DirectionLessGov.com in the UK was

developed in one morning at zero cost, as stated on the website: *“We got so fed up with the general uselessness of the multi-million pound shambles otherwise known as the Direct.gov.uk portal, that we decided to build something better in under an hour. Sadly, we ran catastrophically behind schedule, but we still finished before lunch”*. They strongly focus on usability; with very simple design and clear communication they manage to make public data more meaningful and useful. Another good example is FarmSubsidy.org, which extracts data from unusable government database and makes them meaningful through visualizations and rankings. Finally, they are flexibly adapted after their release, based on the feedback of users. For example, the Petitions site of the UK government, run by developers from Mysociety.org, had 50 changes in the first day.

All this is obviously very much at odds with current government practice in managing IT projects. We lack the exact amount of money invested on making public services available online, but suffice to say that Italy alone invested 6 billion Euros in the years 2000-2006. The results are not impressive: take-up of these services does not grow up from 10% of EU population.³

The logical conclusion from this paradox would be to stop government from building interfaces and services, and let the “thousand flowers” bloom. Because of the low cost of technology, the barriers to entry are now dramatically lowered. Yet it is also clear that these bottom-up initiatives are not only spontaneous. In the last 2/3 years, several initiatives have been launched, which aim at proactively support and stimulate this kind of bottom-up innovation: we call it “the meso-level.”⁴

The emergence of a meso-level government 2.0

One of the key questions stemming from analyzing the wide array of bottom-up projects described in the previous chapter, and the public value they create, is: is this simply an organic spontaneous growth, or can appropriate measures be put in place to encourage their development?

We here describe a set of initiatives, which try to stimulate these bottom-up projects:

- Social Innovation camp⁵: a two day workshop bringing together developers and social activists to create new applications for solving collective problems
- Kublai project: a network project to bring together creative people to launch local development projects in southern Italy, where traditional regional development projects appear ineffective
- Rewired State: a 8 hours day meeting of hackers who built 26 working applications on top of government data, with the only reward of personal satisfaction, fun, beer and attention from government
- IBBT Inca award: a competition for applications with social purpose, built on purpose in one month. 20.000 Euros of reward will be distributed among the best applications.

These initiatives have several common points, revolving around the issues of money, people and how (not) to manage both.

The originating assumption is that traditional policy tools to stimulate public innovation do not work very well in the context of public services 2.0. First, in these initiatives public money is not the main tool to stimulate innovation. Money is the outcome, rather than the pre-condition of the initiative. The availability of funding attracts the wrong kind of participants, the opportunists, and the consultants “able to building any kind of project by paying lip service to the right buzzwords,” as Alberto Cottica put it in his presentation at the public services 2.0 workshop⁶. The inability to attract the right kind of people is indeed a crucial problem of funding mechanisms; for example, the panel evaluation of the EU ICT research program admits⁷ that “there are major barriers to involving the most innovative and growth-oriented SMEs.” In many cases, traditional government funding mechanisms are at odds with the values of creative people and companies.

Instead of focusing on money, these initiatives focus on attracting the right kind of people. The absence of money as the main motivator ensures that participants are mainly involved because of enthusiasm, commitment and passion. With little money and lots of passion you can achieve dramatically better results than with lots of money and little passion. Sometimes, money is a risk, rather than an asset, as it sends the “wrong signals to the wrong kind of people” (quoting from Alberto Cottica presentation). Creative people look for meaning before money.

But what is new today is the scale of the possibility, as made possible by the dramatic reduction in the cost of collective action, as described by Clay Shirky⁸. Technology tools are much less expensive, due to overall reduction in prices, open source software and software as a service. Technology diffusion makes it much easier to ensure collaboration without the need for formal organization. Barriers to entry in organizing and designing collaborative effort are now very low.

The reduced costs means that it is now possible to start up project without public funding, in order to demonstrate what can be done. Funding is then necessary to make the project stand on its feet and ensure up scaling, full deployment and sustainability. This is why in many of the presented cases, the final result is a “working and fundable project” submitted to the attention of the funders. The community acts as a producer of the project, and as a filter to improve and select the best projects. Only at the end of this process comes the funding possibility. Money follows results, not the opposite: it is the public policy equivalent of the new “publish then filter” model, versus the traditional “filter then publish”: create-then-fund. RewiredState, at the end of the development cycle, presents the projects to the government for purchase. Social Innovation Camp delivers the award at the end of the weekend of work, looking at the best working projects. Kublai acts as a collective platform to improve projects proposals from ideas to fully-fledged business plan, which can be presented to different funders. INCA rewards the best applications after they have been developed, not the best project

ideas. This create-then-fund approach is effective in this context because it crowds away the experts in proposal-writing, and attracts the “doers”. Secondly, it is more open to unpredictable outcomes, which is more in line with the nature of bottom-up projects, which often take unexpected turns following the behavior of users. Thirdly, such an approach accepts failure as a normal part of the learning and innovation process.

The meso-level initiatives are necessary new interfaces that bring together different people who would not meet in existing structures. Innovation generally stems from cross-fertilization of different communities and expertise: government and developers (Rewired State); social innovators and developers (Social Innovation Camp), creative people and structural funds officers (Kublai), researchers and hackers (INCA).

Another important lesson learnt is that these initiatives grow in an organic, not planned fashion. There is no structured management approach. These social processes are successful when viral, and it is impossible to rigidly plan ex-ante and top-down. A different approach is necessary. The “right people” are mainly attracted informally, through word of mouth, and reputation mechanisms are crucial to make it work. This is why these initiatives are seldom managed directly by government, but rather by trusted third parties and individuals. Government has to learn to act indirectly, by leveraging networks. Secondly, while a control approach does not work, a great deal of work goes into the careful preparation of a favorable context for innovation to happen. All the resources that are not spent in technology and in attracting people are dedicated to organizing the event. Rewired State collected a great list of public data; Social Innovation Camp works for months before and after the event to make it effective; Kublai developed a wide array of synchronous and asynchronous tools to leverage creativity. These meso-level events share a feeling of enthusiasm, community and energy which is greatly enhanced by the synchronicity of events: intense one day gathering, short term development times such as the one month given for the INCA award.

These viral and creative activities cannot be artificially induced, but are not totally spontaneous either: they have to be carefully designed and implemented. In other words, public policy has to evolve from a planning to a design approach, focusing on setting the favorable context for innovation to happen rather than defining the innovation path ex-ante.

These initiatives are therefore more the result of craftsmanship than of industrial planning: it is therefore not clear if and how they can be up scaled and achieve large-scale impact. Yet they are already very much able to show a radical difference in results from traditional government-led initiatives.

Should government just make data available online?

Slowly, a new policy vision is taking shape on e-government. The sharp contrast between the low cost, fast development and high usability of user-generated applications, and the poor track record of government IT spending, has obviously generated the conclusion that government should refrain from building services online, and simply expose its data and web services for reuse by (more tech-savvy) third parties. This perspective is very much visible in bottom-up initiatives such as RewiredState.org, which claims on its homepage: *“Government isn’t very good at computers. They spend millions to produce mediocre websites, hide away really useful public information and generally get it wrong. Which is a shame. Calling all people who make things. We’re going to show them how it’s done.”*

Sunlight Foundation, the organization running some of the finest government 2.0 projects in the US, argues in a blog post⁹ that government should not provide visualization of its data, but simply expose them for other people to make those visualizations. The reason? *“Because other people will do that and probably do it better.”*

These thoughts have then been consolidated in more articulated visions. Robinson et al. argue that government “rather than struggling, as it currently does, to design sites that meet end-user needs,

it should focus on creating a simple, reliable and publicly accessible infrastructure that “exposes” the underlying data.”¹⁰ Gartner’s VP Andrea DiMaio¹¹ called for a “no government” vision, where services to citizens are provided by private intermediaries, while government simply exposes machine readable data (e.g. RDFa) and web services (e.g. REST).

Transparency and publication of reusable data is certainly key to enable user-led innovation. It is still the case that the bottom-up initiatives above described are implemented without the awareness, and in many cases with passive resistance from government to provide the data. Most of the time and resources is dedicated to scraping the data and making them usable and machine-readable. Releasing government data would bring about several key benefits, such as better government accountability, more engaged citizens, more citizens-oriented services and new opportunities for technological innovation. In this sense, the 8 principles of Open Government Data¹² and the W3C note on making government data accessible¹³ remain key references. It is clear that the new US administration is also setting a new standard by launching the data.gov catalogue of government data; by placing transparency at the centre of its e-government policy, as expressed in the President Memorandum on transparency which was the first act signed by President Obama; and by mandating agencies to release funding data linked to the recovery bill in fully reusable format.

But we believe that having government to simply make data available online is certainly the most urgent thing, it is necessary – but it is far from sufficient. The large majority of the excellent government 2.0 initiatives are from the US and UK: other countries lack the spontaneous bottom-up initiatives, and arguably need proactive stimulus guaranteed by the meso-level. Furthermore, most of the users of government 2.0 initiatives are affluent and cultivated – as well as digitally savvy: market and civil society are unlikely to fully cover the needs of all citizens. Government still has a subsidiary role to play to ensure that all citizens benefit from public services. In other words, it should intervene in cases of market or civil soci-

ety failure: and as it is the case today, there are lots of market failures. We therefore proposed¹⁴, rather than the approach of the no-government scenario, a more subtle scenario: the e-Subsidiarity scenario, where government and civil society are both investing in providing services and continuously collaborating to innovate and provide better services and to address the complex societal challenges of our times.

This e-Subsidiarity scenario is best visualized through the metaphor of Tao. This Chinese symbol, vaguely similar to our visualization of the e-Subsidiarity scenario, represents two opposite forces, the Yin and Yang, which are necessary to one another, and fully penetrated. It is a dynamic principle, permanently changing.

The metaphor aims to highlight the main criticism to the No Government scenario: it points to a static, wall-against-wall, zero-sum game where the prevailing role is either the state or the market/society. Instead, the e-Subsidiarity scenario is flexibly adapted to different user profiles, and it is dynamic across time. Most of all, it rejects the zero-sum paradigm but rather aims at a positive-sum situation, arguing that government and markets are complementary, fully penetrated and necessary to one another. In doing so, the idea refers to the fact that positive-sum games are a typical connotation of network economies, and in particular of the Internet economy. History shows that public and private initiatives are not a zero-sum game: in the late 19th century, the welfare grew parallel to the development of the voluntary sector. It is not by accident that the UK and the US lead the world in both bottom-up civil society initiatives and government understanding of government 2.0.

From visions to policy design

We need therefore not to discuss if government should provide services, build interfaces and visualization, promote innovation: but when and how it should do it.

This is the rationale behind the building of the “Open Declaration on Public Services 2.0”¹⁵: to make a positive contribution towards

the organic integration of web 2.0 in service delivery, and go beyond stereotypes and contrapositions between government and civil society.

The open declaration is collaboratively built and endorsed by EU citizens who share the view that the web is transforming our society and our governments. We feel e-government policies in Europe could learn from the open, meritocratic, transparent and user-driven culture of the web. We also feel that current web citizens should engage more positively with government to help designing a strategy, which is genuinely difficult to adopt in the traditional culture of public administration.

In the first phase of this initiative, we sought to tap the collective intelligence through an open process that aimed to answer the question: How should governments use the web to improve public services and deliver greater public value for citizens? The second phase of the project was about trying to turn these sparse ideas into an impactful message for ministers. The Mixedink.com collaborative writing tool was used so that anyone could co-create the manifesto. Finally, the initiative looks for large-scale endorsement of the manifesto¹⁶.

In conclusion, it appears clear that web 2.0 in public services is becoming more structured, from bottom-up to meso and macro-level initiatives, and is moving from the periphery to the centre of policy debate. Yet it is also clear that web 2.0 initiatives are still exceptional and marginal in the government context, and that progress is too slow so that the gap with web-based innovation is widening, rather than closing up.

2009 is an important year for the EU ICT policy. A new ICT strategy will be put in place and a new e-government action plan. Citizens have to assume a shared responsibility to push the public services 2.0 agenda forward. It is a window of opportunity to accelerate change, and the Open Declaration aims at taking advantage of this opportunity.

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¹ See e.g. Osimo, D. (2008a). Web 2.0 for government: why and how? Technical Report. DG JRC; IPTS. Seville JRC. <http://j.mp/pvcul>

² <http://j.mp/iE6T>

³ See Eurostat data 2008 available at <http://j.mp/GC3jA>

⁴ <http://j.mp/1oNflb>

⁵ <http://www.sicamp.org>

⁶ <http://j.mp/VY5EL>

⁷ Information Society Research and Innovation: Delivering results with sustained impact Evaluation of the effectiveness of Information Society Research in the 6th Framework Programme 2003-2006. May 2008. <http://j.mp/ejzCo>

⁸ Shirky, C. (2008). Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations. Penguin

⁹ <http://j.mp/jFQbK>

¹⁰ Robinson et al. (2009) "Government Data and the Invisible Hand" Yale Journal of Law & Technology, Vol. 11, p. 160, 2009 available at <http://j.mp/hRSz>

¹¹ <http://j.mp/tkGXc>

¹² <http://j.mp/bXpmm>

¹³ <http://j.mp/UnUqe>

¹⁴ Codagnone, C. and Osimo D. (2009) Future Technologies for Future eGovernment Services: Services Platform Analysis, Report for the European Commission, Brussels: Information Society and Media Directorate. <http://j.mp/4r13Gj>

¹⁵ <http://eups20.wordpress.com/>

¹⁶ <http://www.endorsetheopendeclaration.eu/>