

# **Designing new digital public spaces: Engaging a disconnected public**

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Government policy is written by those who show up. Unfortunately, most of us don't. Most don't see the point: we don't trust government. Or politicians. And we don't believe that there's anything we can do to influence them. I've been arguing that digital can help change this. Not set democracy on fire, suddenly re-igniting our latent passions for civic engagement. But just maybe break down the barriers so it's easier to take part. Our personal tipping point is reached sooner, sustained longer.

None of this is new. The democratic drift in mature democracies started in the 1950s and has caused serious erosion in political participation and trust. And a concomitant complacent absolution of responsibility for our civic spaces. We delegate to elected representatives, public officials and – increasingly – private corporations.

There are significant, multi-layered barriers to democratic access for many people. Real-world problems include lack of time, money, knowledge and access. Digital exclusion creates another sub-class of citizens. They can't use new engagement platforms and are increasingly frozen-out of others. Often missing and poorly taught, information and political literacy are vital pre-requisites for participation.

If we're to arrest this decline we have to make it easier to take part. We have to transform our civic spaces so that they look like the world the majority of us live in (or want to live in) – more open, social, inter-connected, even games-based. Driven by issues not ideology. A lot of this can happen online but governments are not Facebook and Facebook is not government. Should we rely on unaccountable, unelected corporations to be the conduits of our 21<sup>st</sup> century democracy?

Let's bring democracy back to the public, not only through their browsers but increasingly through their smartphones. And much, much more. New public spaces need to be designed to include points for democratic participation within them. Parks, schools, libraries, even shopping malls matter. Include everything from the simple, analogue and off-line places to congregate (and, yes, demonstrate – a legitimate and valuable part of our democratic heritage), through to integrated digital furniture and the legislation needed to enshrine our rights to

use it. Kiosks let those who are offline connect, contribute and learn about democracy, their local communities and beyond. Public video displays link to real-time consultations and we can harness the ever more powerful location aware devices of people nearby. Two-way, conversational. Listening as much as talking.

All of this costs money. But perhaps not as much you might imagine and the beauty of the solution lies in the communities we already have. More and more of us can bring our own tools – a smartphone and a reasoned opinion. Many cities host active developers and democratic evangelists in ‘hack-days’. Using open source software, open data and community-government partnerships for co-design we can, now more than ever, bring democracy back to our public spaces and reconnect citizens with those who they elect to govern.



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