A Strong Democracy Is a Democracy Rooted In Communities

/ Chihhao Yu

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Rebuild trust before reimagining democracy. Make communities before making tech.



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Like many, I was curious about this group of people in Taiwan who call themselves “nobodies.” From listening in their freenode IRC channel, everyone there constantly talk to each other, help whoever asks for help, and do whatever they want. They needed no one’s approval. When something is done, they encourage each other’s contribution by tagging them with their id with a “++” appended. They were nerdy, straightforward, sometimes deeply philosophical. It seemed to me that they were trying to create alternative ways to work and govern together, but they were also having fun. “To tear down government and rebuild it from the ground,” some would say, “we are g0v.”

I wanted to ask all these serious questions to these nobodies of g0v. “What is your role within the group?” “Do you think we need roles?” “Is love important in collaborations?” “Is consensus

important?" When I posted these questions to "Hackpad", people's avatars started to show up inside the document editor along the side, shuffling up and down. I sat in front of my screen, words and sentences started to appear. Though I hardly knew anyone, I felt like I could see them reading, thinking, and typing. It was beautiful. That was my first contact with g0v. (That original Hackpad doc can be found here.)

Over the years, g0v contributors have "opened up" Taiwan's antiquated government bureaucracy. They join their frustration to tear things down, optimism to make things together, and openness to share things to make themselves both protesters and collaborators. As protesters, these hackers made governments listen by demonstrating what is possible. Their demonstrations led to the creation of data.gov.tw, join.gov.tw, vtaiwan.tw, and most recently the governmental political contribution open data portal. As collaborators, some served on various national and local government bureaus or policy committees. Some worked tirelessly to build trust with public servants, introduced tech tools into existing organizations, facilitated public policy communications, or hosted open data hackathons. When protesters and collaborators work together, they change things. Perhaps most importantly, they have planted the idea of change.

Four years ago, I started my work at "Watchout", a for-profit media company that aims to "lower the threshold of political participation." Before live-streaming became mainstream, Watchout has been hosting daily live-streaming "parties" of congressional proceedings. Beginning at 9am, a Watchout anchor logs on to the chatroom and converses with other participants. The anchor identifies key persons, explains the rules, and points out details that might otherwise be missed. At the end of each day, journalists and videographers produce short videos highlighting the good and the ridiculous legislators or government officials of the day. This effort has brought much needed attention to what goes on inside the chambers of Congress. Compared to before Watchout, the quality and accessibility of congressional live-streaming have been vastly improved.

Watchout is a pioneer among Taiwan's news organizations in producing interactive reporting. "First Year of President Tsai" asks the reader to draw the line on the line charts of unemployment rate, tourists visiting Taiwan, or government debt. The web page then reveals the difference between the line drawn by the reader and the official government statistics, and gives the reader a score accordingly. "Who Are You In The Martial Law Era?" invites the reader to take on the role of someone living under martial law. It presents the reader with choices like "Which student club should I join?" "Should I write a letter to my friend?" or "Should I help the poor?" Each choice, mundane as it is, turns out to be a real story between freedom and imprisonment, between life and death. These interactive reports have demonstrated new possibilities of storytelling. Now, almost all news organizations in Taiwan have a "new media" team.

If President Tsai's election marked a success of progressive politics, Mayor Han's election was a stark reminder of the disconnect in our society. Once we were drawn to the idea that "new media" will reinvent journalism. We chose to believe in social media and its promise of endless reach. Now we know. While we carefully produce stories, data analysis, and interactions, everything we publish live not in a vast ocean open for exploration, but small, segregated fish tanks built by algorithms for only our own kinds to admire. Once we were hopeful for "new politics" that will heal our society. Now we know. While parts of our society are "progressing forward," moving away from old norms, embracing diversity, practicing tolerance, other parts of our society are fortifying their own systems, making their own language resisting change and "preserving tradition."

"Echo chambers," "fake news," Cambridge Analytica, and "information warfare." We thought the time had come to upload our democracy to the internet, and yet we found ourselves defending our democracy against adversaries from across the Taiwan Strait and within our own homes. Adversaries of Taiwan's sovereignty are mobilizing with disinformation, corruption, and violence. What do we have? What can we do?

Creating a collective experience.

Recently, with a small group of Taiwanese and Japanese journalists, I had a chance to visit Newstapa, also known as Korean Center for Investigative Journalism, based in Seoul. We (the delegation) was greeted by Newstapa's "supporter manager," they showed us around their new offices and video studios. They said that Newstapa, as a news organization, has been making movies. "Why make movies?" A journalist from Japan asked. "Reading news is an individual experience. Watching a movie is a collective experience." The manager replied.

Since its original location, A Break Cafe has been taking care of people in Tainan. With a journalist as co-founder, the cafe hosts many gatherings. They bring together fellow journalists, writers, environmental activists, young directors, indie musicians, queer families, social workers, and people from their neighborhood to share their work, but also their personal stories. These stories then open up conversations and conversations build empathy and a sense of community. Seasonal desserts at the cafe are also delicious.

From time to time, artist collective archipiélago hosts "People's Shokudo" in Taipei, a weeknight event series to talk about their communities. For each event, two other communities would be invited to join members of archipiélago for a 3-way conversation about organizing, decision-making, and collaboration within and between communities. Afterwards, the host brings everyone to a "stir-fry restaurant" around the corner called "People's Shokudo" for food and beer.

Transitional justice is perhaps one of the most divisive topics in Taiwan. Watchout have hosted workshops in cities across Taiwan with the Ministry of Culture to "envision the transition of the Chang Kai-shek Memorial Hall." Both proud supporters of Taiwan's authoritarian past and activists for Taiwanese independence, along with urban planning experts, historians, neighborhood officers, and students were all able to sit at the same table and listen to each other. Last month, Watchout hosted a hackathon with Transitional Justice Commission. 40 people came together to generate new ideas for middle school teachers teaching transitional justice in their classrooms. Six open-source teaching plans were developed.

"Fake News Cleaner," "Lily Action," and "Thousand-Layer Pie Dialogue." These are networks of (mostly young) volunteer groups across Taiwan. They hosts workshops in neighborhood centers to share skills of fact-checking; they set up vendors near hiking trail entrances to share health information with the hikers; they wander around parks and traditional markets with information cards in their hands, looking for people to engage with. "Family Talk Clinic" and "Have You Talked To Your Senior Relatives Today?" are online groups for (mostly young) people exchanging experiences and forming tactics to communicate with senior members of their family and people outside their "Stratosphere."

The g0v task forces "jothon" and "international" have joined forces with hackers from Japan, Korea, and Hongkong to host "Facing the Ocean" (FtO) hackathons. FtO hackathons takes the spirit of g0v's bi-monthly hackathons (hosted by g0v's jothon) into a regional context. Just like in a g0v hackathon, participants are supported by an abundance of food and beverages, electrical outlets, and strong WiFi. They would share their work, pitch ideas, and find people to discuss and work together right away. There, people don't just talk about a shared future, they make it.

People across Taiwan are building new communities. They are reaching out, with or without tech, to listen, to search for conversations, empathy, to connect realities, and create common experiences. These builders of community do not resort to fear or divisiveness when confronting challenges and attacks to their worldviews and values. They keep faith in our commonalities as people of this land. Communities are what we have and building them is what we should do.

Community-building is nation-building.

To me, g0v is as much about building communities as building technologies. The tangible quality of tech makes it a meeting point at which people gather, but it is not the only destination. Starting from a 3-minute pitch on the stage of a hackathon, governance of a g0v project evolves as people join, but it is always the people who hold the agency of change. There is nothing more fascinating than a community, where people can be together, work together, with agency, as the freest version of themselves. In a community, people are not the means, but an end. To me, my favorite project in g0v is g0v itself.

From Umbrella to the ongoing struggles, the democracy movement in Hongkong has remained “leaderless,” or “without a grand stage.” Many are skeptical of this approach. Nevertheless, with heartbreaking sacrifices, the movement has endured and blossomed across Hongkong in the face of mob violence and police brutality backed by the totalitarian Chinese government. This is a movement made of communities and democracy is their rough consensus. You have to be in a community to see its shortcomings and possibilities. Be a skeptic or a critic, but also “jump into the hole” — a g0v way of saying “to contribute,” “to build.” A community is just like a democracy. It can be anything you make it to be.

The achievements of Taiwan’s “digital democracy” needs to be recognized and celebrated. Decades of work laid down by communities that enabled this success also needs to be acknowledged. Activism and collectivism have cultivated the richness of our land so that much can grow and thrive. Calling our democracy “digital” risks overlooking that history and the real struggles that many have endured.

To be optimistic about tech and innovation is not wrong, but to think that a “move fast and break things” approach will not cause any harm is sorely mistaken. Introducing change through tech is a quick patch job. Working through the complexity of people to build solutions together, that is the LTS release our society needs.

Communities are the birthplace of many things. Communities are where NGOs are born, where reality is shared, where common values are found, where trust is woven. Journalism needs communities to be relevant. Technology needs communities to be democratic. Now as we find our way back to making genuine connections and rebuilding trust, let us put communities before technologies. Support those efforts that seeks to strengthen the foundations of communities and the ecosystem between them. This is the way towards a strong democracy.



Participants of g0v hackath34n, 2019/5/24. Photo by daisuke. CC BY 2.0. https://flickr.com/photos/g0v/48042946283/

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