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Government as a platform

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Before being elected to the Tasmanian state parliament in 2002, I had been a chief information officer (CIO)—a kind of failed dot-com entrepreneur. This experience made me obsessed with finding new ways of having a conversation with my constituents using technology. I was sick of conventional community engagement conducted by backbenchers, in which constituents usually do not have a question per se, but rather a 15-minute incoherent ramble in their doorway.

That year, tapping into the stereotype that politicians are lazy and do nothing, I created a website that published my entire diary, enabling people to like things and friend me. What I have discovered subsequently, of course, is that I should have simply left politics then and created Facebook. Instead, this website was a monumental failure. I letterboxed my entire electorate and told them that if they had ever wondered what their local member does with their time, now they could find out and see my diary online.

Six months later, I discovered that really the only user was my mother, working out whether I was in her suburb and had come to visit her or not. And yet, fast forward six years, and I found myself premier of Tasmania, with 12,000 Facebook ‘friends’, all with the CapsLock key on, telling me what they thought of me, largely from the backdrop of anonymity.

It was these formative experiences that have led me to my current obsession: ubiquitous connectivity. The fact that we are all connected to our device of choice is massively disrupting the way we create wealth, changing the way we communicate with our customers(/stakeholders/clients/patients/students/constituents/ratepayers) and changing—in unexpected ways—the way we can solve old public policy problems.

There is a famous comparison of two photos, taken in the same place in the Vatican, eight years apart (Hill 2013). The first, depicting the 2005 election of Pope Benedict XVI shows a crowd of onlookers, one of which is filming the event on his Motorola flip phone. By contrast, in the photo of the 2013 election of Pope Francis, just about everyone in the crowd is capturing the event on their phone or tablet.

To me, ubiquitous connectivity is best described in images: the fact that—if you believe the Mobile Marketing Association of Asia (2010)—there are more people on the planet today that will put a mobile phone in their back pocket than people who will put a toothbrush in their mouth. All this in the reign of one pope. I believe it is the responsibility of government to learn—from citizens and from changing business models—new ways of creating wealth to better serve citizens in the way we co-construct solutions, both in service delivery and policymaking.

Last year, I took my children to Europe. It was the first time I had been to Europe as a tourist in 12 years. To plan that first trip, before my children were born, my future wife and I bought the Lonely Planet guide to Europe, a massive book. We physically cut out Estonia and a couple of other countries we were not visiting to save weight in the backpack. It was the tablet of stone that directed us where to eat, where to sleep, where to shop, what to see and how to get there. From a single voice, with a single point of view, in a single volume.

What did we do before the second trip? We used TripAdvisor. TripAdvisor is completely unlike Lonely Planet, that original tablet of stone. Instead of offering one view, it is a highly efficient marketplace, a platform upon which people like me who want information about travelling in Europe can share with others who have knowledge about tourism in Europe. We can get together and co-construct the solutions to my travel problems effectively.

In this chapter, I will argue that governments in Australia and New Zealand need to behave less like Lonely Planet and more like TripAdvisor. By this, I mean less policy handed down as tablets of stone and more co-construction, in which government provides the platform on which citizens, participants, experts and non-experts can co-contribute.

Throughout Europe, we used Uber, the online marketplace that connects people who have a car with those who want a ride. We used Airbnb, the online marketplace that connects people with a room with those on holiday. We found both platforms to be extremely efficient.

The recent platform disruption that has emerged in the commercial world has changed the way business models work. In addition, I believe it is disrupting the way government needs to work in the future. Consider the seemingly undisruptible model of selling pizzas: ringing up and ordering a delivery is perhaps the only innovation to occur in the pizza market for the last 40 years. But now, Domino's in Australia has created an app, 'Pizza Mogul', in which my 11-year-old son, Hudson, can construct his own pizzas. This not only allows Hudson to determine the service he gets from the pizza delivery shop, but also allows Hudson to develop his own pizzas and put them in the Domino's store for people to buy.

Every time someone buys one of Hudson's pizzas from Domino's, he is paid \$1. In the year after releasing the Pizza Mogul app, Dominos Australia's share price rose by 41 per cent (Business News Australia 2015).

But what he has also done is create a marketplace in which people around Australia, including kids, can co-construct the product. He can sack all his pizza designers, and do away with market research, because, with the help of the app, the market is co-constructing the market research along the way. I will now analyse what is going on in the commercial sector, before exploring how we can apply this to government.

Essentially, since the industrial revolution there has been one business model to make a profit: you make a product, you sell it to customers, you do some sort of innovation (new price, new widgets, new colour, new flavour, new whatever), you repeat the process. Innovation might extend to market research.

But the emergence of the platforms I have earlier mentioned is disrupting this. The old way of wealth creation is being replaced by new models. Products are becoming services. In the pizza business, Domino's has created

a much more personalised service than existed previously, but the really mature models are those in which services are becoming marketplaces. It is in those marketplaces, or platforms, that the value lies, because they engage the crowd—both experts and non-experts—in co-constructing the actual product. Think Uber, think Airbnb, think TripAdvisor, think Domino's Pizza.

In fact, the vast majority of the top 100 companies in Silicon Valley are those in platforms, not in services and products (Quantumrun 2017). The differing recent fortunes of TripAdvisor and Lonely Planet tell the story. In 2007, the BBC bought Lonely Planet for £130 million. In 2013, the BBC sold Lonely Planet for £50 million (BBC News 2013). That loss represents how much value has been stripped from the highly productised, single-voice model and distributed to the marketplace platform model.

If that much value has been stripped out of a commercial entity because of that the changing business model, how much value—whatever your meaning of that word—is being stripped out of government in its response to what citizens want?

In 2014, I gave a TEDx talk with the title, 'What the government can learn from the crowd', in which I argued that a digitally empowered and ubiquitously connected community is smarter than 1,000 policy wonks (Bartlett 2014). After the talk was posted online, I received a three-page dissertation from a friend, then the secretary of the Department of Premier and Cabinet in Tasmania, telling me why I was wrong. But I think he was wrong. My argument is that while there is a role for experts in government as a platform, there is a much more significant role for the non-expert population in co-creating solutions.

I will now outline some examples that illustrate how crowdsourcing can be both active and passive—and we need to think about both of these models.

Consider the following example. In 2008, when I was premier of Tasmania, the head of public health in the state, Dr Roscoe Taylor, warned me of the imminent threat of swine flu. He told me the virus was going to spread to Tasmania, and that consequently I needed to sign a cheque for \$1 million to roll-out 32 swine flu clinics across the state where people in white coats will wait for the onslaught of swine flu-infected people to arrive.

It turns out the first strain of swine flu was reasonably innocuous. (This does not mean the second strain will be.) I asked Dr Taylor how we will know where the virus will spread and whether we could tactically deploy resources to respond to it. He said, we will not know.

Dr Taylor was wrong. Researchers at the University of Otago found that an accurate, advance predictor of where the virus was heading was people with a cough searching ‘swine flu’ in Google. By aggregating the data together and geolocating those searches, the researchers observed a nearly perfect 24-hour advance predictor of how swine flu spread from Mexico City to Australia, down to suburb, if not street, level. This is an example of passive crowdsourcing, enabled because of our ubiquitous connectivity.

A similar example occurred in the United States, when the City of Greater Boston decided to act on complaints about the state of its cycleways. Normally in this scenario a city would send out staff to locate the potholes and bumps, circle them with spray paint and a truck would come back to fix them. Instead, the city of Boston spent \$5,000 creating a smart phone app that allows cyclists to record trouble spots. This has led to Boston being able to access a to-the-minute picture of every single bump or pothole in 3,500 kilometres of cycleways across the city. Not only do they have this, but they also have longitudinal study, because they are keeping the data over time to measure if those potholes and bumps are or improving or eroding.

I am a keen recreational fisherman. One thing that tells me climate change is having a big impact in Tasmania is that, as the waters off the island’s east coast warm, I am catching fish species that I have never seen before. And I have been fishing Pirates Bay since I was a boy.

The app Redmap (Range Extension Database and Mapping project) allows me to log and geolocate a fish I catch. This, in turn, allows the CSIRO and the Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies to tell me what the fish is, when it was last caught and how many others of its kind have been caught in the same area. These scientists have access to this data because across Tasmania, recreational fishermen like me are snapping their invasive species.

In other words, marine researchers have gained access to vast troves of data without having to send a boat out. And recreational fishermen get to have their catch recorded—an impact currency we like. This is another platform on which we are co-creating solutions to old and wicked public policy problems.

Through their use of technology, for the first time in history consumers are ahead of their major institutions—including government. Whether it be the Apple watch, the personal data measurer Fitbit or something else, the more people use technology, the more they expect it to shape their experience as citizens. And, traditionally, I think governments find that hard to deal with.

In 2013, bushfires swept through south-eastern Tasmania while flooding affected Queensland's Lockyer Valley, where my father lives; as my holiday shack was under threat from fire, my father's house was flooded for the third time in four years.

During those unfolding disasters, for the first time in history, I had access to better, richer and more accurate information from Twitter than I did from the traditional media. Within an hour of the fire front passing though, Mel Irons, a young woman 150 kilometres away in suburban Hobart, wondered how she could help those affected. She set up a Facebook page called 'Tassie Fires – We Can Help'. Within three days, there had been 35,000 interactions on this very simple Facebook page.

Now that I am no longer in government, if a light globe blows in my bathroom, I say to my wife, 'what's the government doing about that, anyway?' Because, of course, normally after a disaster like the 2013 Tasmanian bushfires, citizens turn directly to their government for help. Instead, in this instance, Facebook, a classic example of a new marketplace, was turned to. Thanks to Irons' page, whole flotillas of boats were organised to take supplies from Hobart to the Tasman Peninsula, cut off by fire.

When power went down in the fire-affected town of Dunalley, which is responsible for 70 per cent of the country's oyster spats, a plea for help was made on Facebook. Within an hour, six generators arrived to help save the oyster industry. This was a marketplace response that could never have been replicated by the old Lonely Planet approach. Only by the TripAdvisor approach.

I was surprised, two weeks after the fire, when the media reported claims that the government was doing nothing for citizens of the fire-affected area (Street 2013). I rang up my friend in the Tasmanian Department of Premier and Cabinet who was running the post-fire response and asked what was going on. There was a whole platform of people—a marketplace—

solving their own problems. Why was the Tasmanian Government not interacting with that? To this she replied that the Department of Premier and Cabinet had no Facebook policy.

By this time, Lara Giddings had succeeded me as premier, and she wanted to interact with this marketplace. What did she do? She wrote a press release with the Tasmanian Government letterhead and posted it on Facebook page, promptly attracting much online criticism.

Lara's mistake was that in engaging in these platforms, governments are no longer the experts. Actually, we need to create a platform on which experts and non-experts can co-create solutions in service and policy. We also need to recognise we are now a participant in that marketplace, which means sticking the Lonely Planet model on top of the TripAdvisor platform will not work. We have to be an authentic participant in the marketplace of co-construction, illustrated in the case of Finland outlined in Tanja Aitamurto's contribution to this volume (Chapter 11).

We see this in the commercial sector. The growth of investment in Silicon Valley and what the Americans call 'civic-tech' is massive. We in government need to move away from the old idea that when we want to consult the community on a particular issue, we set up a single website, provide information and invite. Instead, we need to embrace a much more citizen-centric approach of ubiquitous utility-like consultation; an engagement platform that is citizen-centric and that allows a citizen to say, 'I'm interested in forestry issues, I'm interested in legislation about off-road motor vehicles and I'm interested in neighbourhood issues in my area, tell me what's going on and I'll interact that way'. And that's the way we need to go. I should declare an interest here: I am a director of a Canadian company called Play Speak, founded by the former premier of British Columbia and former mayor of Vancouver, Mike Harcourt. He, too, recognised some of these problems post his premiership.

That is largely the end of my argument. Government faces many challenges in this space. The world used to be a roughly evenly divided triangle, with incumbents (think the existing invention of pizza) at the base, innovators (half Aussie, half Hawaiian-flavoured pizza) in the middle, and regulators (the marketplace in which pizza is sold) at the top.

But in today's world, the innovators, pushed by the consumers armed with their mobile devices, are stretching that triangle out in favour of platform wealth creation. Think of the following triangle to illustrate

this: incumbents (the taxi industry); regulators (department of roads and transport) and innovators (Uber). The consumers and the workers are massively driving these changes. But we have not in government, I think, adequately sought to understand this new regulatory environment, let alone the environment in which we need to be the innovators in government, service delivery and policy.

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