

# Technologies of Civic Participation

Civic technologies and They Work for You

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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**

### **Overview**

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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.



Figure 1: Search box

### 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].



Figure 2: Text only browsing via Lynx

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.

### 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.

**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](#)

(Citation: H

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

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

**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

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

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 developed into a tool called Pombola. The screen shot within Figure 6 depicts information about Pombola showing that it is currently being used to

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

provide information about the parliaments in both Kenya and South Africa. The Pombola code [5] is freely accessible from the GitHub [6] open source, on-line 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].

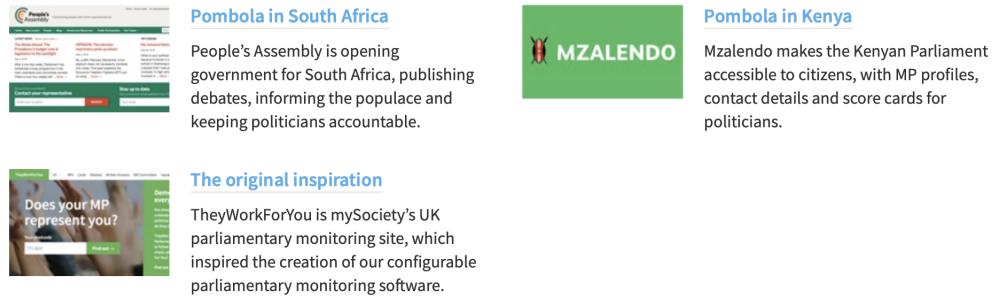


Figure 6: They Work for You: Pombola

## 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

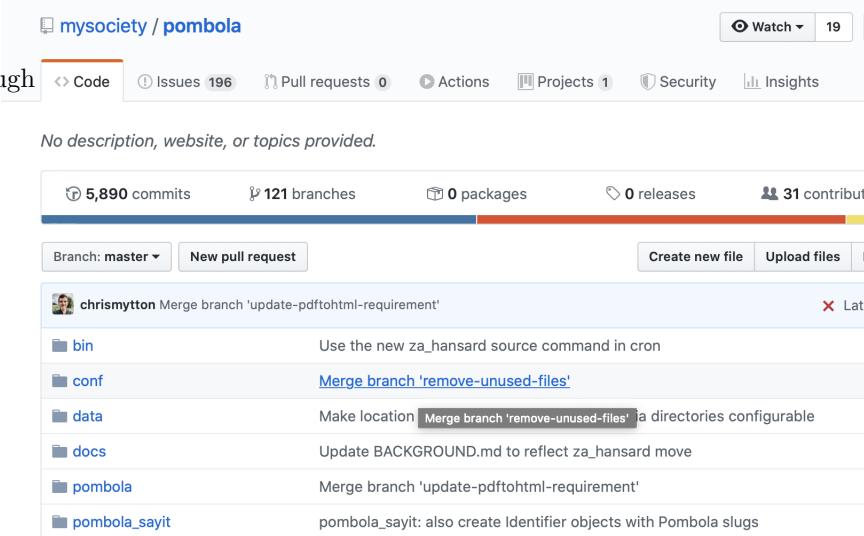


Figure 7: They Work for You: GitHub

INSCRIBED IN THE TECHNOLOGY I WOULD SUGGEST - PRIMARY VALUES ARE 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**

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

### **Data object**

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

TheyWorkForYou UK e.g. a postcode, person, or topic Search

MPs Lords Debates Written Answers Bill Committees Recent Votes Upcoming

 **Ian Murray**  
Former Labour MP for Edinburgh South [@IanMurrayMP](#) [https://facebook.co...](#)

Search this person's speeches Search

### Numerology

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

11  
Has spoken in **80 debates** in the last year — well above average amongst MPs. [See all speeches](#)

Has received answers to **0 written questions** in the last year — well below average a  
Replied within 2 or 3 weeks to [a very low](#) number of messages sent via WriteToThem according to constituents.

ONLY conceived of in terms of their voting records - that is, a data object

## Challenges

### Users

One of the primary challenges faced by They Work for You in fulfilling such contributions to civil society concerns the type of users accessing the site. Although They Work for You do not publish user statistics, the site has an Alexa rank of approximately 125,000 [11], suggesting, at least anecdotally, that the site receives around 20,000 user visits per month. Whilst the contributors to the development of the site should be proud of such user engagement, it is suggested, however, that there may be an element of self selection amongst those using the site; that is, they are already interested in politics. Moreover, such self selection may ameliorate the strength of the contribution of the site as a whole to the general public and, thereby, civil society.

### Web analytics

Figure 10 depicts a screen shot 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 site is sending information about user activity to Google Analytics

[12] on an approximately second by second basis. That is, the client browser that the author of this essay used to view the site is sending information to Google Analytics. This finding suggests that They Work For You as an organisation do have access to statistics about user activity on their site. However, given that They Work for You is a small charitable organisation, it may well be the case that make use of the free version of Google Analytics. If that is the case, then the rights to the aggregated analytics data are held by Google, and that may explain why they don't publish data about usage of the site.

## Finance

A second challenge facing They Work for You, and one that they may well share with many charitable organisations, is a lack of finance. To that end, Figure 11 depicts the home page of the site with an apparently permanent banner advert for donations. That being said, and according to a *Guardian* article in 2008 [13] They Work For you via parent organisation MySociety undertook paid work for the government to produce the UK e-petition site. A screen shot of the e-petition site can be found within Figure 12. In addition, the They Work for You now offer a paid for Application Programming Interface (or API) enabling secondary groups of individuals to access data (once an appropriate licence) has been bought.

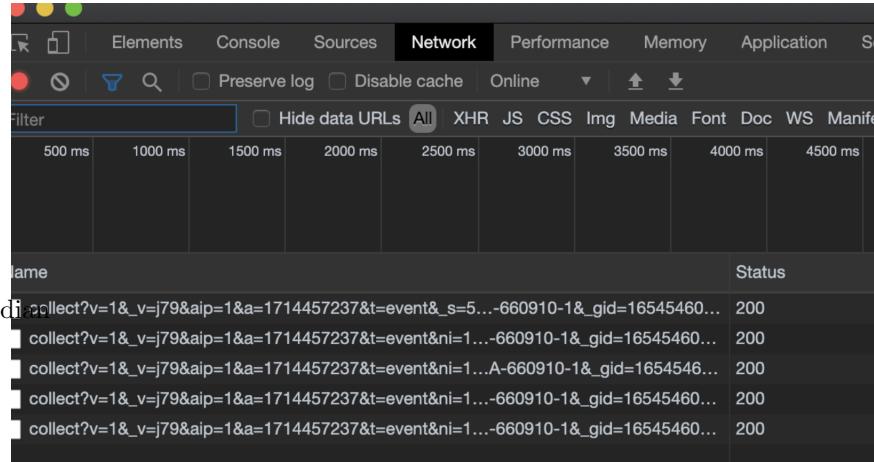


Figure 10: They Work for You: Google analytics

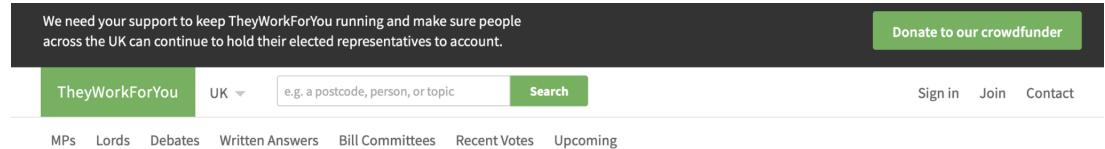


Figure 11: They Work for You: banner advert for donations

## Summary

In short, two of the challenges faced by They Work for You in fulfilling its aims towards civic society are: (i) how to promote an understanding of politics beyond those already interested in the subject, which is an issue that can be further addressed via web analytics; and (ii) they may face financial pressures, though as mentioned the overall picture of their finances may be more complex than it at first seems.

Figure 12: UK Government: E-Petition web site

## 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 pro-

mote lasting impactful change

## 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

## 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

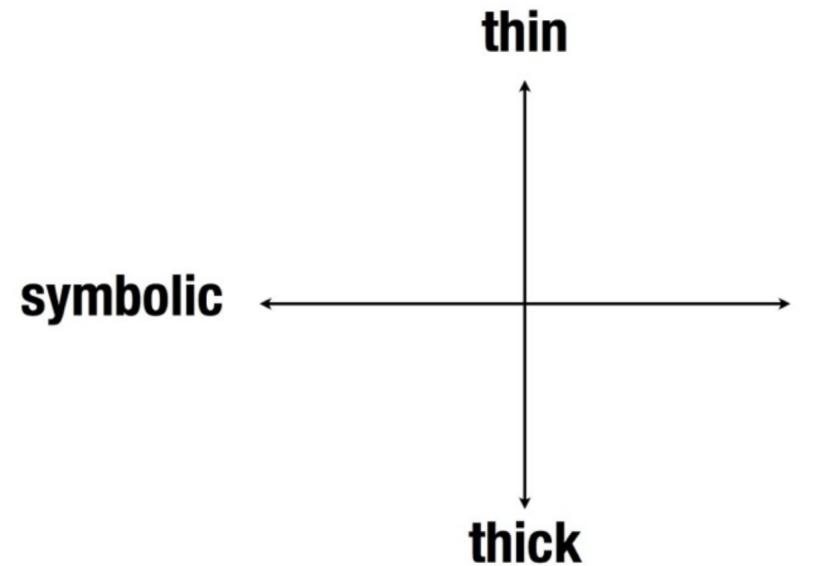


Figure 13: Taxonomies of civic technology:  
Sifry

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.

**Wikipedia**

**Further research**

Richard Rogers

**Definition**

**Low level technology →civic tech design power**

**Summary**

Figure 14: Pipeline taxonomy

**Conclusion**

## Appendix

## References

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