Ten Years of Failed Civic Tech in Germany

E-government fails and the structural lessons yet to be learned from them

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Failed yet successful - Learning from discontinued civic tech initiatives[1], Workshop at the CHI'23 on April 28th, 2023 in Hamburg, Germany[2]

1 Introduction

Digitalization in Germany has been progressing slowly, with e-government serving as a prime example. The goal of e-government is to improve administrative processes while bolstering citizen accessibility and also increasing public participation. Therefore government agencies are constantly on the lookout for innovative technological approaches. For this purpose, civic tech projects and start-ups are often promoted as flagship projects. To find those, city labs are being established, financial aids are provided to apply for and hackathons are being organized to encourage and find such innovations.

2 Example cases

In the last decade, various civic tech initiatives showed great promise at their inception. However, many of these projects have now either become defunct or are no longer technically maintained. Here are four of these cases to better understand the challenges they faced. All have been started by volunteers, and partly and temporarily funded by the non-profit NGO Open Knowledge Foundation Germany.

a) Kleine Anfragen (Small Inquiries)[3] was founded in 2014 within the Open Knowledge Foundation Germany. The project focused on making parliamentary inquiries from the federal and state parliaments transparent and easily accessible to the public. By gathering and archiving these inquiries and their corresponding answers, the platform enabled citizens to track the issues that their representatives are

[1] https://discontinued-civictech.github.io
[2] https://chi2023.acm.org
[3] https://www.kleineanfragen.de

raising and the government's responses. smallInquiries was shut down at the end of 2020 after five years of standstill and many sudden API changes from various parliaments.

b) BürgerBautStadt (Citizens Build the City)[4] was founded in 2012. The civic tech initiative aimed to increase citizen participation in urban development projects throughout Germany. The platform provided an overview of ongoing projects and enabled users to access relevant documents, share their opinions, and contribute ideas. It set out to foster communication between citizens, local authorities, and developers, promoting transparency and collaboration in urban planning processes. At the end of 2019, the service was shut down due to a lack of volunteers.

c) Politik bei Uns (Politics at Our Place)[5] was founded in 2014. The German civic tech project made local government information more accessible to citizens. The platform aggregated information from city council meetings, minutes, resolutions, and other official documents from municipalities across the country using the OParl technical standard, having made it easy for citizens to stay informed about local political decisions. Beginning of 2020 the service was shut down due to a lack of volunteers after they used up the initial funding but no maintenance funding was possible.

d) Ratsinformationssystem-Datenstandard OParl (Council Information System Data Standard Oparl)[6] was conceived in 2012. It establishes a standardized, open data format for council information systems in Germany. By defining a standardized data format for meeting documents, minutes, and other council-related information, OParl enables easier access to this data for both citizens and developers, promoting transparency and fostering the development of civic tech applications. It is still widely used, as can be seen via `https://www.meine-stadt-transparent.de`, but further development of the standard was halted in 2018.

3 Post mortem analysis

Those and many other seemingly sensible projects have stalled or have been abandoned after an initial phase of wide success and use. All projects started with volunteers, grew, and were partly funded, but eventually faced operational challenges due to a lack of integration into governmental structures or stable funding, and therefore getting stuck with volunteers in increasingly demanding positions without perspective. So the problem is not a lack of ideas or technical prototypes, but rather the absence of an infrastructure that can support and sustain them. Hackathons creating new flagship projects regularly produce even more ideas and prototypes. The real issues are therefore the sustainable implementation, stabilization, and maintenance of both the technical aspects (also known as "digital care work") as well as the organizational ones of such projects.

[4] `https://www.buergerbautstadt.de`
[5] `https://www.politik-bei-uns.de`
[6] `https://www.oparl.org`

At times the relevant municipalities would have liked to integrate said services but did have neither the needed resources nor the internal processes to do that. This points to much deeper structural problems with administrative digitalization in Germany. Austerity measures have weakened administrations for decades, making it more and more difficult to conduct their original tasks let alone integrate creative civic tech projects into public structures. Furthermore, administrations often lack not only staff by size but also the specialized technical knowledge and expertise needed for successful digital integration.

3.1 Anti-participation

As described above civic tech actors are often left alone with growing demands until they retreat and give up. These activists encounter structural obstacles unprepared, which still remain unaddressed, leading to disillusionment, frustration, and plain burnout. Here it is arguably better to have no participation than to break the promise of participation so severely. This results in many people, initially eager to contribute their expertise, turning their back on civic tech after such an experience.

4 Recommendations and Conclusion

If digital infrastructure is understood as a public service they require much more resources, openness, and the development of long-term in-house competencies in the respective public administrations. For additionally being participatory, such administrations must then also be enabled to utilize the ideas and initiatives of civil society by providing appropriate interfaces/APIs, actively participating in civic tech projects, and providing pathways to their stability. Administrations must therefore learn to interact with civic tech projects on an equal footing to address challenges together. Many civic tech actors explicitly demand the development of competencies and resources in public administration instead of externalizing knowledge to service and consulting firms. The administration must be put in a position to build up competencies and infrastructure so that administrations can boldly develop themselves without consultants. That would be real sovereignty and genuine, profound implementation of innovation"[7]. Furthermore, inclusive and diverse participation could and should be enabled by involving citizens with low technical education and for people with precarious living and working conditions, or people with poor internet access.

To get a conducive environment for civic tech projects, politics must create and ensure the appropriate framework conditions, and administrations must commit to self-renewal. To achieve this, they urgently need the necessary resources: time, money, and smart minds. With these elements in place, more people will be inspired to join the civic tech movement and contribute to the digital transformation of Germany in a sustainable fashion.

[7] `https://www.fiff.de/presse/updatedeutschland.html`