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DISCUSS

Using data to reinvigorate democracy

By Amelia Loye and Martin Stewart-Weeks • 17/10/2018

Democracy has become something of a stalemate. We seem to be stuck in a loop, a kind of Mexican stand-off between frustrated and angry citizens and governments, who are equally frustrated, unsure of how to respond.

Trust in governments is at an all-time low and the challenge to their legitimacy is almost paralysing. Meanwhile, citizens don't feel listened to, especially those who participate in government processes.

Government agencies and public servants regularly seek citizen input and feedback into all sorts of policy development and service design contexts. You can argue that these continued efforts are not always elegant or effective, but they do prove something.

These are evidence of a government that is inviting engagement from communities. Above that, it shows that the agencies willing to listen and confirm their understanding of communities and their needs.

There is no question that governments could be doing better, but they are trying, and often harder we think.

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Smart governments across Australia and New Zealand at the local, state and federal levels are experimenting and innovating their methods of consulting and engaging with their stakeholders and communities.

You don't have to look far to find excellent examples of the various ways governments are engaging citizens and stakeholders in policy-making and planning. Just look at the way design thinking and co-design methods have started to influence how services and programs are being created and evaluated.

The Victorian Government has an online consultation platform, providing an easy-to-find central point of contact. The platform lists where all government agencies can be consulted and offers a range of ways the community can share and discuss their ideas and opinions about a variety of issues.

In New South Wales, the Roads and Maritime Authority and Rail Corporation have been experimenting with the use of artificial reality and virtual reality to engage communities. By helping them visualise proposed changes, citizens can provide better informed contributions into impact assessments and project plans.

The NSW government also set up the Smart Innovation Centre. This allows them to work with businesses and local communities to design safe, efficient transport solutions that leverage industry knowledge and emergent technologies.

Finally, last year, the South Australian government ran an ambitious public deliberation using a citizens jury method to seek community input into whether the state should consider receiving nuclear waste.

When citizens and stakeholders come to the table to participate in these kinds of engagement processes, it shows an actionable desire to be heard. This infers a basic expectation that governments will consider and use what they have to say. It also assumes that the agencies and departments that receive their concerns and suggestions will have systems in place to analyse and consider the information.

Perhaps even more importantly, there is a hope that the conversation will continue, open for further community contributions beyond the opening stage. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

When engagement works well, this kind of invited data finds its way into the frank and fearless advice of a public servant's briefing note, used to inform data-driven decisions which can lead to better policy, projects, plans, and services. But too often, governments fail to treat this stage of the process as an opportunity, and the citizen data it gathers as a powerful asset.

Engagement is also sometimes treated as an add-on to projects, an activity that can be used to test solutions and manage risks. The use of creative methods, technology and data analytics, on the other hand, as a way to support engagement is still often regarded as innovation.

When engagement and the management of the collected data is treated as anything other than an investment, the opportunity to deliver better long-term outcomes can be missed, meaning governments may fail to harvest the full value of the crops they plant through them.

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Is it possible that this focus on innovation and co-design has led us to forget about co-delivery and representation? Surely data management systems are critical for any representative government.

No matter how good the engagement process, it is a waste of investment, the goodwill created and the data collected if governments are not digitally prepared to store and use the data to generate insights, continue engagement or build relationships.

If governments are to continue encouraging constructive public participation and trust in democracy, they need to need to be open and ready to listen. They need to show citizens they are listening, and the insights received from public participation are helping to grow their community's future. They need to ensure there is an open and transparent consultation and engagement process that nurtures a more productive relationship with the citizens they represent.

The good news is that agencies are increasingly recognising authentic engagement as the essential bedrock of recovering goodwill, trust and legitimacy.

Governments are looking for better ways to do that. When it is done well, democracy improves.

New digital tools and platforms are becoming a larger part of the mix. Together with safer and more ethical ways to store, analyse, share and draw on government collected insights, these innovations are essential for the survival of representative democracy and an incredible opportunity to evolve it.

Join us at the EngageTech Forum in NSW to experience the latest tools and techniques being used by smart governments across Australia and how you can integrate them into your digital architecture and information management processes to strengthen your organisation, and our democracy.

Article from The Mandarin

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