



The VOICE for mobility



Imagine, for a moment, a world without radio and television (much less the Internet) and one with voting privileges reserved for land owners (of the male persuasion), eventually widened for an uninformed and poorly educated electorate who are asked every four or five years to take a leap of faith. The beneficiary elites would then gather and cajole among themselves, observed by a small number of newspaper reporters filtering proceedings as they saw fit.

Such a ‘democracy’ would also feature a tightly contained public service. While a select set of senior officials, dubbed ‘mandarins’ would advise ministers (and, a lesson of British television, perhaps even manipulate one or two on occasion), most public servants would be expected to follow orders from above.

Such are the simplified contours of Westminster democracy, eventually imported to the Canadian colonies and still the underlying basis for our parliamentary system of government.

Naturally, much has changed and government has adapted and grown – and how. In 1918, according to Wikipedia, the core federal public service reportedly comprised some 5,000 employees, 0.05 percent of the population. By 2012 that figure would swell to more than 250,000 or 0.75 percent. The extended federal public service today: more than 400,000 workers strong.

Despite this massive expansion, much

of the overarching model of political accountability, the so-called ‘machinery of government’ remains intact: secrecy and hierarchy solidify what some have termed as the ‘clay layer’ of bureaucratic control. While significant reforms are underway at all government levels, as well as among them (see *CGE* May 2013 on the Joint Councils for numerous examples), systemic change has remained elusive and performance and legitimacy continually suffer as a result.

That something new is needed is well understood, even by government leaders. In his 2013 annual report on the federal public service, for instance, the Clerk of the Privy Council recognizes that “we achieve the best outcomes for citizens when we work collaboratively across our organizations and beyond.” He goes on to stress the importance of seizing opportunities from new technologies (announcing a new deputy committee to examine the role of social media in policymaking). Yet as witnessed in the Canadian Senate as well as in many cities, the rising tide of transparency also intensifies pressure on those exerting power via old school ways that often remain engrained, though eroding in a painfully gradual manner.

Canada is not alone in confronting such tensions. South of the border, the Obama administration has struggled to embrace a digital impetus while facing familiar accusations of excessive secrecy and wasteful bloating. Australia’s parliamentary foundations mirror our own, but there an elected Senate is surprisingly digitally literate. The State of Victoria boasts a formal Gov 2.0 Action Plan with four guiding principles (Leadership, Participation, Transparency and Performance) that offer a sound basis for crafting a new architecture.

This new architecture entails holistic renewal and much greater degrees of societal input and involvement than have thus far been permitted within our structures of democratic governance. In short, ma-

chinery must give way to mobility.

What is mobility? As one journalist quips, “Think mindset and not handset.” While the explosion of smart devices is the most visible aspect of frontline mobility, the emergence of the cloud as a proxy for a more open and interconnected era, bringing about conditions for what Canadian journalist and author Nora Young terms the “virtual self.” In embracing this new citizenry, governments should strive for what two American researchers describe as “ubiquitous engagement,” a collaborative and participative eco-system predicated upon a mindset of openness and driven by the collective intelligence of an empowered society.

Beyond this broad reframing, the derivation and design of more open and participative governance approaches can only come about through collective and inclusive innovation, infusing our democracy and public administration with a new VOICE. This acronym encapsulates, in my estimation, the main set of tensions that must be recognized and resolved in forging a new path.

V – Virtualization, the cornerstone of the Internet and the still-nascent mobility era, but one also comprising ongoing digital and data divides that threaten to further fragment rather than facilitate inclusion. Canada’s geographic and social cleavages in terms of both broadband and mobility set us back from global leaders in this regard. With government’s own addiction to paper-based processing, a hallmark of bureaucracy, mobility within the public sector is likewise stymied, limiting creativity and agility.

O – Openness, from three inter-related drivers: first; the rise of open source software and operating systems; second, heightened demands across all sectors for both proactive and reactive transparency; and third, the rise of meta data and social media. Nonetheless, governments – along

with significant segments of industry – remain strongly attached to viewing information and knowledge holdings as proprietary concepts, and secrecy remains at the core of most representational democratic regimes.

I – Intermediation, fundamental alterations to how citizens retrieve information, form opinions, and mobilize action. Traditional media actors are rivalled by new forms of social media that seek novel and wider inclusion in the conduct of democracy and public management. Yet many online quarters reflect what philosopher Mark Kingwell describes as the “shout doctrine”: an amplification of opinions potentially drowning out compromise and civility.

C – Collaboration, at the heart of Web 2.0 and Gov 2.0 logics driving participative value creation and the pursuit of collective intelligence. At the same time, parliamentary democracy and public administration dictate hierarchical and informational con-

trol. The trepid deployment of more innovative and flexible work arrangements is indicative of this tension, enjoining collaboration and virtualization and pitting networks against hierarchy within rivaling notions of accountability.

E – Engagement, as increasingly informed and enabled citizens seek opportunities for influence and engagement in accordance with the rhetoric often espoused by governments themselves. Nevertheless, widespread online commercialization emphasizes choice and self-interest at the expense of responsibility and collective action. Government continues to view social media as primarily a communications medium and increasingly adversarial and aggressive forms of partisanship further constrain engagement from taking hold.

Innovating politically is especially important to resolving these tensions and more is required than uninspiring discussions of

Senate reform or abolition. One can easily be forgiven, in Canada, for viewing electronic democracy as purely theoretical or a concept limited to voting online. By contrast, I have the privilege of partaking in the Council of Europe’s World Forum for Democracy, a richly discursive showcasing of novel, virtual, and collaborative models of political participation, policymaking and service delivery. The infusion of youth at this event is explicitly mandated and one in keeping with this demographic imperative.

In short, the underlying nature of mobility and VOICE necessitates a participative ethos encapsulating the spirit and potential of Gov 2.0 and ubiquitous engagement. While governments have embraced open data and, in some cases, open government, a more ambitious societal project is required in order to foster genuine governance renewal. Only then can we truly embrace the considerable and, as yet, largely untapped potential afforded by an era of mobility. ☉

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Jeffrey Roy

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