SOCIAL INNOVATION IN PRACTICE

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OPEN SOURCE GOVERNMENT?
FORK ME: APP4GOV

David Evan Harris

What if an app could run for elected office? Imagine: when your elected official made a decision that you did not like, you could simply reprogram him or her—with the support of your co-constituents, of course. Preposterous, you might think? Well, if we humans can use open-source technology tools to collaboratively write the best encyclopedia in the world,[1] and build the core of the world's most popular mobile operating system,[2] what is to stop us from collaboratively rewriting democracy, as we know it?

But why would it be necessary to rewrite—or reprogram—democracy? Harvard Law Professor Lawrence Lessig describes the present situation in the US as follows: "...the corruption of today is in plain sight. The mechanism of its reach is displayed to everyone. It is the simple and pervasive economy of influence that buys access and more through campaign cash. And then without explicit recognition, the actions of our government are guided by the understanding of how those acts will affect the opportunity to raise money."[3]

This problem is not easily solved within the system that produced it. Lessig underlines this intractability in his Anti-Corruption Pledge[4] campaign: "... politicians won't talk about this because they're all hypocritical if they make this the number one issue. They have to live by the very system which is corrupt." Candidates spent more than $7 billion on their campaigns during the 2012 U.S. election.[5]

1 "Reliability of Wikipedia," Wikipedia, accessed April 30, 2014. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reliability_of_Wikipedia

2 "This Chart Shows Google's Incredible Domination Of The World's Computing Platforms," Business Insider, March 28, 2014. www.businessinsider.com/androids-share-of-the-computing-market-2014-3#ixzz30MAznlkN

3 "Neo-Progressives," Huffington Post, Lawrence Lessig, September 3, 2010.

4 "Anti-Corruption Pledge," Rootstrikers, 2012. (video) http://vimeo.com/36624800

5 Total 2012 election spending: $7 billion, Sunlight Foundation, 2013. http://sunlightfoundation.com/blog/2013/01/31/total-2012-election-spending-7-billion/

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Unfortunately, a similar problem pervades governance processes the world over: elected officials respond quickly and efficiently to opinions that are backed by the financiers of their campaigns, but slowly and inefficiently to the opinions of their constituents. Without fundamentally restructuring the deep internal logic driving the decisions of our elected officials, making public policy in the public interest is nearly impossible.

App4Gov came out of a deep desire to fix this problem and give every citizen a fast and efficient platform to participate in the policymaking process without having to back those ideas up with cash. It is as much a thought experiment and artifact from the future[6] as it is a performance art intervention and a deliberate provocation: "Hello, politicians! With all your focus on fundraising, would we constituents just be better off getting an app to replace you?"

Together with colleagues at the Governance Futures Lab, I explored the possibility of such an app, even entertaining the notion of mounting a campaign to run this app as a candidate for the United States Senate, representing the state of California. We would know that the app is not corrupt, because every single decision it makes would be completely transparent and determined by citizens.

The app's software—quite literally its *modus operandi*, or operating system—would be open source and published on a website like GitHub.com, open to the community to post and track bugs, share blueprints, test new features, and even fork the code if different people wanted to take it in different directions.

6 "Artifacts from the Future," Institute for the Future website, accessed April 30, 2014. www.iftf.org/what-we-do/foresight-tools/artifacts-from-the-future

The App4Gov registration process: Users register online and receive a postcard at their address. Voter identity is anonymized, but elected officials can track voter participation by census tract, allowing them to make sure that demographics of participating voters are not disproportionate from a specific subset of their constituency.

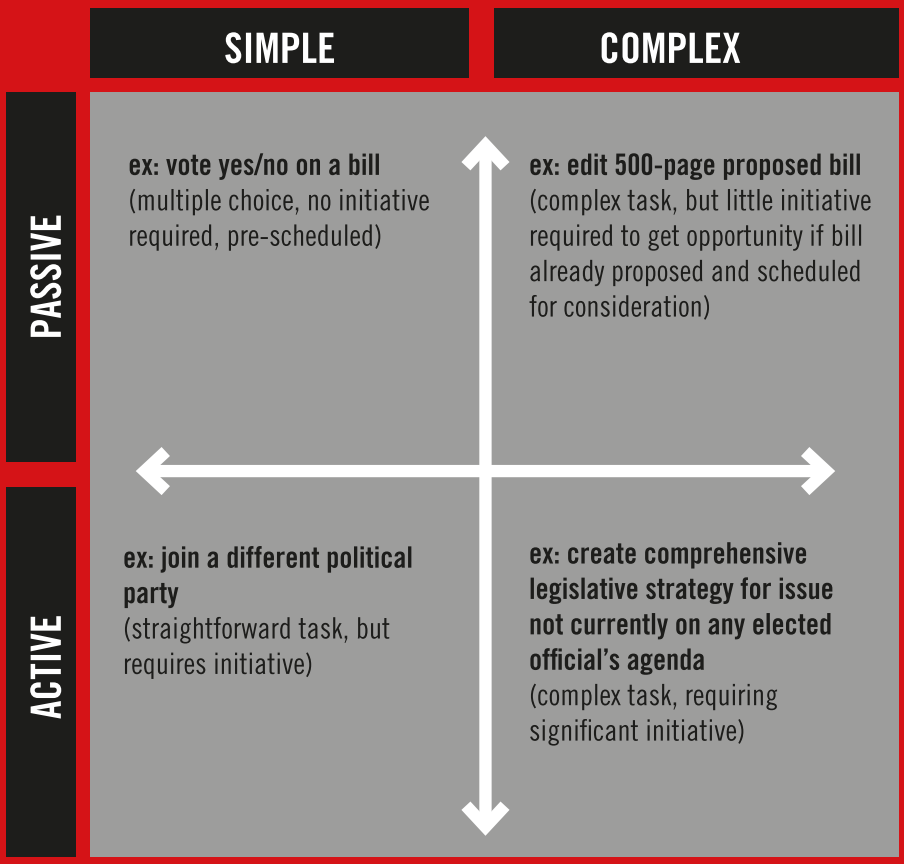
App4Gov users vote regularly on all sorts of issues through direct communication with their elected representatives. Users can delegate their votes to organizations or individuals.

Augmented Reality (AR) Heads-Up Display for Elected Official: Senator uses AR glasses (i.e., Google Glass) to monitor live suggestions for questions during senate proceedings. App4Gov committed elected officials agree to video broadcast every working minute of their political life — from hearings to meetings with lobbyists —, constituents can watch the stream and participate in real time. Senate staffers act as community managers, working to encourage participation and moderate as needed. Exceptions to video broadcasting may be made for security or confidentiality reasons, though transparent justifications are required.

Forking, a central concept in open source software development, would mean that the app software development could branch off in many different directions from the central "trunk" of the code base. It could be customized for specific campaigns and contexts, as different people develop different versions of the app running for different offices in different places—think "App4Mayor," "App4Senate," etc. Additionally, the software would need to grow in complexity to match the requirements of different types of "decision points" related to the different moments in an elected official's day. (see chart below)

The elected official could serve effectively as a "human proxy"—a term that we developed for the human being who would technically run for office, while signing a public pledge stating that he/she would not make a single decision without consulting the will of the constituents through the app.
The name App4Gov has a double meaning: it is a more generic term for a piece of software *for* any government official, and at the same time describes an app that could run *for* elected office. I quickly found that policymakers had real interest in the concept and was encouraged to keep developing it along these lines, which led to the mockups in this article.

TYPOLOGY OF DECISION POINTS FOR ELECTED OFFICIALS



FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

While developing the App4Gov blueprints, a number of concepts for important future features took shape.

One key feature is a digital divide correction tool that gives insight into demographic breakdowns of votes based on voter wealth, race, age, geography, or other characteristics. This feature informs elected officials if App4Gov users participating in any given poll or debate are unrepresentative of their overall constituency, and then weights their views to compensate in generating final outcomes. If the sample size is too small, elected officials can do phone polling or door-to-door outreach to make sure that their sample is accurate before making an important decision.

An example could be a decision about expanding public transportation to specific neighborhoods. If poorer people have less access to computers and smartphones, and vote disproportionately little on App4Gov, it is possible that a decision could be made against their interests. App4Gov could track this disproportionate representation and allow elected officials to compensate for it pro-actively using the methods mentioned above.

Another to-be-designed feature is similar to the battery of questions offered by the dating site OK Cupid, which uses an algorithm to pair potential partners. In the case of App4Gov, an ever-growing set of questions could offer elected officials and constituents a "continuous sentiment tracking" tool, measuring opinions not related to specific votes, but rather to the general views of citizens on issues. This type of information could contribute to the active and difficult decision points that elected officials face, allowing them to make long-term strategies and legislative agendas based on the deeply held views of their constituents, independent of what might be currently rolling through the legislative process.

A third feature in development is a semantic discussion tool drawing upon the advances of Yelp restaurant reviews and Amazon.com product reviews that allows hundreds and even thousands of individuals' views on a topic to be more easily parsed without reading the entire discussion. Yelp produces "review highlights" by searching for common word strings like "avocado tempura" and then telling you how many reviewers mentioned them. One could imagine a similar algorithm in App4Gov, which for example tells you that "this bill has **racist implications** as written" appears in 732 reviews.

7 Eggers, D. (2013) The Circle, Toronto/San Francisco:Knopf/McSweeney's

Amazon.com organizes the conversation around product reviews. First, the most positive and negative reviews are highlighted, then all the reviews are sorted by "most helpful," based on user feedback.

Amazon.com also offers badges to the users who verify that they are using their real names, as well as to the site's top reviewers. It is not difficult to imagine how similar technologies could be used for App4Gov. One could even imagine different levels of "expert" certifications for users in certain policy areas.

These three more advanced features are aimed to address some of the major problems inherent in a project like App4Gov: uneven adoption among constituent sub-populations and the difficulty of providing easily digestible ways for users to understand a conversation that potentially could involve many thousands of people.

SEECHANGE AND PRIVACY

In October 2013, novelist Dave Eggers released *The Circle*[7], a thoroughly delightful and disturbing book, set in the not-too-distant future. The story features politicians that "go transparent" by live video broadcasting their every waking moment. The Circle, a fictitious company that has gobbled up Google, Facebook and Twitter, is pioneering surveillance technology through their SeeChange cameras. The tiny cameras transmit wirelessly for years on a single battery and can be easily worn or hidden anywhere. People from all walks of life decide to "go transparent," broadcasting every moment of their lives via a live video stream from a SeeChange camera worn around their neck.

In the book, Bailey, the company's public-facing leader, makes an excited announcement about the impact of the SeeChange cameras:

Now this new era of transparency dovetails with some other ideas I have about democracy, and the role that technology can play in making it complete. And I use the word complete on purpose, because our work toward transparency might actually achieve a fully accountable government. As you've seen, the governor of Arizona has had her entire staff go transparent, which is the next step. In a few cases, even with a clear elected official, we've seen some corruption behind the scenes. The

transparent elected have been used as figureheads, shielding the backroom from view. But that will change soon, I believe. The officials, and their entire offices with nothing to hide, will go transparent within the year, at least in this country, and Tom and I have seen to it that they get a steep discount on the necessary hardware and server capacity to make it happen.
(Eggers, 2013:383)

As some politicians in the book speak out about SeeChange being overly invasive into their political and personal lives, they find themselves embroiled in scandals, and The Circle is presented as having far too much power in shaping political outcomes.

This presents a valuable allegory for the fact that the control of political technology—no matter how technically advanced the technology—is an important factor in determining who truly benefits from that technology. The obvious rejoinder to Eggers' implicit critique of such self-surveillance techniques is that if the technology for building a tool like App4Gov is open source and not dependent on a single for-profit corporation, it could be less vulnerable to the types of abuses of power seen in SeeChange.

At the same time, Eggers also clearly draws into question the value of the type of "complete transparency" that I had originally envisioned when exploring the first version of App4Gov, as well as the notion of the human proxy as a political candidate, who can simply represent an App in an unbiased way. The dystopian vision of a world where elected officials are completely tapped in to the minute-by-minute sentiments of their constituents appears to hinder any type of deep thinking about almost anything. The characters in the book who "go transparent" find themselves constantly distracted by the ongoing stream of continuous feedback coming from users watching the live video stream of their lives, with more popular users receiving thousands of comments in a single minute.

Despite this critique, I believe it is possible that this type of problem could be solved through a more structured and still immediate approach to "transparency" as described in the App4Gov features above.
While App4Gov would theoretically decrease the influence of special interest lobbying on decision-making by elected officials, it is possible that the money spent by those same interests on lobbying could be redirected to massive marketing campaigns to sway users of App4Gov directly. Political

campaign finance laws might need to be updated in the case that a system like App4Gov were to become mainstream to accommodate for new definitions of lobbying and issue-specific campaigning.

Another dilemma that elected officials might face would be in the case of a moral dilemma such as policymaking on issues like abortion or gay marriage. One could envision that politicians who use App4Gov make a clear statement of their core principles and beliefs that they would not be willing to compromise on, even if their user community voted for them to act against their values. This could be transparently modified and also made available for adaptation by other users as the system and patterns of best practices develop.

At the deepest level, an elected official choosing to use App4Gov as part of his or her campaigning or policymaking efforts would simply be an effort of good faith at making democracy *more representative*. Because they pro-actively seek out input in scalable and sophisticated ways, electeds using a platform like App4Gov would be much more than simply "transparent", like the politicians described in *The Circle*. They would be actively collaborating with other officials and their respective constituent communities. They would use free and open source software to test, modify and build technological tools which will help them to do their jobs better. It is in this way that—whether or not they choose to stream some or all of their working lives—they would maintain their political and technological sovereignty and be less vulnerable to the machinations of the corporations caricatured in *The Circle*.

Whither App4Gov today? Which fork is the right one? Stay tuned for the next chapter at app4gov.org. Or just fork it and make the next chapter yourself.

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David Evan Harris is Research Director and Social Change Agent at the Institute for the Future (IFTF), an independent nonprofit research institute based in Palo Alto, California, founded in 1968. David co-leads IFTF's **Governance Futures Lab.** The mission of the Governance Futures Lab is to reimagine and experiment with the basic architectures and processes of governance. David is also founder of the Global Lives Project, a video library of life experience. He has been involved in numerous local, national and international political movements, ranging from working on environmental policy at the White House in the Clinton Administration to lobbying on behalf of Greenpeace for stronger action on international climate change and participating in four World Social Forums. David believes that an open society is a society where all knowledge and innovations are shared freely and put to the greatest possible use for all people. For him, social innovation should provide new methods that improve the lives of all people, especially those less privileged than others. David is particularly concerned with the question of political representation and economic rights. He believes that all individuals should have equal rights to meaningful political representation as well as access to economic opportunities and free top-quality education and health services.

DAVID HARRIS

ABOUT HIVOS

Inspired by humanist values, Hivos envisages a world in which women and men live their lives in freedom and dignity. Hivos develops programmes which are carried out jointly with civil society organizations in 26 countries, international donors and specialized agencies. We also engage in policy advocacy and co-create knowledge.

We work with academics, activists, policy makers and business people to tackle key questions. Such as how to understand and innovate support for civil society building or how to promote pluralism in times of growing intolerance. Hivos' knowledge activities include research, policy advice, documentation and creative encounters such as BarCamps, summer schools, writing workshops and knowledge exchanges.

At the Open for Change event in October 2013, we brought together change makers from around the world to share their stories, experiences and tools. Together, we attempted to uncover unusual perspectives and reflect on what has worked – and what hasn't – to mobilize people to play part in the change they want to see. Some of these stories of social innovation can be found in this publication.

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