

Rethinking the Role of Citizens in a Gov 2.0 World

By John M. Kamensky

What does it mean to be a citizen in a Gov 2.0 world?

Recent social, political, and technological changes are redefining the role of citizens from one of just being voters, or just being polled for their opinions, to a far more interactive role. Much of this redefinition is happening online, but not in all cases.

The Millennial Generation's expectation of being connected and networked at all times is an important social trend and one that has made the desirability of more politically engaged citizenry a reality. The Obama administration's emphasis on citizen participation, transparency, and open government is a major political boost to this expectation of being connected and engaged. Social media tools, such as Twitter and YouTube, and smart phones are important technological enablers that have facilitated this rising tide. Mark Drapeau, a web trends guru and an associate professor at George Washington University, notes that, as a result of these trends, the phrase "citizen 2.0" could well replace "government 2.0" in the next few years. Furthermore, he sees local governments at the cutting edge of engaging citizens in new and meaningful ways.

Both government and citizens will need to co-create these new roles if they are to be effective. But what are the elements of these redefined roles? These elements can be described along the lines of the three Obama Open Government initiatives: greater transparency, greater participation, and greater collaboration.

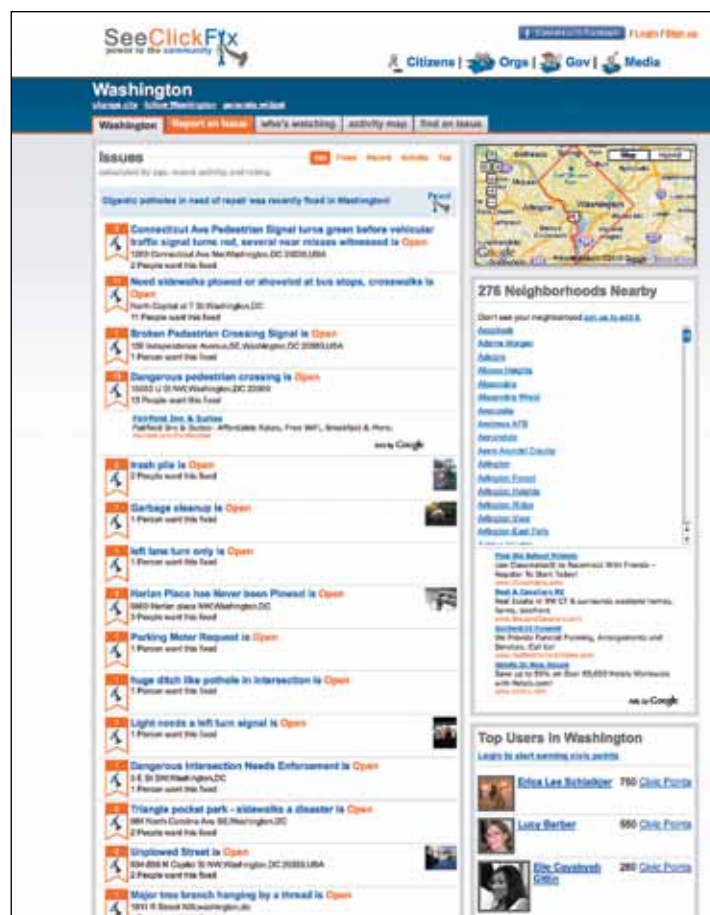
Rethinking Through Greater Transparency

Government's role: actively sharing data with citizens.

Governments at all levels can take the first step in changing the dynamic in citizen-government engagement by publicly sharing raw data on their websites. The District of Columbia piloted this several years ago, when Vivek Kundra, then D.C.'s chief technology officer, began to "democratize data" by putting the city's administrative data online. The data included restaurant inspections, pothole reports, and crime

reports. Today, the city regularly posts 428 data sets in its DC Data Catalog online. Citizens can then download the data and use it for innovative purposes—overlaying data onto maps to find crime hot spots, zoning violations, and recurrent service requests. Realtors use the data to help prospective buyers learn more about their potential new neighborhoods.

This approach has spread to the federal government, where Mr. Kundra is now the government's first chief information officer. There, he created data.gov, which allows citizens access to more than 170,000 data sets from across the



SeeClickFix website.



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federal government. Citizens are able to use these data sets to create new services as well as to better understand things as diverse as air traffic delays, wildlife migration patterns, and patent applications.

Both the federal and many state governments are also posting financial data. The federal government is posting data related to all grants, contracts, and loans. More detailed data are posted on the use of Recovery Act funds. Some states, such as Utah and Colorado, are going further by posting all financial transactions, putting their “checkbooks online.”

Citizens’ role: increased oversight and accountability.

A recent *CNNTech* article by John Sutter describes how Craig Newmark, founder of Craigslist, sends an electronic note to San Francisco City Hall via a mobile phone application called “SeeClickFix” to report an overheated train car. Sutter says this gives citizens “more of a say in how their local tax money is spent.” Cities all over the country are releasing public data to the web and mobile application developers are creating “mash up” applications to make it easy to use. Some say it “could usher in a new era of grassroots democracy.”

In the District of Columbia, the DC 311 iPhone app allows users to take photos of graffiti, potholes, etc., and send them to a city database that catalogs work requests. The photos are linked to a GPS location so officials can see the problems, and other citizens can as well. Other examples of “citizen posses” include the “Coalition for an Accountable Recovery,” which tracks the implementation of the Recovery Act.

These examples do not offer the only vision of how citizens’ roles have changed. After all, we can’t become a nation of fault finders. There has to be a more positive view of the role of citizens than just conducting oversight. This is happening in other dimensions. For example, websites are popping up at the neighborhood level to create new ways of connecting among citizens, and not just with between citizens and government. These are being done via websites such as Every Block and Neighbors-for-Neighbors, which are becoming far

more interactive versions of the old “in person” community associations. And the new federal data transparency creates new ways to understand what is going on. For example, with the text of the Federal Register now searchable, non-profits, such as GovPulse.us, have created tools to use it in new ways. GovPulse provides visualization tools to search for information based on geographic location or topic.

Rethinking Through Greater Participation

Government’s role: increasing opportunities for informed discourse. Dialogue works best when both conversation part-



Neighborsforneighbors website.

ners learn. One example is the new online town hall format described in a new report by the Congressional Management Foundation. There, members of Congress are beginning to engage citizens in far more meaningful discussions of issues. The Obama Open Government initiative is encouraging agencies to use similar approaches. For example, over a five-week period in early 2009, two dozen major agencies, with the help of the General Services Administration (GSA), launched online public dialogue efforts to engage citizens around issues such as transparency and collaboration. In addition, individual agencies have sponsored similar dialogues. These include the development of the Department of Homeland Security's Quadrennial Review, and GlobalPulse 2010, which engaged citizens in more than 100 countries around the world to help inform priority-setting for the U.S. Agency for International Development and State Department.

Citizens' role: help frame public decisions. In some communities, such as Des Moines, Iowa, citizens became engaged in measuring the performance of city services and then were involved in helping set city budgeting priorities. Similarly, citizens in Washington, D.C., did the same when Tony Williams was mayor, via his citywide Citizen Summits that engaged each of the neighborhoods. At the federal level, several years ago Congress created a Citizens Health Care Working Group to engage citizens in developing recommendations for reforming healthcare. Some advocacy groups want opportunities for citizens to actually make decisions, but this step may require some careful thought, especially given experiences such as California's referenda being driven by special interest groups. This has resulted in the legislature not being able to make needed trade-offs and the state now faces fiscal challenges that may be difficult to address.

The more traditional manifestations of citizen participation via hearings will continue as well as a spectrum of other forms of engagement, including innovative forums such as President Obama on YouTube answering questions about his new budget, will continue to evolve.

Rethinking Through Greater Collaboration

Government's role: reach out for innovations and solutions. Sometimes people with different perspectives can solve problems that the experts have a hard time tackling. A prominent example is the increased use of crowd sourcing. This is where an organization sends a problem out to a group of people asking for contributions or solutions to a problem. One example is "Apps for America," where a nonprofit group sponsored a contest to find the best uses of government provided information. The Obama budget for FY2011 commits to expanding the use of contests and awards for innovations. The city of Montreal, Canada, regularly sponsors contests where citizens can help improve their community. Its most recent contest was for new designs for taxi stands!

Citizens' role: become empowered to solve their own problems. Too often, complexity creates a need for "middle men" such as tax advisors, lobbyists, and attorneys. Reducing complexity, providing information more openly, or using "plain language" to describe things can make a huge difference. The Open Data effort by the Obama administration is one step in this direction, and this is being replicated at the local level as well. For example, BlockShopper is a community-based resource that allows real estate agents to "mash up" data from different public sources to help home buyers understand the neighborhoods they hope to live in.

Ongoing efforts to use plain language in government writing are another approach to helping citizens solve their own problems. If you can understand the directions without hiring a lawyer or consultant, that's a big step forward! In addition, streamlining application processes to be more citizen-centered is also another approach. However, this seems to be a stronger trend in other countries. For example, in Canada and Australia, citizens can go to one website—or one office, or one phone number—to access public services as diverse as student loans, birth certificates, or business licenses.

Both government and citizen roles: co-deliver public services. Co-delivering services is more common at local levels, but a high-profile example at the federal level is called "peer-to-patent," where citizens help determine whether an idea is new and worth a patent. Citizen involvement significantly speeds the processing of the patent, and reduces the government's costs. Another is sponsored by the Library of Congress



Open.alabama.gov website.

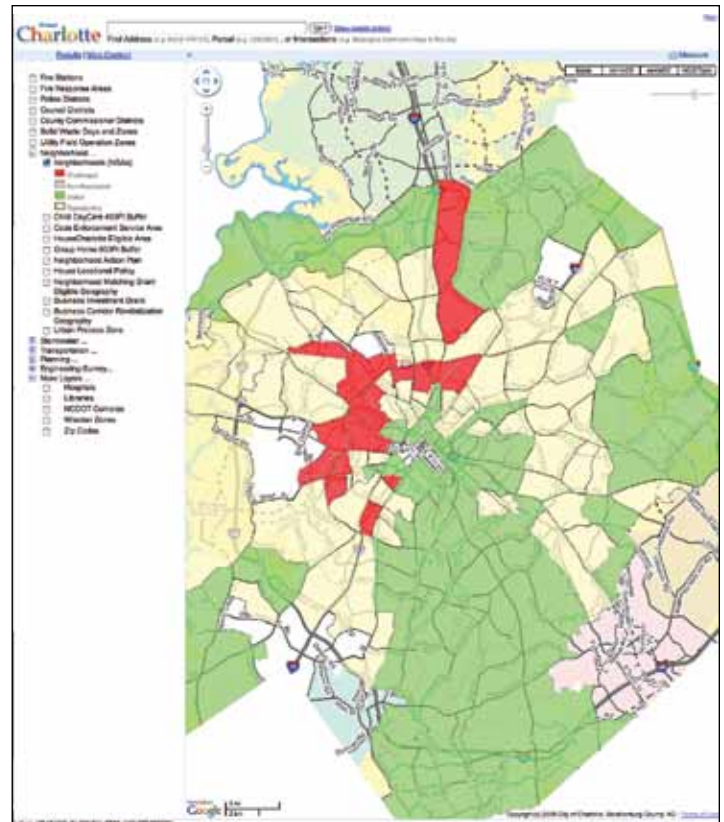
where users are encouraged to help index publications by tagging them online with topics other readers might use to look for them. At the local level, groups of tech-savvy citizens are gathering on weekends to help add details to local street maps via OpenStreetMap. These details include not only historical markers but also park benches and parking zones—at no cost to the local governments. These efforts not only save money, but also involve citizens in a direct way in government.

Why Is This Rethinking Important?

The popular media seem focused on the increasing incivility miring public discourse. In many cases, this perception is fostered by the very technology that makes more citizen engagement possible—the immediacy and persistent presence of news and social connections via the web. If this trend continues, it can damage the fabric of civil society, and democracy.

However, the web also has the potential to increase citizen involvement in their government in positive ways that increase public trust and restore the legitimacy of government to act on behalf of citizens. Actively engaging citizens in their government—at all levels in the federal system—has demonstrated benefits. Studies show that active engagement can reduce costs, and also reduce litigation over policy decisions where citizens feel they were not sufficiently involved in crafting. This has been especially the case in many zoning laws, eminent domain proceedings, and land use decisions in the West.

The Obama administration, and many states and localities, are piloting these promising new approaches. Yet these efforts may be simply catching up to the expectations of the rising Millennial Generation, which tends to be more engaged in social and community issues, as well as being “digital natives” in the use of social networking technology. ■



Virtual Charlotte website.