Franco-British Workshop "Digital Government: Next Steps and Potential Futures"
26th May 2016, Residence of France, London
Synthesis

The Science and Technology Department from the French Embassy in the UK organised on 26 May 2016 a Franco-British prospective workshop on digital government, in collaboration with the British charity Nesta and the French Centre for Research and Interdisciplinarity (CRI).

It gathered 26 participants with a wide range of backgrounds (academics, public servants, civil society representatives, etc.) involved in various aspects of our governments' digital transformation.

In a context of numerous and complex evolutions linked to the rise of a data-driven, technological society, the event's goal was to reflect on the current evolutions of our democracies and public services with a bilateral perspective, and try to investigate their potential next steps and futures.

Distinguished guests opened the event: Government Chief Scientific Adviser Sir Mark Walport introduced the audience to his latest report on distributed ledger technology and its potential for public services' improvement; French Digital Council's representatives Charly Berthet and Camille Hartmann showcased French experimentations in public citizen consultations, especially to discuss a new digital bill; Oliver Buckley from UK Government Digital Service and Laure Lucchesi from French taskforce Etalab outlined their work and perspectives on government data management, analysis and opening. Laure also introduced the Open Government Partnership at the light of the upcoming French chairmanship.

The day was then organized into 3 sessions, during which the audience was split into 3 working groups. This document aims to summarise these discussions' main outcomes.

Digital Government: what are we talking about?

This event dealt with the broad topic of 'Digital Government'. Sometimes summarised as 'using digital technology to deliver more and better with less', the term covers the challenging evolutions faced by our public administrations and services under the influence of digital technologies, among which: the multiplication of data produced by and available to our governments; data and information accessibility; data and information treatment/analysis/mining; data security thanks to cryptographic tools and protocols. The paramount question of the impact of these new tools and processes underpinned the event's discussions, which adopted a strong socio-political focus.

Digital Democracy and Digital Public Services: new paradigms

Discussions outlined the evolution of democracy since its creation. Participants pointed out that democracy was created at a time of slow information (Ancient Greece); and thus cannot be practiced in the same way as before and has to evolve to take account of the current flow of information and data.

Among the main democratic challenges discussed, the groups discussed:

- Access to information and data: It is citizens' right to be correctly informed of public action. How can governments ensure access to the right information in the current flood of data? It has to be made discoverable, just putting it online is not enough. The disclosure of some specific information such as public contracts is seen as a way to foster engagement. Likewise, authorities have to ensure equality in accessing the data.
- Engagement with information and data: how to give citizens the tools to engage? Etalab's presentation outlined the user-centric philosophy of the French open data platform. People also have to be informed of the technologies available.
- Data ownership: there is a need to ensure citizens own their data to prevent the concentration of power in the hands of a few organisations.

As for public services, there were thoughts on what this concept is and should be covering: day-to-day services such as driving licences, bin removals, etc. but also more general areas such as education. It was suggested that new public services should be created to adapt to our current world, such as universal access to Wi-Fi.

But more dramatically, participants warned against the privatisation of public services under the influence of multinational companies like Google, Amazon or Uber. In a globalised market where platforms deliver worldwide accessible services, there is a risk that states get displaced from their basic functions. The main concerns in this regard were for health and education.

Rethinking the ideas of citizenship, identity and society

Participants emphasised the need to stop and think carefully about basic elements of our political systems and society.

The key question is: what does it mean today to be a citizen? We observe a decline in participation and engagement in polls, referendums etc. coupled to a growing defiance towards politicians, but at the same time, citizens are willing to engage (see the Occupy movements) without finding the right channel. Does being a citizen mean only voting from time to time? It appears that we are thinking now of citizens as more active actors within a democracy than that.

More specifically, how do we define our own identity? Participants highlighted the shift that can be witnessed on two main fronts:

- 'Thematic' identity, built within communities of interest engaged in specific causes, is getting stronger than geographical identity for some citizens.
- As for the latter, local communities (such as at the scale of a city) seem to be stronger than national ones.

Furthermore, before thinking of implementing specific digital democracy projects, it has been argued that we should first think on the core values we would like to build upon: Transparency? Accountability? Participation? This raises the question of governments' own interests: do they truly want full transparency? The example of the publication of MPs' expenses was discussed in this regard.

A key feature: the public dialogue

It has been emphasised that communication between citizens and politicians should be carefully redesigned in several aspects, for instance:

- Pedagogy: make sure that all the digital democracy tools implemented are clearly explained to citizens, including their purpose and effects. It is important for participants to see a clear outcome of their involvement, since it often takes a lot of time to participate in a project such as the French consultation for the new digital bill.
- Co-Construction: sustain a constant feedback loop between citizens and representatives, to prevent closed-end declarations on both sides. Effective cross-exchanges are seen as a sine qua non requirement to an effective digital democracy.

Citizen engagement: creating new ways to practice democracy

It was highlighted that citizens experience governments mainly through public services and that they are for many the first step to actual democratic engagement. In fact, digital public services and digital democracy appear to be two parts of the same spectrum, and the distinction operated in the event agenda seemed rather artificial.

Rather than offering unique digital solutions to try to engage all the citizens of a nation, some participants suggested shaping step-based digital processes, which could be accessible to people according to their various desire for public engagement. Two processes have been considered:

- Data => knowledge/expertise => wisdom: the idea is to ensure that data are treated and used to help citizens get effective knowledge fueled with expertise, which in turn can help to build collective wisdom.
- Proposals and options (by anonymous individuals) => scrutiny (reputational devices) => decision-making: the first step would allow all citizens to suggest ideas and proposals anonymously; the second step would analyse those ideas through human experts and/or analytic tools: the priority here would be to verify the reputational devices to ensure the full transparency of the system, and prevent lobbyists or other powers taking control of the process; the third step, decision, should not be seen as a definitive end, but an evolving process which can be updated through this loop all over again. Citizens would be involved in all the steps.

It was suggested to try to build such processes within traditional political parties. The concept of collective intelligence was also discussed, through various initiatives such as the use of simulation tools (up to virtual reality) which can be used to help citizens get more active in public debate (example of budget processes).

Education was also thought to be a key requirement to prevent digital exclusion, and make sure every citizen can access the new digital democracy opportunities discussed above, which is mandatory to prevent lobbies from overcoming these new political spaces. Local associations have a huge role to play in it.

Digital and physical space: a balance to be found

Digital tools bear a massively disruptive potential in reshaping the political debate space and enabling anyone to engage. Simulation software, consultative forums, participative platforms and many others are creating new opportunities of channels between governments and citizens.

However, participants stressed the fact that digital tools couldn’t be the only answer to citizens’ engagement. Educated, highly connected people are those who participate the most in

current digital projects (as we could see with French Digital Council results with their public consultation).

Physical spaces appear to be as important as digital ones to ensure engagement with all citizens. A complementary balance between the two should be sought by governments.

Central vs Local: the role of small communities

Rather than adopting a top-down approach coming from a central authority to deliver digital tools, it was proposed by some guests that governments should rather seek to liaise with locally-based associations working with local communities. This could be an answer to both the challenge of engaging citizens who are not used to getting involved in political processes, and of engaging citizens who are not used to digital technologies in their daily life. It can also be an answer to the challenge of collecting useful data for central authorities, and allow them to build more efficient evidence-based policies.

In this regard, the French Digital Council initiative to gather citizens' participation on the 'Digital Republic' bill, starting from a unique national platform supported by various local events and consultations was discussed.

This emphasis on local was also thought relevant for public services: we may witness the development of new services delivered locally by people themselves in place of less present public services.

New ways of working inside government: experiment and be agile

These new paradigms require new ways of working: governments have to be more agile to take citizens' input into account. Crowdsourcing appears as a potentially powerful tool but also a challenging one to fully harness. The current organisation of various hackathons is a good example of initiatives to adopt this practice. We were reminded of this point in Laure Lucchesi's keynote during which she highlighted the startup-like *modus operandi* of her team.

Participants stressed the need to run Randomised Controlled Trials and experiments to see what actually works in the field of digital democracy. Governments should not be afraid to experiment, but on the contrary test various options and select effective digital democracy solutions on this basis, not just guesses. This was backed by the opinion of some participants that there is a real appetite among citizens for experimentation.

Finally, focusing on security and tools that prevent lobbies' influence should also be a key priority.

Redesigning government's IT management in the data era

Ollie Buckley of the UK Government Digital Service showed in his keynote how dealing with huge amounts of data, which are often not structured or even harmonised, was challenging. The British government adopted a small projects focus, to take one specific topic and address its data issues. One example given was producing unique, shared databases / registers for use by all central government departments for the same information, such as the names of countries.

According to participants, it is also crucial that governments abandon IT silos and instead prioritise interoperability to allow data sharing.

Hope vs Reality: being careful with the actual outcomes

The introduction of new technologies was discussed. Regarding Distributed Ledger Technology, it was stated that it could indeed be useful thanks to its innovative features (decentralised, etc.) for various public services. Academics are already working on related projects: for instance, an Ethereum-based smart contract project is currently being developed at Imperial College London. Blockchain could help transform the government, but we need also to realise it covers a lot of different applications, and we have to ask ourselves what problems it would solve specifically.

The argument of saving money within public services and government digital transformation has also been mitigated by the observation that expensive parts deal with people at the extremes with very complex needs, which would be difficult to standardise.

The temptation of trying to emulate successful private sector companies such as Amazon or Uber was considered, but participants warned that we need to make sure we understand how they really work, and not just how we imagine they do. They work with human processes as well as digital ones. Participants evoked the idea of 'human APIs (Application Programming Interfaces)' (hand-offs between technology and people). Participants also warned against some perverse effects of these kinds of organisations, taking the example of Wikipedia, which grew excessively bureaucratic despite its original philosophy.

Central vs Decentralised: Rethinking the role of central governments

This prospective exercise led to a major question: what will be the role of central governments in the near future?

Participants suggested we are moving towards more decentralised, local-based services, and that central governments will get less relevant in the coming years. We are indeed already witnessing the experimentation of new forms of decentralised, commons-owned organisations (e.g. Decentralized Autonomous Organization, or DAO), and this is the philosophy behind blockchain and distributed ledger technology.

If the latter should be adopted by governments, how far would they be able to control its decentralised features? A participant quoted the metaphor of "govcoin": what if a government decided to create a specific money based on the bitcoin principle to pay pensions, which recipients could use for their daily needs (food, health, etc.) but not for products deemed as improper such as tobacco, alcohol, etc.?

The use of digital technology, algorithms etc. raises very strong ethical issues which need to be addressed.

More generally, it was suggested that central governments may play some role in recommending standards, for example in data sharing. The role of states compared to global private companies was also discussed, and it was stated that we will need stronger international governance to cope with them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this prospective exercise led to the sketch of a highly decentralised democratic system in the next decades, in which local services and communities would become more relevant than central authorities.
Digital technology won't be the answer to every democratic challenge: participation, engagement, etc. Physical, local spaces will play a key role in supporting the engagement of a majority of citizens, who then may take advantage of all the opportunities offered by digital tools.

Digital technology brings hope of equality, efficiency, transparency, data-driven and evidence-based policies. However, despite their primary intentions, web and digital tools are also bearing the risk of power concentration in the hands of elites and lobbies. To prevent it and achieve identified goals, this will require both a major organisational shift in our administrations, as well as a deep educational involvement to engage with all citizens. Ethical questions on the ownership and use of data will have also to be addressed with the utmost precision.

Governments should take extra care to not create new silos or barriers by adopting new technologies hoping to solve the old ones.

Education, experimentation and co-design appeared as the three main next steps to engage now, in order to ensure a successful future for the opportunities identified today.

To go further, some resources:

- Sir Mark Walport, "Distributed Ledger Technology. Beyond Blockchain", January 2016 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/492972/gs-16-1-distributed-ledger-technology.pdf
- Open Government Partnership Consultation Platform: https://en.ogpsummit.org/osem/conference/ogp-summit
- Digital Republic Bill Platform: http://www.republique-numerique.fr/pages/in-english
- Data.gov.uk: https://data.gov.uk/
- Data.gouv.fr: https://www.data.gouv.fr/fr/
- Hackathon on French digital republic bill consultations: https://git.framasoft.org/c24b/republique-numerique/wikis/home
- We, All of the People
- Prêt à vôter
- Blueberry Soup
- Saillans (FR)
- Estonian experience of digital engagement: https://e-estonia.com/

On the French Embassy S&T Department website:
http://www.ambafrance-uk.org/Franco-British-Workshop-Digital-Government-Next-Steps-Potential-Futures