

WHO NEEDS ELECTED OFFICIALS?

Tara Hunt

“When I’m in charge of redrafting democracy, I will make sure that we create more ways to put citizens in charge of the system. I will make it a mandate to create more turned on, tuned in citizens and see where that leads us.”

I recently gave a presentation on how individuals around the world were taking it upon themselves to improve government services by using web tools and technology to transform their communities. Afterward, a very astute government official walked up to me and asked a question, “If all of these amazing collaborative tools exist and all of these really tuned in, turned on people exist, why do we need government at all, really? Why don’t people just truly self-organize?”

Now, I’ve never been one to define myself as a no-government type, having been raised in socialist-leaning Canada and attributing much of my opportunities to that system, but I found myself quite intrigued by her question. Over the past couple of years of talking to government agencies about the wonders of Web 2.0, I have found that

it is a frustrating thing to be part of a large organization that has to make the whole country happy at once. Large government organizations move slowly and are inefficient. Government agencies also cost way more money to run than they produce in value in many cases (mostly through the heavy administrative costs).

My questioner was raising a valid point: in this emerging 2.0 world of collaboration, community and transparency, do we really need to elect people to run stuff?

Could we actually create a TRUE democracy and run it all ourselves? Oh, don't get me wrong, I don't mean that each one of us would need to take turns arresting people or putting out fires. I just mean that we can make good decisions ourselves without all the buttoned-up politicians in the way. Why couldn't we all be involved in our local, regional and national governments without having to entrust someone to make decisions on our behalf, but by actually making the decisions for ourselves every day? Couldn't we have an ongoing level of engagement with which to make public decisions wisely?

Now, you may be thinking "That's crazy! People don't have time to be deeply involved in the political process!" Of course they don't, particularly not with the current state of government. It's way too complicated. Bills are unwieldy and complex, with many people trying to stuff their interests into one piece of policy. But let me propose this: we need to run policy making more like we run startups. Simpler. Small pieces loosely joined. We need to deal with real issues that affect us now.

Let's start with a group of citizens, we'll call them Ombudsmen, who are focused on long-term issues. They will pay attention to trends and potential difficulties in the same way that Wikipedia deals with controversial topics using an iterative process of discussion and editing until the community comes to a consensus.

And then there are the here and now issues. Well, I suggest that

we deal with them here and now. And if we screw up? Well, we'll fix it. We can be in a perpetual beta, people. It's okay. We already don't know what we're doing; we may as well make that transparent, too.

Imagine an issue arising on Twitter, a free networking and micro-blogging site, wherein someone proposes a change to the legal driving age:

sassygirl123: “With the number of video games teaching our children to drive these days, why not drop the learners permit in Utah to 14? #utah” (The hashtag, #utah, alerts all Utah residents to the suggestion.)

concernedmom: “I'm not sure if I would equate video game driving with actual driving ability. I don't think my 14-year-old is ready. #utah”

The debate goes back and forth until there are enough people gathered around the subject. Someone sets up a survey and it is put to a vote. The vote is in favor of dropping the learners permit age to 14 in Utah with 73% voting for and 26% voting against. Google records the results and someone updates the Wikipedia entry. Craigslist sees a jump in ‘Seeking Second Family Car’ ads.

When I'm in charge of redrafting democracy, I will make sure that we create more ways to put citizens in charge of the system. I will make it a mandate to create more turned on, tuned in citizens and see where that leads us. I may be putting a little too much faith in our ability to make sound decisions for our communities using Twitter, but the point is that we can streamline our decision-making processes using new Web 2.0 technology. We also need our governments to begin to treat our personal data with the respect it deserves and move past their proprietary habits, such as forcing people to fill out awful, repetitive

forms that get lost in the system. We need to start using open systems that allow users, in this case citizens, to manage and safeguard their own information.

About the Author

Tara 'missrogue' Hunt understands how the participatory web is changing all of our relationships: B2C, B2B and C2C. She co-founded Citizen Agency in 2006 with the mission of teaching her clients how to work more effectively with the communities they serve and how to embrace and adjust to all of the changes in culture businesses are facing. Her forthcoming book on social capital and online communities called *The Whuffie Factor* is due out in November 2008 from Crown Publishing.