

Technologies of Civic Participation

Civic technologies and They Work for You

Git Version 0.1.1

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Abstract

An investigation of civic technologies focused upon They Work for You, and including descriptions of civic hacking and open data, along with taxonomies of civil tech.

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Introduction

This essay will discuss the civic technology They Work For You and do so with regard to conceptions of hacking, open data. It will begin by moving from general descriptions of hacking and open data to specific investigations of They Work for You. After that, the essay will diverge from They Work For You to examine taxonomies of civic tech, how they might be applied to other

Civic hacking

Overview

It might be suggested that the stereotype of (not for profit) hackers is of an individual (usually a man) or a group (usually men) of programmers extracting information from (and, thereby, breaking into) a government or corporate computer system. In this gloss, hacking is akin to a high tech heist movie. Another way of understanding hacking might be to consider what it would appear to involve, namely , to hack iteratively at a large problem. And it is this conception of hacking that when applied to social problems gives rise to the term civic hacker. Thus the pre-existing outsider status of hackers is combined with commercial software engineering practices to address civil problems and to do so, for the most part, in a not for profit manner.

Open data

Overview

They Work for You

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civic hacker. Thus the pre-existing outsider status of hackers is combined with commercial software engineering practices to address civil problems and to do so, for the most part, in a not for profit manner.

Aims

Quoting directly from the website, the aim of makers of the site is that it should "make it much easier for anyone to understand exactly what is going on in Parliament". I suggest that that aim has been implemented through three aspects of the site: (i) a front-end design that engenders accessibility; (ii) the curation of permanent URLs; and (iii) the provision of open source and freely available code.

Implementation

Accessible design: search box

The screen shot within Figure 1 depicts the home page of the site, and prominently displayed within the home page is a search box, which, amongst other types of entries, accepts postcode [1] values. When a user enters a postcode within the search box the site will subsequently display information about the MP associated with the entered post code. This clear and simple process is a good example of how the design of the site engenders accessibility, particularly for those users who do not know the name of their MP.

Accessible design: text only

A second way in which the design of the site engenders accessibility can be seen from the screen shot within Figure 2. The screen shot depicts a terminal (or console) based text only browser, and it is displaying the information from the They Work for You site for the current UK Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn. The text only browser displayed is called Lynx [2], which was created at the University of Kansas in 1992, and which was successor to the first browser (known as 'WorldWideWeb' [3]) developed by Tim Berners Lee [4]. Relatively few modern web sites fully support text only browsing, due to the inclusion of client side JavaScript DOM manipulation. However, text browsers are frequently the basis for text to speech browsing (or transformations) as used by those with disabilities, such as blindness. As such, the fact that the site can be viewed via a text only browser is another demonstration of how its design engenders accessibility, and, hence, contributes to civil society.



Figure 1: They Work for You: search box

Permanent URLs

The second aspect of the site that enables it to contribute to civil society is the construction of permanent URLs (or web addresses). The screen shot within Figure 3 shows a summary page (from within the They Work for You) for a debate between two MPs in the House of Commons. The debate, itself, is published by They Work for You with a permanent and unique URL. In addition, each speech (or interjection) within the debate can be viewed (and references) separately; such that, the They Work for You site also allocated permanent and unique URLs to each interjection, as can be seen from the screen shot within Figure 4. Lastly, Figure 5 depicts the URL for the interjection depicted by Figure 4. Such URLs curate all interjections and their parent debates, enabling references to them to be used accurately across the web.

Open source

The third aspect of the implementation of the site that enables it to contribute to civil society is through the provision of open source, freely available code. To that end, the They Work for You site was redeveloped into a tool called Pombola. The screen shot within Figure 6 depicts information about Pombola showing that it is currently being used to provide information about the parliaments

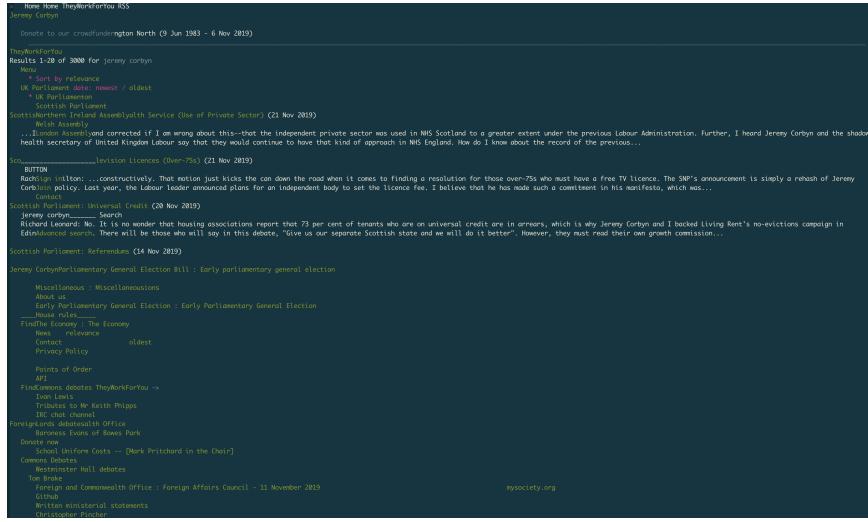


Figure 2: They Work for You: text only browsing via Lynx

in both Kenya and South Africa. The Pombola code [5] is freely accessible from the GitHub [6] open source, online code repository, as be seen within Figure 7. It is worth noting that the development of Pombola was financed by the Omidyar Network [7], which is a philanthropic investment organisation, and which was launched by the founder of the auction based e-commerce site eBay [8] Pierre Omidyar [9]. Furthermore, and highlighting the sometimes complex interplay between civic technologies, the tools that the use, and commercial technologies, GitHub was recently bought by Microsoft [10].

Summary

Taken together, They Work for You contributes to civil society through its implementation, whose key aspects are: (i) accessible design; (ii) the construction of permanent URLs; and (iii) open source and freely available code, which, additionally (and through Pombola) aids the development of civil society in secondary countries.

Values

Overview

MOVING ON NOW TO SLIDE 12 TO ADDRESS THE VALUES INSCRIBED IN THE TECHNOLOGY I WOULD SUGGEST - PRIMARY VALUES ARE



Sarah Jones

Shadow Minister (Housing, Communities and Local Government) (Housing)

To ask the [Secretary of State](#) for Housing, Communities and Local Government, what discussions he has had with the expert advisory panel on building safety on revising Advice Note 14 following the increase in unsalable properties in tower blocks.

(Citation: H



Esther McVey

Minister of State (Housing, Communities and Local Government)

[Holding answer](#) received on 21 October 2019

It has not proved possible to respond to the hon. Member in the time available before Dissolution.

(Citation: H

Figure 3: They Work for You: permanent page for a debate

Cooperation and sharing of data HOWEVER, THE SAME TECHNOLOGIES THAT enABLE THOSE POSITIVE VALUES MAY GIVE RISE TO CONCERNs data driven nature of the site WHICH IT IS SUGGESTED MAY LEAD TO a focus on MPs voting patterns and not the broader aspects of their roles within a community - or in indeed in government.

Strengthen civil society

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Data object

One example of the dochotomy between an MPs voting patterns and their community work concern CONCERNs former UoE student Ian Murray



Nick Brown Opposition Chief Whip (Commons) ○ 2:07 pm, 31st October 2019

I am replying for the **Opposition**, **Mr Speaker**. Before I do so, however, may I say to you, Sir, that I want to identify myself with absolutely everything my right hon. Friend the **shadow Leader of the House** said in tribute to you. You have been an outstanding Speaker, and you deserve the gratitude of us all. I know that to be praised by the Opposition **Chief Whip** will probably not help your standing with your colleagues, but let us face it—just between the two of us—it is probably too late to make amends. I can truthfully say, **Mr Speaker**, that nobody is going to miss you more than I am.

[See this speech in context](#)
[Tweet](#) [Share](#)
(Citation: HC Deb, 31 October 2019, c553)

Figure 4: They Work for You: permanent page for a single speech

<https://www.theyworkforyou.com/debates/?id=2019-10-31a.553.2>

Figure 5: They Work for You: permanent URL for a single speech

- Labour MP for Edinburgh South In 2015 - Hearts of Midlothian football club
- one of two clubs in Edinburgh - faced closure following the bankruptcy of its Russian owner Ian Murray was asked by supporters to liaise with official receivers IN HIS CONSTITU Over several years - his work led to a supports cooperative buyout the club Is the only club in top flight UK flight to whole owned by the supporters

Ian Murray was interviewed RECENTLY on the BBC Parliamentary channel discussing a book he wrote about his voluntary work helping the supporters of the football club, and I have included the link directly below.

However, although Ian Murray's involvement came about because of his role as an MP Did not involve any specific questions in the commons And - CONSEQUENTLY - is not described by the aggregated data on his They Work For You page, as shown within the screenshot.

Data object: response

That being said, ThEY WORK FOR YOU aware of the problem Within the page associated with each MP Section called Numerology - shown in the screenshot caveats around a data driven / data object perspective

Summary

- Cooperation and DATA sharing - ALSO Potential for MPs to be ONLY conceived of in terms of their voting records - that is, a data object



Pombola in South Africa

People's Assembly is opening government for South Africa, publishing debates, informing the populace and keeping politicians accountable.



Pombola in Kenya

Mzalendo makes the Kenyan Parliament accessible to citizens, with MP profiles, contact details and score cards for politicians.

The original inspiration



TheyWorkForYou is mySociety's UK parliamentary monitoring site, which inspired the creation of our configurable parliamentary monitoring software.

Figure 6: They Work for You: Pombola

Challenges

Users

THE PRIMARY Challenge faced by They Work For You in fulfilling SUCH CONTRIBUTIONS TO CIVIL SOCIETY CONCERNS - I SUGGEST - the typeof users accessing the site:

- Although They Work For You do not publish user statistics Alexa Rank of approximately 125, 000 suggesting - AT LEAST ANECDONTALLY - that it receives around 50,000 users VISITS per month

WHILST CONTRIBUTORS TO THE SITE SHOULD BE PROUD

- However, I would suggest aspect of self selection in those who are using the site already interested in politics

MOREOVER - SUCH SELF SELECTION MAY Ameliorate the strength of the contribution of the site as a whole to CIVIL SOCIETY - and the general

Screenshot of network traffic generated by the They Work For You site when viewed using the Chrome browser The five entries towards the bottom of the screenshot Show that the They Work For You site is sending information about user activity to Google Analytics on approximately second by second basis That is, the client browser that I used to view the site - sending info

Suggesting that They Work For You as an organisation do have web / user statistics

Given small charitable org May well be the case that they are using the free version of GA IF THAT IS THE CASE, THEN THE Rights to THE aggregated

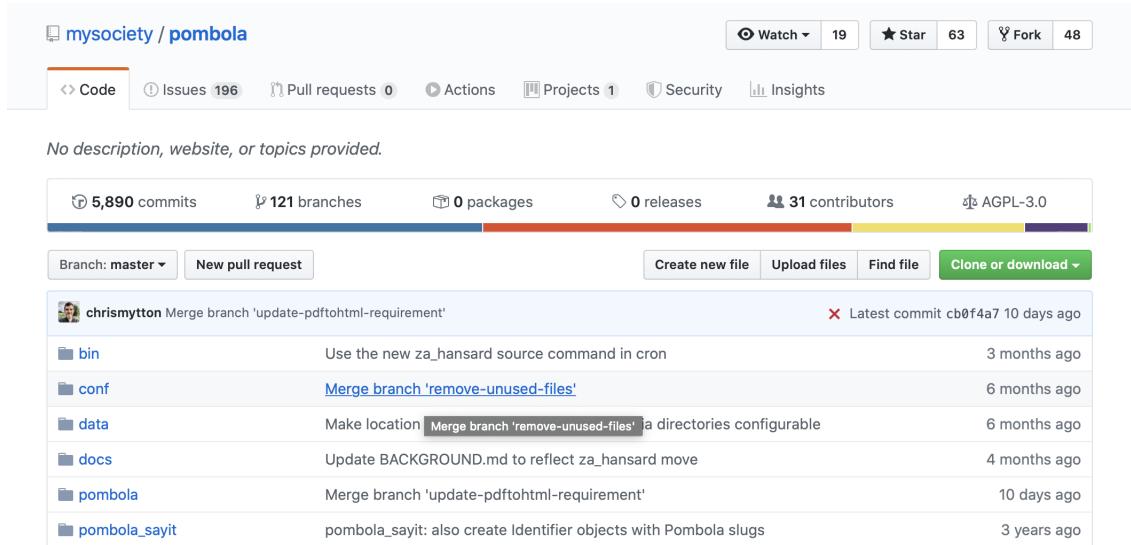


Figure 7: They Work for You: GitHub

analytics data held by Google And that may be one explanation of why they don't publish data ABOUT usage

Finance

That being said, and according to a Guardian article in 2008 The Work For You via My Society undertook paid work for the government to produce the UK e-petition site, A SCREENSHOT OF WHICH CAN BE FOUND IN SLIDE 11. In addition, the They Work For You offer a paid for API - Application Programming Interface

Summary

IN SHORT Two of the challenges faced by They Work For You in fulfilling aims towards civic society ARE

HOW TO PROMOTE an understanding of politics beyond those already interested in the subject - which could be understood further via web statistics They MAY FACE Financial pressures - AS PER many small charitable organisation - though as mentioned - overall picture of finances may be more complex than it at first seems

The screenshot shows the TheyWorkForYou website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'MPs', 'Lords', 'Debates', 'Written Answers', 'Bill Committees', 'Recent Votes', and 'Upcoming'. Below the navigation bar, the main content area features a portrait of Ian Murray, a former Labour MP for Edinburgh South. The page title is 'Ian Murray' and it includes social media links for Twitter (@IanMurrayMP) and Facebook (<https://facebook.com/IanMurrayMP>). There is also a search bar for 'Search this person's speeches'.

The main content area has tabs for 'Overview', 'Voting Record', and 'Recent Votes'. The 'Overview' tab is selected. On the left, there is a sidebar with links for 'Votes', 'Appearances', 'Profile', 'Numerology', and 'Register of Interests'. The right side displays a section titled 'A selection of Ian Murray's votes' with two examples:

- Almost always voted against a reduction in spending on welfare benefits**
2 votes for, 42 votes against, 10 absences, between 2014–2016. A 'Show votes' button is available.
- Almost always voted against reducing housing benefit for social tenants deemed to have excess bedrooms (which Labour describe as the "bedroom tax")**
0 votes for, 16 votes against, 2 absences, between 2011–2018. A 'Show votes' button is available.

Figure 8: They Work for You: generated page for MP Ian Murray

Taxonomies of civic technology

Overview

- micah-sifry proposed the PRESENTED - Cartesian taxonomy of civic tech
- Vertical axis - scale of participatory engagement from thin to click - THAT is - simply clicking a like button (on the one hand) to sactivities far more extensive and involved - Horizontal axis - DISPLAYS A SCALE OF outcome of such engagement - from purely symbolic to those that promote lasting impactful change

Numerology

Please note that numbers do not measure quality. Also, representatives may do other things not currently covered by this site. [More about this](#)

Has spoken in **80 debates** in the last year — well above average amongst MPs. [See all Jeremy Corbyn's speeches](#)

Has received answers to **0 written questions** in the last year — well below average amongst MPs.

Replied within 2 or 3 weeks to [a very low](#) number of messages sent via WriteToThem.com during 2015, according to constituents.

Has voted in [73.43% of votes](#) in this Parliament with this affiliation — below average amongst MPs. (From Public Whip)

This MP's speeches, in Hansard, are readable by an average **18-19** year old, going by the [Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level](#) score.

492 people are tracking this MP

Has used three-word alliterative phrases (e.g. "she sells seashells") **2332 times** in debates — well above average amongst MPs. ([Why is this here?](#))

Figure 9: They Work for You: numerology section

Groups

Micah Sifry's taxonomy offers a MARVELOUS MEANS of discriminating between and identifying different types of civic tech I do not believe that the scales used offer a comprehensive means of describing INDIV civic tech projects

For instance, does not DIRECTLY incorporate the nuanced conception of group membership outlined by NOVECK NOR does is address the political, social and engineering decisions underlying the technologies involved in individual civic tech projects

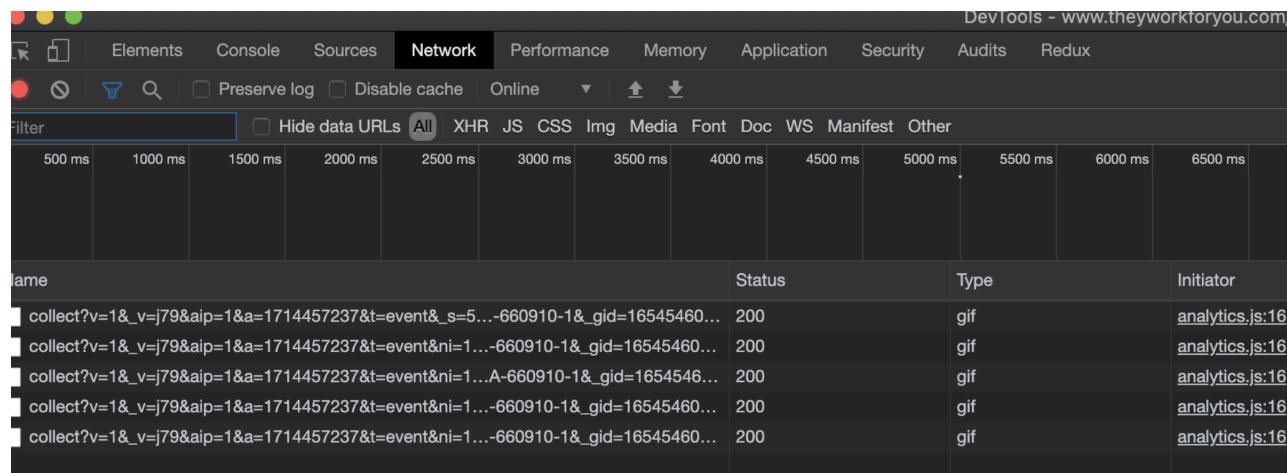


Figure 10: They Work for You: Google analytics

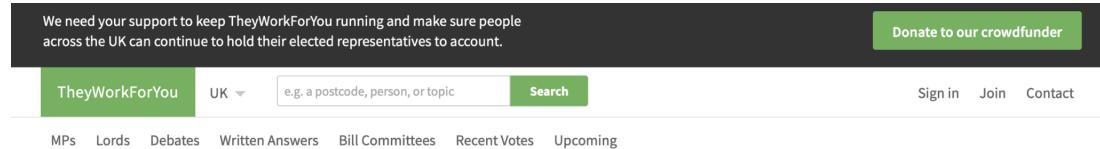


Figure 11: They Work for You: banner advert for donations

Infrastructure

Pipeline taxonomy

Overview

PIPELINE TAXONOMY of civic tech Low Level technologies - such as servers - AND OR accessibility of open web networks - important when considering civic tech in countries with restrictive web practices MovING FORWARD TO THE RIGHT the taxonomy addresses the design of individual civic tech projects IT then encompasses the types of engagement such projects offer - group membership Lastly, it finishes with a phrase coined by Tom Steinberg (the founded of My Society) NAMELY - civic power. That is, what types of civic power does a project engender.

I would suggest that this pipeline taxonomy offer strong descriptive power (per individual civic tech project) but, unfortunately, lacks the discriminative clarity of the taxonomy proposed by Micah Sifry.

The screenshot shows the UK Government Petitions website. At the top, there's a green header with the Royal Coat of Arms and the word "Petitions". Below it, a blue banner states: "Parliament has now been dissolved. There will be an early General Election on Thursday 12 December. This means that Parliament has been dissolved and that all parliamentary business – including petitions – has been stopped. Find out more on the [Petitions Committee website](#)". Underneath, a grey box contains the text "Get involved with the UK Parliament". Below this, a section titled "During the last parliament" provides statistics: "456 petitions got a response from the Government" and "73 petitions were debated in the House of Commons".

Figure 12: UK Government: E-Petition web site

Wikipedia

Further research

Richard Rogers

Summary

Conclusion

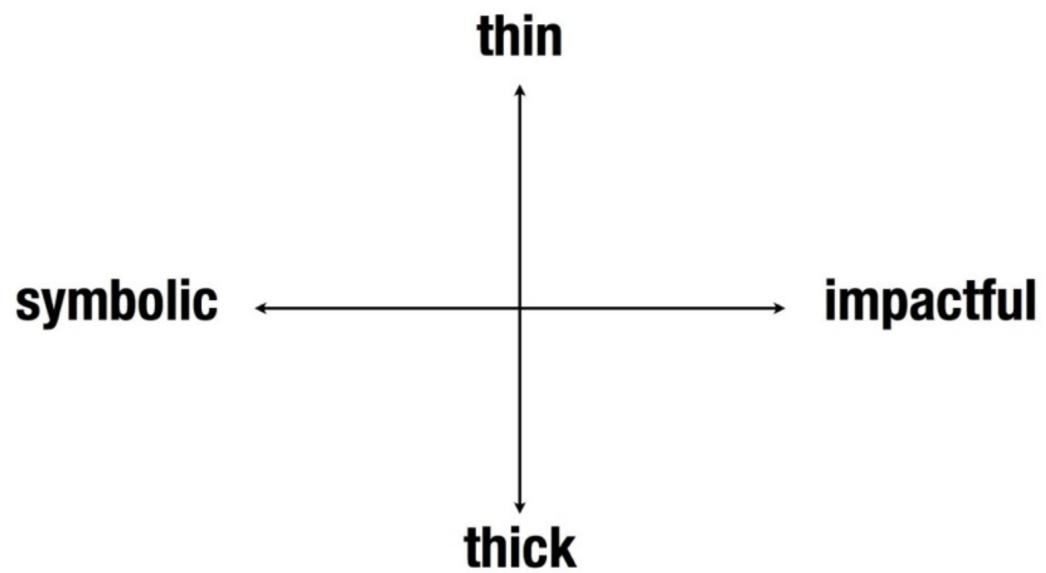


Figure 13: Taxonomies of civic technology: Sifry

Appendix

Definition

Low level technology → civic tech design → civic group engagement power

Figure 14: Pipeline taxonomy

References

- [1] “Uk postcodes.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postcodes_in_the_United_Kingdom.
- [2] “Lynx browser.” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lynx_\(web_browser\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lynx_(web_browser)).
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