

The Impacts of Civic Technology (TICTeC) conference 2016

Intro

In May 2016 I took part in the two day [TICTeC conference](#) in Barcelona. This is the second such event to be organised by [mySociety](#) with a view to bring together people from across the world involved in the creation of civic technology projects to share best practice, concerns and issues and to foster networks.

This year's conference had an attendance of approximately 150 and had a strong slant towards academic work being done in the area of [benefits realisation](#). With the extent of funding for non-governmental civic technology services remaining relatively static and the rapid increase of project teams working in this area, the channelling of money to the most successful, as defined by the individual funding body's criteria, is becoming key.

Outside of the eight plenary sessions there were five sets of break-out sessions in three rooms. Each of these was made up of three 20 minute sessions. Making a total of more than 50 speakers.

A number of interesting teams and projects were mentioned during the conference, some of which will be mentioned in more detail below. However, there are three that are worthy of specific highlight:

- mySociety continues to be the driving force for the introduction of civic technology well beyond the UK through tools like [Alaveteli](#) and [EveryPolitician](#)
- [Newspeak House](#) is the venue and organisation in the UK starting to bring together the diverse elements of the civic technology community here
- [Civic Hall](#) is the organisation doing the same thing in the USA

Tweets from the conference can be found on the [#tictec hashtag](#).

Day one

Plenary : Introduction from Mark Cridge, mySociety CEO

Civic technology is becoming one of the key engines this is powering government-to-citizen and citizen-to-citizen interaction worldwide. mySociety continues to help drive key research in this area - especially around the area of benefits realisation. It's vital to define the intended impacts of any piece of work before starting to implement including full clarity of measurement methodologies. Then results must be collected during and after (if applicable - i.e. the project ends), analysed and passed back to the funding organisation(s).

Plenary : Understanding impact, mySociety's year in research

Dr Rebecca Rumbul (Head of Research at mySociety). A case study is the use of SMS for political engagement in some countries in sub-saharan Africa. It was found that civil servants tend to be both more respected than politicians and do tend to respond faster to queries with more actionable suggestions. Representations do not have useful incentives to respond. When marketing the service to citizens personalising the initial approach SMS message lead to a significant difference in take-up. SMSs indicating that submission of information has been received and showing change in status of applications were very popular (similar to GOV.UK Notify). Confidentiality of senders is very important - often keeping personal identifying information away from politicians was seen as a positive. Communities that started to use these SMS services quickly started mentoring each other in how best to use them. Not only in the villages where they were introduced but in nearby ones too. The maximum value for the civic technology partners was in being able to be involved as early as possible in order to be able to define what changes in circumstance they wanted to measure before the service was introduced.

Plenary : Mobile civic tech, encouraging accountability or increasing inequality?

Dr Guy Grossman (University of Pennsylvania). Mobile technology is becoming increasingly pervasive. It's seen as a great enabler but it's important to remember that the majority are not smartphones and to pay attention to the demographics of those who control the use of the phone.

Short : Creating momentum and accountability with the Global Open Data Index

I spoke at this session alongside Mor rubinstein from the Open Knowledge Foundation (OKFN). [My slides can be found here](#). The main themes were that even governments that are doing well, as judged by the Index, still have work to do. While they continue to improve they can use what they have already learned to organise cross-government communities of people working with the same kinds of data - perhaps via the Open Government Partnership.

Short : How crowdsourcing solved the Estonian crisis of democracy

Nele Leosk (European University Institute). Brought on by the "[silvergate](#)" corruption crisis in 2012. The Estonian government looked to what Iceland had done in terms of novel methods of citizen interaction. It used online crowdsourcing methods to include 2,000 users in a national effort over 3 weeks using pre-existing ID cards for login. The also used the [James Fishkin model](#) from Deliberative Democracy to run a large in-person deliberation day using representatives chosen randomly from across the country. There was no party clustering as citizen party affiliation is open data (!). Sixteen ideas suggested by citizens in the three-week lead-up period were voted on by the citizens chosen to take part in the deliberations. Popular themes included: the electoral system, financing of political parties, patronage and public participation. Two of the ideas voted most popular were enacted by Parliament and four were partly enacted. Following on a new government petitions website was introduced.

Short : Impacts of government lead civic tech

Emily Shaw (mySociety USA). Most successful civic tech projects in the US are based around efforts in individual cities rather than states or nationally. Most civic tech projects are designed to: save money, improve trust in government, improve the image of government or enable further citizen empowerment. Following the UN's [five-stage model](#) of e-government. Most services are keen on finding and amplifying 'citizen voice'. Comprehensive user research before tool creation is still seen as quite new. Sometimes tools are introduced that empower citizens with little thought to how those on the "back end" will have to cope with new communication channels or an increase of work - leading to blockages further down the process. Issues with long term funding for such civic technology services remain - especially during austerity if they have a relatively low uptake at present. There are further issues as research shows that these tools are often used mainly by demographics that are already well represented in conversations with the state.

Plenary : From the funders

David Sasaki (Hewlett Foundation), Fran Perrin (Indigo Trust) and Duncan Edwards (Making all Voices Count). It's vital to have detailed impact assessment measurement as part of any proposal. If you can't do this yourself find someone to help you. Always work with locals, via an intermediary if required, to gather user needs. You must be able to demonstrate you did this. To start with there is nothing wrong with spending seed funding money to look for larger funders. Different funders have very different risk appetites. At the start of a service it is often seen as better to have a small number of highly engaged users than broad awareness with low uptake. Ask for and use money for marketing! Understand the [360 Giving](#) data standard (works with [IATI](#)). All agreed that organisations that demand transparency in their fundees should be transparent themselves. Also, that the nature of funding can be combative - especially if multiple groups are working in the same area or on the same issues. Which measures achieved the outcome?

Use short-term grants to build an evidence base for your work. Learn how your funders frame the problems they want to address. If they are looking for a technical solution it's often a tech spin on a long outstanding problem. Common proposal weaknesses include: little substantive understanding of underlying problem, belief that governance can be fixed by better informing those governing, lack of capability or willingness to act in the short term ('more research is needed'), can't easily explain what good looks like. Focus on [double-loop learning](#). Pull out key findings from your research.

mySociety suggests using 30% of initial funding request to 'build a thing' with 70% held in escrow to be used to sustain and scale if it is shown to work.

Plenary : Civic tech research at Facebook

Samidh Chakrabati and Winter Mason (Facebook team for Civic Interaction). Roughly 3% of all comments from American's are rated (by textual analysis) by Facebook as 'political'. They do research using the [ANES guide](#) for political efficacy. Their intentions are to: strive for broader representation, defuse acrimony and overall be able to measure impacts of changes in Facebook's products. Properly instrumenting a product before making any change is vital. Performing randomised control trials. Citizens want an insight of what their representatives do day-to-day and how this leads to advantage for them (the citizens). Nationally contentious issues are often aimed at the Facebook pages of politicians outside of a user's state - perhaps at ones seen more likely to be influenceable or as part of a concentrated campaign. Local issues tend to be discussed with representatives below the level of Senator. In general people don't feel connected to their local government. Facebook's response is to create a product specifically for connecting people to their local representatives.

Short : Assessing the success of Decide Madrid

Pablo Aragon (Universitat Pompeu Fabra). Based around the popular [D-CENT tool](#) which is used in several countries - e.g. the Finnish Open Ministry platform. In Decide Madrid there was extensive multidisciplinary research to design how the service would be measured before it was introduced. Measurements included: participation, level of citizen agreed transparency and the amount of open data produced. Citizens could create a debate or a proposal (e.g. a petition) for discussion or comment on the existing instances of either. Lots of statistics were measured for this which lead to a lot of interesting social graphs. Local councilors committed to spend time in the debate threads. Pseudo-anonymity was achieved by letting users create their own forum ID but they needed to login using IDs retrieved in person from city hall after showing ID. The system was considered enough of a success to gather continued funding.

Short : Finding data-driven stories with data novices

Rahul Bhargava (MIT). The idea is to use data and narrative to enable citizens in local communities use data to show improvements in their own areas - e.g. through 'data murals'. Created a number of tools at [datatherapy.org](#). Highlights the importance of taking data recorded as part of a new civic technology service back to the citizens it has impacted using methods they will understand and want to interact with - encouraging them to want to continue and expand on the work.

Short : When does conditional commitment work?

Roger Hallam (King's College). Issues with the '[collective action problem](#)' (I won't act unless you will too). Success in the private sector with Kickstarter, etc. Less so in the public sector with [Pledge Bank](#). In the 'collective action s-curve' there are 3 sets of participants: altruists, self-interested rationalists and 'herd'. It's estimated that you need at least 30% of total needed volume as initial altruists in order to achieve a tipping point. This is much easier to find with digital technology. The speaker has used this in order to [co-organise the UCL rent strike](#).

Short : The state of civic tech impact in the US

Kate Krontiris (Omidyar Network). Civic tech is still very much in an early stage - especially in the minds of funders, civil servants and politicians. It's key at this stage for us to all continue to meet and share our learnings. It's especially important for us to be more savvy about learning from the huge history of non-technological civic organisers that have gone before us. What we do is often broadly the same. It's very hard to deliver and measure at the same time - but it's key to try and describe what you do. Proxy measurements like website stats suck. People are often afraid to commit to measurements for fear of losing funding. There's currently a huge variety in civic tech - this is a blessing and a curse. It can be easier to find small amounts of funding to start something new but currently there's a huge amount of duplication. We need to start talking about civic tech values and discernable impacts. These will coalesce and evolve as the field aligns itself to traditional and new societal goals such as health, education and democracy.

Short : Stakeholder needs and outcome mapping, a blended approach

Lindsay Ferris (independent contractor). A mixture of human-centered design and traditional stakeholder management - a framework for social change activists. Addresses the friction between 'open discovery' and starting with organisational strategy. See outcomemapping.ca. Asked the very good question - "if citizens don't care about something, how much should we attempt to push them to do so?"

Short : Co-creating a taxonomy for civic technology

Erin Simpson, Micah Sifry (Founder) and Matt Stempeck (Civic Hall). They are creating [a taxonomy for civic tech projects](#) - which will be followed by list of who is doing what - hurrah! It's important to track failed projects as well as good ones to learn from our mistakes. More at the Personal Democracy Forum convention in the summer (which I'm going to).

Day Two

I was quite ill on day two so took considerably fewer notes.

Plenary : GovLab demonstrate Research Repository

GovLab introduced their [open governance and civic technology research repository](#) database. This includes case studies related to: behavioural science, citizen engagement, civic tech, data analysis, expert networking and open data.

Plenary : Three billion people left behind

Helen Milner (Tinder Foundation). Helen spoke about the global digital divide and reminded us that it's key to ensure that civic tech doesn't simply magnify the already engaged and empowered when speaking to the state.

Short : Studying data-driven and collaborative innovations in governance

Prof Stefaan Verhulst, Andrew Young and Dr Erik Johnston (MacArthur Foundation). Research on the use of civic technology in this area is still in its very early stages but is

expanding very rapidly. More diverse populations of involved users leads to better results for society as a whole. Civil servants and politicians are very keen on using more data to direct policy. However, there are issues where data conflicts with political policy - especially when they are driven from election commitments. The use of open data has been more impactful than estimated and continues to rise.

Short : How Google's Interested Bystanders' research inspired new election tools for engagement

John Webb (Google's Civic Innovation team). Google is working to improve its products based on its ['interested bystander' research](#) ([full paper here](#), [video about the findings](#) from Personal Democracy Forum 2015).

Short : EveryPolitician - crowdsourcing data on every politician in the world

Tony Bowden (mySociety). mySociety is, through massively distributed crowdsourcing, attempting to keep an updated real-time list of [every political representative in the world](#). So far they have nearly 70K people in 233 countries.