

## Civic Engagement Platforms Designed for, and by, Citizens

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Local governments across the world are facing new realities. At one time, they enjoyed a large role in the community because they were the purveyors of services to citizens. Today, things are different. Citizens have a different level of trust of government, financial constraints do not allow local governments to deliver all of the services the community requires, and local governments have an additional focus on attracting new business, tourists, and new residents. In response to these changing realities, citizens are changing. No longer are citizens interested in being managed by their local government; when there is an opportunity to improve their community themselves, they seize it!

Seizing new opportunities include designing citizen engagement platforms. Citizen engagement platforms are opportunities for regular, everyday citizens to create a website or mobile app that connects with other citizens and, sometimes, the local government to improve the community. These platforms can include discussion groups, forums, information sharing, networking, and open data. For example, ACTION Alexandria is an online platform created by a nonprofit, for citizens. The platform offers a space where all residents of Alexandria, Virginia can engage in challenges, debate solutions, access archived information, share stories, develop relationships, and disseminate or capture data all on their own and without the help or permission of the local government.<sup>3</sup>

It should be no surprise that citizens have decided to find solutions for themselves. Domestic and international incidences such as the 2007/2008 recession, unemployment, and government shutdown have brought to the forefront just how common it is for government at all levels to falter. The 2011 Egyptian Revolution, the anti-corruption movements in India and Brazil, and the Occupy Wall Street movement in the U.S. and other countries reflect a groundswell of citizen movements to combat government problems. These movements demand a sort of action that is different from what has been done; it requires action that is bottom-up.<sup>4</sup>

Bottom-up engagement is a strong tool to overcome power inequalities. It allows citizens to empower themselves and grow from that empowerment. For instance, in Italy, a referendum for a law on water privatization was proposed in 2011. The law would allow for de facto privatization and capitalization on public water services to private companies.<sup>5</sup> A bottom-up social movement consisting of 150 communities and political organizations called the *Italian Forum of Water Movements* called for the proposed law to be rejected. For the proposed law to be rejected, a quorum of 50% of voters must have been present to vote. Italy had not experienced a quorum since 1995.<sup>6</sup> Due to movement online, quorum was reached and the law was rejected.

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<sup>3</sup> "About Action Alexandria." *ACTION Alexandria*. N.p., 2014. Web. <<http://www.actionalexandria.org/about>>.

<sup>4</sup> "Social Development." *Social Accountability and Demand for Good Governance*. The World Bank, 15 Aug. 2013. Web. <<http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/socialdevelopment/brief/social-accountability>>.

<sup>5</sup> Gierre, Elle. "Letter from Italy: A People's Victory to Remember." *CounterFire*. N.p., 7 July 2013. Web. <<http://www.counterfire.org/index.php/articles/international/16558-letter-from-italy-a-peoples-victory-to-remember>>.

<sup>6</sup> Migliaccio, Alessandra, and Flavia Rotondi. "Italian Voters Set to Overturn Key Berlusconi Legislation in Referendums." *Bloomberg.com*. Bloomberg, 13 June 2011. Web. <<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-06-12/italian-referendums-threaten-berlusconi-infrastructure-funding.html>>.

The rise of citizen developed platforms can also be attributed the rise of information and communication technologies (ICTs). ICTs such as websites, smartphones, and tablets and accessibility of the internet offer citizens the opportunity to try their hand at developing their own platform. After all, recent generations such as Millennials and Digital Natives are very tech-savvy and engage differently from their parents and grandparents' generation in a number of ways.

First, their conception of citizen engagement is different. According to the National Conference on Citizenship, Millennials are somewhat more likely to volunteer whereas Baby Boomers are more likely to engage in more demanding civic duties such as voting, participating in face-to-face civil society, and attending public meetings.<sup>7</sup> Second, younger generations engage for reasons different from older generations. Their view of engagement is different. For younger generations, engagement originates from peer-to-peer relationships and a quest for self-actualization.<sup>8</sup> These individuals are looking for ways to fulfill an intrinsic need. However, older generations engaged because it was a part of their civic duty. For them, being a good citizen meant being involved in their community. Third, the rules of engagement have changed. Gone are the days when local government managed their populace by making decisions. Before the proliferation internet, citizen engagement was traditionally town halls, letter writing, phone calls, or in-person visits. Besides the open forum of a town hall, the rest of these forms of engagement were singular and private. The greater population weren't made aware of the issues nor consulted for a solution. Today, the internet has made everything public. This publicness has shaped many opinions about local government and how individuals want to proceed with improving their community.

What drives citizen innovators today is the knowledge that they have all the tools, and in some cases better tools than their local government, necessary to make a change in their community. The City of Detroit, Michigan has been experiencing tough financial and political times. The city is in around \$2.5 billion in debt and working feverishly to get back on track. Several services have been canceled due to the financial problems. In response to this, citizens are picking up the slack. For instance, citizen volunteers for the Violence Intervention Protective Emergency Response System assist police with patrolling dangerous neighborhoods. After the city closed 72 parks, other citizens noticed that land was no longer being tended to so they began to regularly maintain 15 of the closed parks. Another group boards up abandoned homes to prevent future criminal activity.<sup>9</sup> In addition to their offline activities, citizens have found online platforms as a positive way to enhance their community.

### Citizen Developed Platforms

In the course of developing their own platform for change, citizens have found creative avenues to engage. The platforms represent an opportunity for the developer to get the best out of technology and their fellow citizens. Here, we outline three platform types and discuss their features.

### *Dis-intermediate*

The internet has reshaped society in significant ways. The relationship between citizen and government has changed substantially.<sup>10</sup> Today, citizens have the opportunity to dis-intermediate, or remove the middleman out of decision-making. In this case, the middleman is local government and citizens are creating platforms that do not include them, but does not necessarily preclude them. Dis-intermediation

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<sup>7</sup> "NCoC: Two Special Generations: The Millennials and the Boomers." *Two Special Generations: The Millennials and the Boomers*. NCoC, 2014. Web. <<http://ncoc.net/226>>.

<sup>8</sup> *Civic Engagement through Digital Citizenship* (n.d.): n. pag. Feb. 2012. Web. <<http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/00/30/10030.pdf>>.

<sup>9</sup> Dorton, Elizabeth. "Private Citizens Pick up the Slack as Detroit Cuts Public Services." *The Daily Caller*. The Daily Caller, n.d. Web. <<http://dailycaller.com/2013/07/18/private-citizens-pick-up-the-slack-as-public-services-cut/>>.

<sup>10</sup> Ben-Yehuda, Gadi. "Disintermediation: The Internet's Impossible Promise, And Ten Ways It Is Changing Government for the Better | IBM Center for the Business of Government." *Disintermediation: The Internet's Impossible Promise, And Ten Ways It Is Changing Government for the Better | IBM Center for the Business of Government*. N.p., 14 Jan. 2014. Web. <<http://www.businessofgovernment.org/blog/business-government/disintermediation-internet%25E2%2580%2599s-impossible-promise-and-ten-ways-it-changing-go>>.

reduces the complexity of the institutional landscape that citizens confront in trying to access and improve services.<sup>11</sup> For instance, the citizen developed microfinance platform Kiva is a nonprofit organizations that dis-intermediates (in this case, removes a banking institution from the equation) the lending relationship between socially motivated lenders and microentrepreneurs in developing countries through the internet.<sup>12</sup> The value of dis-intermediation lies in the power to offer users a pool of options and opportunities that are different or more appealing than the intermediaries.

Four English nonprofits - The Tavistock Institute, Involve, The Democratic Society, and Public-i- joined forces to create NHS Citizen.<sup>13</sup> NHS Citizen was designed to identify genuine issues that are concerning citizens about healthcare, facilitate a process where those issues can be debated and aggregated into an agenda, and then given to NHS England (National Healthcare Service of England) executive officers for implementation.<sup>14</sup> This process allows for decisions not to be influenced by layers of intermediaries and the outcomes actually reflect the concerns of the people.

Dis-intermediation also offers an opportunity to make things happen quicker. Often, when dealing with local government, citizens and employees are subject to red tape and minutia to implement initiatives. Even the slightest projects can be a liability for the locality or require city council approve. When citizens create their own platforms, they can move things along quicker. For instance, the Barnet Pledgebank in the United Kingdom is a website that allows individuals interested in completing a project for their community to pledge their work.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the pledge will only be honored if a number of other people commit too. Pledges can be started by organizations, schools, community, and volunteer groups who would like to start projects such as clearing snow and ice from streets, painting over graffiti, or setting up a community class. All projects that might require significant time to set-up if done through the city.

### *Fill a gap*

It's no secret that local government bears the brunt of many national problems. Unemployment, recession, and natural disasters, for instance, all affect local government and its residents first. Local government is constantly battling current community problems and on-going constraints. For instance, recently, many cities are beginning to fully rebound from the 2007/2008 recession. Unemployment is still rampant in many communities and the effects of the recession such as layoffs and the modification or cancelation of some city services still linger.

Citizen developers understand these constraints and seek to fill the gaps between city services and citizens' needs. For instance, in Mexico, the street infrastructure is largely car-oriented. The Mexico City government made many efforts to introduce pedestrians and cyclists to the streets but were unsuccessful. In response to this, a group of citizens called Colectivo Haz Ciudad created the online platform *#wikibanqueta* (wiki sidewalk).<sup>16</sup> The website offers citizen information about the status of the streets and an opportunity for citizens to sign-up to help create sidewalks and bike routes.<sup>17</sup> In San Francisco, a group

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<sup>11</sup> Dunleavy, Patrick. "The Future of the Dollar." *Edition: 1* (2009): n. pag. *The Future of Joined-up Public Services*. June 2010. Web. <[http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/28373/1/The\\_Future\\_of\\_Joined\\_Up\\_Public\\_Services.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/28373/1/The_Future_of_Joined_Up_Public_Services.pdf)>.

<sup>12</sup> Bruett, Tillman. *Cows, Kiva, and Prosper.com: How Disintermediation and the Internet Are Changing Microfinance* (n.d.): n. pag. Alternative Credit Technologies. Web. <<https://www.prosper.com/downloads/research/disintermediation-internet-changing-microfinance.pdf>>.

<sup>13</sup> Burall, Simon. "Policy Makers Are from Mars, Citizens from Venus: Designing Effective Public Engagement." *Involve*. N.p., 28 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.involve.org.uk/blog/2014/04/28/policy-makers-are-from-mars-citizens-from-venus-designing-effective-public-engagement/>>.

<sup>14</sup> "NHS Citizen." *NHS Citizen*. N.p., 2014. Web. <<http://www.nhscitizen.org.uk/>>.

<sup>15</sup> "Barnet PledgeBank Is a Site to Get Things Done." *PledgeBank*. Barnet, n.d. Web. <<http://barnet.pledgebank.com/>>.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, Alejandra A. "Crowdsourcing Infrastructure." *La Ciudad Creativa the Creative City*. N.p., 11 Mar. 2013. Web. <<http://laciudadcreativa.com/2013/03/11/crowdsourcing-infrastructure/>>.

<sup>17</sup> "COLECTIVO CAMINA, HAZ CIUDAD: ¡Súmate Al Colectivo!" *COLECTIVO CAMINA, HAZ CIUDAD: ¡Súmate Al Colectivo!* N.p., n.d. Web. <<http://hazciudad.blogspot.com/p/sumate-al-colectivo.html>>.

developed the app EcoFinder to help residents determine where to recycle and dispose of trash.<sup>18</sup> The app lets users search based on item, location, and service and was developed using data from the San Francisco Environment initiative.<sup>19</sup>

Citizen platforms are also heavily used to organize in times of crisis. For instance, in Allentown, Pennsylvania in 2011, a devastatingly powerful natural gas explosion went off in the downtown area.<sup>20</sup> Five people died as a result of the explosion. During and following the event, citizens used social media platforms to provide updates about rescue and recovery, disseminate information about ways to help the affected families, and volunteer. These connections were made largely on their own and with little to no assistance of the city.

### *Right-a-wrong*

In many pockets of the world, issues such as corruption and poor government services have plagued cities for years. Issues such as corruption are likely to thrive when there are low levels of transparency, poor external scrutiny, networks of cronyism, outsourcing of public services, significant sums of money being used, and a denial that corruption is an issue.<sup>21</sup> Citizens are taking notice of these occurrences and are developing platforms to combat such issues and essentially right-the-wrongs that have been going on. In Uganda, corruption is common at all levels of government.<sup>22</sup> In Kampala, Uganda, citizen groups are developing a mobile app, Action or Transparency (A4T), which allows citizens to see how much money is being allocated, how much is being spent, and for what reasons. If citizens notice signs of impropriety, they can 'blow the whistle' and notify their partner, Transparency International<sup>23</sup> for action.

At all levels of government in the U.S., a new commitment to transparency was brought forth by the Obama Administration. It makes a simple yet poignant statement about the role of government: transparency is a vital responsibility of any democratic government.<sup>24</sup> For countries around the world, open data is the gold standard for responsible governance as well. For instance, in Hong Kong, open data activist developed the Legco Hansard Parser. The LegCo Hansard Parser sifts through meetings, speeches, and other government information from Hong Kong's Legislative Council (LegCo). The app was developed during Hong Kong's first open data hackathon.<sup>25</sup> The app has been lauded as making government the go-to source for information.

In some cases, local challenges requires global attention and vice versa. For instance, human migration has been a highly contested issue globally. The rising number of migrants, the context in which they integrate into their destination country, and the circularity of migration flows are just a few issues. In 2012, the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) developed a global platform called the *Learning Platform on Human Mobility* dedicated to training local authorities on migration.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Lamers, Chantal. "Eco-Finder App Lets You Dump Responsible." *SFGate*. N.p., 19 July 2009. Web. <<http://www.sfgate.com/homeandgarden/article/Eco-Finder-app-lets-you-dump-responsible-3291689.php>>.

<sup>19</sup> Sutter, John D. "Cities Embrace Mobile Apps, 'Gov 2.0'" *CNN*. Cable News Network, 29 Dec. 2009. <<http://www.cnn.com/2009/TECH/12/28/government.web.apps/>>.

<sup>20</sup> Little, Lyneka, and Alan Farnham. "Allentown, Pa., Explosion Leaves Five Dead." *ABC News*. ABC News Network, 10 Feb. 2011. <<http://abcnews.go.com/Business/pennsylvania-natural-gas-explosion-leaves-dead/story?id=12883552>>.

<sup>21</sup> Barrington, Robert. "Fewer Safeguards Means an Increased Corruption Risk in Local Government." *Theguardian.com*. Guardian News and Media, 09 Oct. 2013. Web. <<http://www.theguardian.com/local-government-network/2013/oct/09/corruption-local-government-robert-barrington>>.

<sup>22</sup> Heuler, Hilary. "Ugandan App Lets Citizens Blow Whistle on Local Corruption." *VOA News*. VOA, 2 July 2014. Web. <<http://www.voanews.com/content/uganda-app-lets-citizens-blow-whistle-on-local-corruption/1949403.html>>.

<sup>23</sup> "Corruption by Country / Territory." *Transparency International*. N.p., n.d. Web. <<http://www.transparency.org/country>>.

<sup>24</sup> Meskell, Darlene. "Transparency in Government." *Technology Innovation Management Review*. N.p., May 2009. Web. <<http://3A%2F%2Ftimreview.ca%2Farticle%2F252>>.

<sup>25</sup> Chao, Rebecca. "Citizens Create Open Data Tools to Drive Transparency in Hong Kong." *TechPresident*. WeGov, 8 Aug. 2013. Web. <<http://techpresident.com/news/wegov/24251/citizens-create-open-data-tools-drive-transparency-hong-kong>>.

<sup>26</sup> "Human Mobility Programme." *Unitar*. Unitar, n.d. Web. <<http://www.unitar.org/ldp/human-mobility-programme>>.

The platform seeks to make the phenomenon of global migration work for local authorities, migrants, and their countries of origin.

### Government Response

In some ways, government has embraced citizen developed platforms. In times when government provides data or opens a hackathon to the public, the local government hopes to gain something out of those efforts. Usually, the locality reduces costs due to the new service provision being offered through the new platform or a reduction in staff time dedicated to an effort. For instance, 311 services in most cities offer citizens the opportunity to get information, and report non-emergencies. The cost of 311 centers lie largely in their personnel and software costs.<sup>27</sup> To cut the cost of 311 services many cities such as Philadelphia, New York City, and San Francisco created 311 apps to continue to connect with citizens as well as cut costs.

Local government also finds value in many of the citizen developed platforms. Most platforms offer citizens an opportunity to express themselves, generate ideas, connect with their community members and become more engaged with local government or local government services. For instance, in Helsinki, Finland, an app developer used Helsinki's data on public transport and services, and merged it with location data from the social networking app FourSquare to create BlindSquare. BlindSquare is an app that helps blind people navigate the city.<sup>28</sup> The app has mapping tools, GPS, and artificial voice capabilities of new smartphones. The app now works in a dozen of countries.

However, local government can take a defensive stance when it comes to citizen developed platforms. For all the great aspects on the internet, local governments ultimately lack control of the platform. The lack of control means that the local government cannot manage the information being shared, censor certain information, or participate in shaping the narrative about an issue. Consider the Egyptian Revolution in 2011, the 18-day protests in Cairo, Egypt that started with a Facebook page. The Facebook page gained millions of followers in a short amount of time.<sup>29</sup> Protestors began to coordinate and update one another in real-time using ICTs and even when President Hosni Mubarak's regime terminated all access to the internet, Google and Twitter joined forces to make a system that would get information out to the public without internet access, via phones.<sup>30</sup>

In some cases, local government can be reluctant to cooperate with new technologies. In Oakland, California a citizen developer created the Oakland Crimespotting website. The website provides citizens with the most up-to-date information about criminal incidence in Oakland. The app used open data from law enforcement and displays the data on an interactive map. When the app was released, it was met with interest and success. However, the local government chose to cut off the data stream for the website after a week noting that the frequent data demands of the website were disrupting the city's crime website. The city changed its mind reversed the decision.<sup>31</sup>

Local government reluctance can come about if the citizen platforms place the city in an adversarial or defensive position. A rather extreme case is in Russia where the government has simply blocked access to

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<sup>27</sup> Brown, Justine. "Cities Aim to Slash 311 Costs Without Affecting Services." *Budget & Finance*. Govtech, 31 May 2012. Web. <<http://www.govtech.com/budget-finance/Cities-Aim-to-Slash-311-Phone-Bills-Without-Affecting-311-Services.html>>.

<sup>28</sup> Sulopuisto, Olli. "How Helsinki Became the Most Successful Open-Data City in the World." *CityLab*. N.p., 29 Apr. 2014. Web. <<http://www.citylab.com/tech/2014/04/how-helsinki-mashed-open-data-regionalism/8994/>>.

<sup>29</sup> "Wael Ghonim and Egypt's New Age Revolution." *CBSNews*. CBS Interactive, 16 Feb. 2011. Web. 14 Aug. 2014. <<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/wael-ghonim-and-egypts-new-age-revolution/>>.

<sup>30</sup> Kang, Cecilia. "Google, Twitter Team up for Egyptians to Send Tweets via Phone." *Post Tech* -. N.p., 31 Jan. 2011. Web. <[http://voices.washingtonpost.com/posttech/2011/01/google\\_twitter\\_team\\_up\\_for\\_ser.html](http://voices.washingtonpost.com/posttech/2011/01/google_twitter_team_up_for_ser.html)>.

<sup>31</sup> Miller, Claire Cain. "Data Mother Lode." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 6 Dec. 2009. Web. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/07/technology/internet/07cities.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/07/technology/internet/07cities.html?_r=0)>.

internet sites that oppose the government.<sup>32</sup> In 2011 at the Occupy Wall Street protests, numerous allegations of police brutality and human rights violations were leveled against the NYPD. The Occupy protests were peaceful protests, however many protestors and some innocent bystanders were allegedly accosted and abused by the police.<sup>33</sup> The acts committed by police during the Occupy protests were seen as excessively violent and a way to suppress the movement.<sup>34,35</sup>

### Fully Engaging

There are new challenges facing local governments that require new approaches to engagement. Embracing citizen developed platforms is a new approach to citizen engagement that will continue to grow. Here, we offer advice for local governments to engage more fully with these platforms:

1. Understanding that **the days of the local government being the sole provider of services are gone**. Local government cannot afford to even pretend that they are capable of providing all of the service citizens need. Therefore, embracing other options is necessary.
2. **Be prepared not control to the narrative** and to allow citizens to take their stance. This does not mean you are to allow people to post grossly negligent or untrue information but it does mean that you should respect that the platform is the citizen's space to reflect and engage in ways they want to.
3. Understand that your role is to **work with citizens not manage them**. A part of citizen engagement is allowing the citizen to actually engage. Encourage citizens to engage in their own way and work through their issues. You can learn a lot about the perception of your agency by reading comments posted on these platforms.
4. **Your main objective might not be the citizens' main objective**. While your agency is concerned with the public interest *and* job security, bureaucracy, and political agendas, citizens are mostly concerned with their most immediate needs.
5. If possible, **find ways to work with, not compete with the platforms**. Citizens are bombarded with information for a variety of sources on a regular basis. Information that is consistent and from a trusted source will help citizens engage more.
6. Remember, **citizens have good ideas too**. Citizens can offer some of the best, novel ideas if given the opportunity. In New York City, the mayors created the PlaNYC, an ideas marketplace for how citizens wanted the city to look and feel by 2030. Over 25,000 votes were cast and over 400 ideas were uploaded.<sup>36</sup> Citizens have ideas and they want to help.
7. **Honor citizens' efforts**, even when it is difficult. For instance, 22 European Union members signed the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) treaty that would curb internet piracy. However, citizens protested online and when ACTA came up for a vote, it was rejected. This was a significant loss for many in Parliament but they honored citizens' request.<sup>37</sup>

The community is engaging and willing to pick up where local government leaves off. This new form of engagement can increase the legitimacy of local governments and help citizens retain the services, information, and connections that are most important to them.

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<sup>32</sup> Gutterman, Steve. "Russia Blocks Internet Sites of Putin Critics." *Reuters*. Thomson Reuters, 13 Mar. 2014. Web. <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/13/us-russia-internet-idUSBREA2C21L20140313>>.

<sup>33</sup> Devereaux, Ryan. "Occupy Wall Street Demonstrators March to Protest against Police Violence." *Theguardian.com*. Guardian News and Media, 24 Mar. 2012. Web. <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/mar/25/occupy-wall-street-protest-police>>.

<sup>34</sup> "Suppressing Protest." *Economic and Political Weekly* 32.29 (1997): 1777. Web. <<http://cdn.theatlantic.com/static/mt/assets/politics/Suppressing%20Protest.pdf>>.

<sup>35</sup> Naidoo, Jay. "Open Data Platforms: A Tool to Revolutionise Governance." *Theguardian.com*. Guardian News and Media, 16 Apr. 2013. Web. <<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2013/apr/16/open-data-governance-jay-naidoo>>.

<sup>36</sup> "EU Rejects Anti-piracy Agreement." *BBC News*. N.p., 4 July 2012. Web. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-18704192>>.