Digital Conversations [1]

Written by **Charlotte Bowyer** [2] | Friday 29 November 2013

Last week I went to an event put on by the Meetup [3] group 'Digital Conversations [4]'. Hosted by the digital agency Reading Room [5], the theme for the night was "Society, Government and Public Life". Six speakers gave a range of short but varied and interesting talks, bringing together people from digital design, non-profits and the government.

The topics ranged from software design to government snooping via community engagement and smarter government services. It has become cliched to talk about these last two, especially alongside phrases like 'the data revolution' and 'people power'. What's less clear is if these ideas really mean something and in practice help forge better outcomes. In this way it was interesting and encouraging to see what people in a range of different jobs were doing within the intersection of technology and government.

Despite the breadth of topics, certain themes ran throughout the night. One was the use of digital technology to amplify the 'soft' power which citizens posses through traditional civic engagement.
Will Perrin from kingscrossenvironment.com gave his experience of holding government to account using methods from the humorous - sticking council logos on dog mess and blogging them - to the serious - using freedom of information requests to spark a corporate manslaughter investigation [6] into TFL. The ability to use digital to empower citizens was shown to be even stronger within less developed and transparent states. For example, a basic app of the Nigerian constitution has allowed citizens to learn and assert their rights, and has been downloaded over 8 million times.

The event also highlighted the importance of the micro and designing for humans. Websites such as 'What Do They Know [7]' and 'They Work For You [8]' are popular because they take chunks of information and display them in a way which is easy for people to understand, informing and empowering them.

Designers should make sure the systems they create are designed with the user's habits and needs in mind, instead of forcing them to tackle rigid and unintuitive systems. Similarly, whilst the concept of big, open date may be brilliant, it is essential that this data can be manipulated by all. Many potential users aren't programmers or statisticians, and giant datasets which need APIs to navigate them can hinder as well as help analysis.

Government services benefit from this re-imagining. Dominic Campbell spoke about the Patchwork app [9] designed to provide better collaboration within child protection services, and which was designed in response to Baby P's case and the total failure of the incumbent ContactPoint system to prevent it. Despite retaining huge swathes of data on every single child from birth till 18, the expensive system raised serious privacy concerns, failed in its objectives and was ultimately scrapped. In contrast, Patchwork allows professionals to 'group round' children and share information only when necessary and in a way which is

clear and intuitive.

It was interesting to see what attendees and speakers thought the future would hold for government. Some ideas were rather libertarian-friendly- for example, the goal of efficient 'invisible' government, which would do things like automatically create and process visa applications with the purchase of flight tickets. It was also encouraging to hear a speaker insist that a world in which 14% of the health budget comes from the sale of narcotics on a government version of Silk Road is not inconceivable!

However, some other ideas - such as government gathering social media data to create a 'community hive mind' -were rather more alarming. Most remarkable was the level of complacency of the organisers and attendees regarding mass government surveillance. One speaker's entire presentation was summed up by a slide saying "NSA am I bothered? Not really LOL :)" Of course, not everybody is going to find the recent revelations earth-shattering, but it is unnerving to hear people working within these sectors have such little regard for civil liberties and privacy concerns.

When those responsible for designing government systems (and ultimately the use of citizen's information) seem not to perceive potential abuses of state power and trust, it is hard to be enthusiastic about new government initiatives. With tech companies tightening security and encryption in response to Snowdon's revelations, I don't want well-meaning and forward-thinking designers to be asleep on the job, and dismissive of questions about the proper power balance between citizens and the state. This aside, it was really good to see such smart and engaged people talk about the exciting work they do.

blog comments powered by Disqus [11]

Source URL: http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/politics-government/digital-conversations

Links:
[1] http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/politics-government/digital-conversations
[2] http://www.adamsmith.org/taxonomy/term/5805
[3] http://www.meetup.com/
[4] http://www.meetup.com/Digital-Conversations/
[5] http://www.readingroom.com/
[6] http://kingscrossenvironment.com/?s=manslaughter
[7] https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/
[8] http://www.theyworkforyou.com/
[9] http://wearefuturegov.com/case-study/patchwork/
[10] http://disqus.com/?ref_noscript
[11] http://disqus.com