
Digital Civics: Citizen Empowerment With and Through Technology

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Abstract

The current economic crisis has thrown the relationship between citizens, communities and the state into sharp relief. Digital Civics is an emerging cross-disciplinary area of research that seeking to understand the role that digital technologies can play in supporting relational models of service provision, organization and citizen empowerment. In particular, how digital technologies can scaffold a move from transactional to relational service models, and the potential of such models to reconfigure power relations between citizens, communities and the state. Through examples of Digital Civics systems. that question conventional models of service provision, this SIG aims to bring together researchers and practitioners to critically discuss and explore the theoretical underpinnings, development and deployment of digital tools, platforms and processes within a Digital Civics research agenda.

Author Keywords

Politics; social sustainability; digital civics; social justice.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

The field of human-computer interaction has a long history of advocating for the role of technology in supporting both public participation in democratic processes and the ways in which technology might reconfigure the running of government and the production of different classes of public services (e.g., [6,14]). More recently, researchers within Smart Cities, digital government, and community informatics have engaged with different aspects of the challenge of managing and delivering public services, supporting alternate forms of participation in democratic processes, and enabling meaningful public deliberation (e.g., [1,7,9]).

At the nexus of these different research endeavours is a digital civics agenda that weaves together advances in data-driven service delivery, efforts to broaden participation in local governance and local public institutions through interactive systems, and the support of deliberation and equity in local, national, and global civic enterprises. This agenda builds on the evident commitment within HCI to supporting democratic practices and social justice; and comes at a time when the current political and economic conditions have led to new attention being paid the role that public institutions might play in supporting communities at a local and national scale. Clearly, there is a role that digital technology can play in reconfiguring citizen participation, and as we advance research concerned with the many ways people come in contact with civics, we need a heightened awareness of the various power relations at play.

The Digital Civics SIG will highlight how HCI has begun exploring the emancipatory qualities of online and

situated technologies; opening avenues to alternative modes of political organization, the broadening of participation in political discourses [4] and social activism [2]. However, the SIG will also engage with concerns and skepticism as to whether socio-technical systems may be actually reproducing unjust socio-political and economic systems, and even increasing levels of exclusion in civic life [8].

Digital Civics

Broadly, Digital Civics aims to support citizens becoming agents of democracy with and through technologies and in dialogue with the institutions that can actualize public will. This entails an exploration of how technologies might better support community organization and the co-production of 'knowledge' and resources in a context of partnership between different stakeholders (communities, local/national governing bodies, NGOs, etc.) towards the shaping of their localities and the provision of services.

Contemporary public service provision casts citizens as service consumers (even customers), local government as information producers, and digital technology as means of reducing the costs of customer-service provider transactions. Such a model positions citizens as objects of an issue, and as responsible for feeding back on services without a genuine involvement in the shaping of the service provided. The ambition of Digital Civics is that by working with local governments and citizens on locally embedded and responsive projects, we can create a participatory imaginary in which both citizens and local government can explore the value of relational models of service provision. The vision is that participatory platforms might provide spaces through which citizens can take a more active role in shaping

agendas, make decisions about service provision and their administration, and play a central role in making such provisions sustainable and resilient. These platforms have potential to foster advocacy and open possibilities for new forms of relations among stakeholders (citizens, local councils, NGOs, and businesses) based on dialogue rather than efficiency.

In this SIG we aim to open a critical and timely debate around the models of governance such a participatory imaginary might foster. To achieve this will engage participants in discussion and debate on three topics that exemplify the orientations that might support the development of technologies and methods within a Digital Civics research agenda, and its currently under-theorized shift from a transactional to a relational model of governance.

Tools

Technologies developed for transactional models of governance or service provision aim at delivering the solutions of well-defined problems. A relational approach in HCI might encompass the development of digital tools that can support citizens envisioning, advocating and materializing particular changes in their everyday lives. As a result, citizens are in a better position to act as agents of change through both defining their everyday problems and negotiating solutions. For example, in [3,13], a digital voting system (i.e. PosterVote) and a smart phone app (i.e. Cycle Atlanta) were both designed as tools for citizens to collect data and advocate for particular changes in their city., The App Movement [5] platform enables citizens to commission their own location-based review apps and engage in a democratic process for deciding their salient features. Finally in [3] digital storytelling

suitcases (i.e. Travelling Suitcases) were designed to support multiple stakeholders in communities express their memories and perspectives towards the re-envisioning of their place and communities.

Commissioning and Co-owning

Tools such as Open Source software, Crowdfunding platforms, and Open Innovation platforms offer ways in which communities can part take at differing levels, in the production and commissioning of technology. However, technical expertise or resources can often limit access to these forms of commissioning. Platforms such as Bootlegger [10] and App Movement [5] exemplify potential for new models of commissioning; ones that allow citizens accessing these platforms to instantiate their own services without the technical skills or resources usually required. In addition, while large social media platforms are appropriated for civic purposes, the sharing economy revolves around “access and not possession” [11] and the use of such technologies struggle to align with the principles of citizens rights and work ethics. In response, emergent technology commissioning prototypes – such as *Platform Cooperativism* [21] are exploring co-ownership models that might better support a relational paradigm of the sharing economy.

Data-in-Place

Big data and Smart Cities focus on the development and deployment of urban sensing technologies to facilitate data-driven analysis and management of urban phenomena such as human behavior, economic activity, mobility and resource consumption. In Smart Cities, research is underpinned by a model that proposes to ‘run’ a city through ‘urban management dashboards’. As a result, research has focused on the

development of the right technologies and the right models to capture big data for urban phenomena in order to predict and ameliorate future performance of a city. However, the Digital Civics research agenda contends that this focus should shift towards reconnecting data with place and developing the systems that allow citizens to explore and understand their data in relation to the sites and places in which they are produced (e.g. [12]).

Expected outcomes

The SIG aims at engendering a critical discussion on the topic and the themes above as well as share ideas for next steps in this emergent and compelling area of research. We expect to generate and bring together existing case studies of tools, platforms, processes and orientations to support a theorizing on a Digital Civics agenda in HCI.

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