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Defining and Understanding the Civic Tech Space

“One of the wonderful things about civic technology is that no one really knows what it means.”

I. What is the purpose of the civic tech movement?

Civic tech is a movement of people using digital technologies to enhance how people interact with the government and one another. Civic tech digital tools are designed to help the government serve and disseminate information to the public while allowing for citizen voices to be heard. The movement gained momentum in the 2000s as a series of ad hoc initiatives and hackathons although the first documented civic tech initiative in the USA was in 1988 when the US Census opened up a competition to find a more efficient means of tabulating data. The 2000s, according to Matt Stempeck (2019), were a rich era of technical experimentation; the age of map and app mashups, the introduction of major social media platforms, and “making nifty code and putting it online for others to use”.

Today the movement has evolved into a broad civic tech community of practitioners that include for-profit, citizens,

information technology coders and hackers, and non-for-profit organisations and private investors and philanthropists.

There is no known “industry standard” definition of civic tech yet but the closest definition according to civic tech foundation, the Omidyar Network is: ‘Civic technologies are those that are deployed to enhance the relationship between people and government.’ According to May and Ross (2018), “Civic tech needs to be better understood in terms of the factors that promote representative public participation and impact.” Further, “there is a lack of understanding of how ‘civic tech’ platforms are used and how they may be designed for maximum effectiveness.”

Various digital technologies and platforms such as mobile apps, software and web portals are giving people a voice to participate in government decision-making, the political process and improve the delivery of government services to people. In other words, civic technologies are driving transparency in political processes and accountability with open-government data; and are allowing more people from diverse socioeconomic levels to build and engage with civic matters in a way that was not possible earlier.

According to an Open Main brigade leader, “Civic tech is a movement to modernize government. But more important than

that, it’s about humanizing government. And placing the needs of people – the same taxpayers who pay for the service – at the heart of the process.” (Jackson, 2018)

II. What Exactly is Civic Tech and What it is Not?

Several studies, analytical blog articles and reports have tried to provide a clear definition of what is civic tech but as a young and growing field, to date, there is no universally accepted definition of the term.

A. Civic Tech vs. GovTech

From the onset, it will be critical to differentiate civic tech from gov tech to have a clearer understanding of what civic tech is.

Civic Tech	GovTech
<p>(i) Technology used to inform, engage and connect residents/citizens with government and one another to advance civic outcomes.</p> <p>(ii) CivicTech is defined by the intended (civic) outcome</p>	<p>(i) Technology designed with the government as the intended customer or user.</p> <p>(ii) GovTech is defined by the intended user (the government)</p> <p>(iii) Includes technologies which</p>

(iii) Includes tools that largely have a citizen-facing component.

government use to increase the efficiency of its internal operations

Source: Scaling Civic Tech, Knight Foundation (2017)

B. For Profit Organisations and Civic Externalities

Because the boundaries of civic tech remain loosely defined, it is also a contested playing field as to who could be part of the emerging civic tech community. For example, there have been debates on whether private companies involved in the “sharing economy” such as Uber, Lyft and Airbnb could be considered civic tech organisations. A situation arose when during the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy, Airbnb provided New York residents with free, temporary housing.

However, Nathaniel Heller from the Research for Development Institute’s Governance Program contends that for-profit platforms fall outside the scope of civic tech saying that: “..while citizen-to-citizen sharing is indeed involved, the mission of these companies is focused on maximizing profit for their investors, not any sort of experiment in building social capital.” (Global Integrity, 2013).

There are certain technologies that have emerged such as Twitter - the intention of which was not necessarily to affect civic life and yet it has. Twitter has made conversations more transparent and accessible to the broader public. Such unintended “civic outcomes” produced by technologies are called *civic externalities*.

C. Technology for Public Good and Social Processes

So from an “outcome” perspective, civic technology can be defined as “the use of technology for the public good”. (Matt Stempeck, 2016).

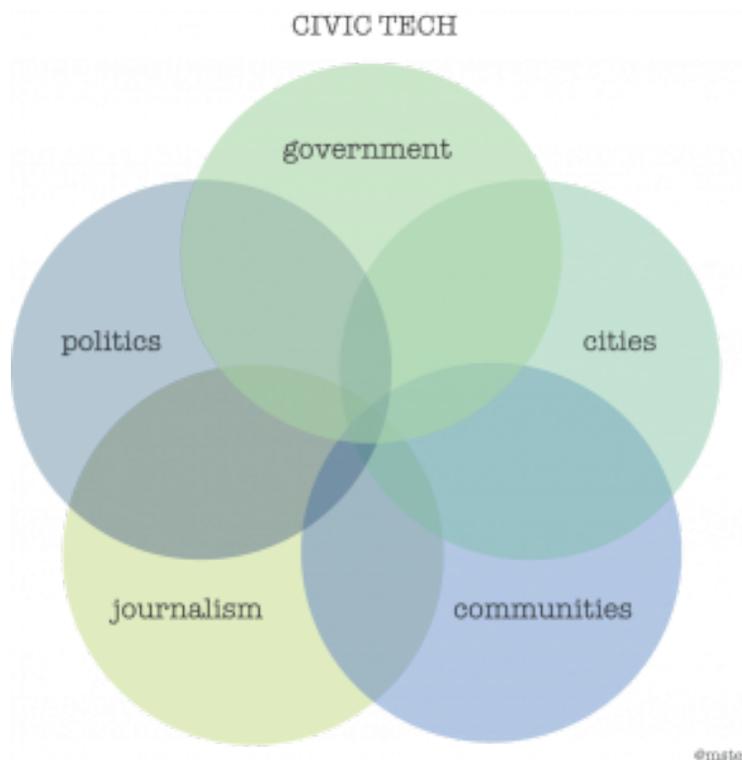


Diagram 1: Previously distinct fields have met at the intersection of civic tech. And each field is forced to reconsider profound shifts in participation and empowerment and the new challenges they present (Matt Stempeck, 2016)

Civic tech is at a broad convergence of fields that invites a variety of actors with different objectives as shown in *Diagram 1*.

Furthermore, according to Stempeck (2016), civic tech is more than tools and platforms, and the groups that make them. The civic tech ecosystem includes “social processes” that are used to employ the technologies and is a way to evaluate impact.

Stempeck inventoried social behaviours from hackathons and global open source projects including traditional gatherings built around shared values and developed these social processes:

COMMON SOCIAL PROCESSES

CONVENE

Civic hacking meetups
Backchannels
Roundtables
Working Groups
Physical gathering places, hubs
Tech translators & intermediaries
Talent Pipeline
Peer networks
Partner networks
Datapalooza
Conferences

INFORM

Journalism, books, podcasts, blogs
Educational programs and courses
Online Forums
Research Centers and Projects
Digital Literacy groups
Workshops
Data analysis for public good

BUILD

Innovation teams, Labs
Open source projects
Social impact design groups
Foundation initiatives
Accelerators
Incubators
Tech companies with civic teams
Behavioral economics programs
Open governance initiatives
Data sourcing
Civic & social good hackathons
Civic tech competitions

Source: Towards a taxonomy of civic technology (2016)

D. Open Government and Community Action

In a 2013 report on the Trends in Civic Tech by the Knight Foundation, civic tech projects were categorised into two categories: open government and community action.

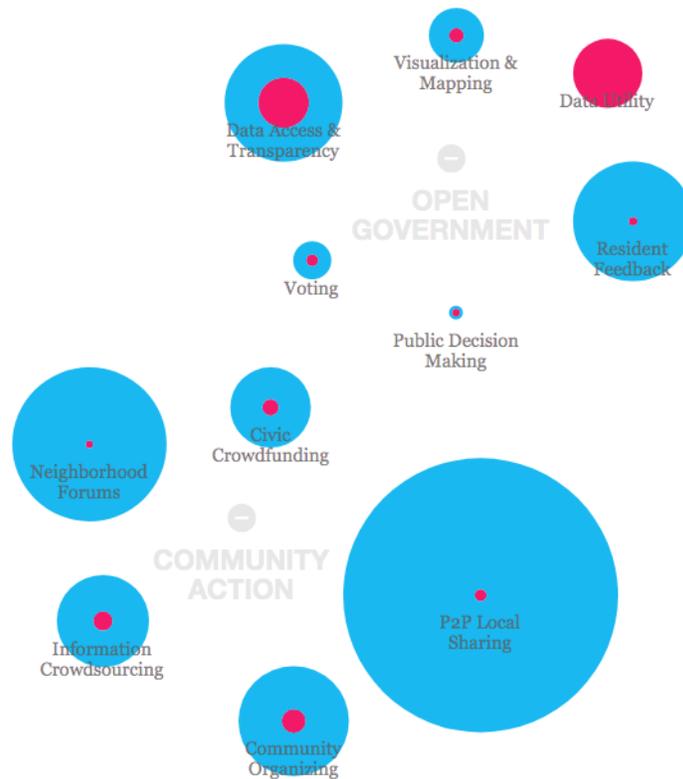


Diagram 2: Two types of civic tech projects - open government and community action. Source: Trends in Civic Tech, Knight Foundation (2013)

Open government and community action includes:

OPEN GOVERNMENT	COMMUNITY ACTION
Data access and transparency	Peer-to-peer local sharing
Voting	Civic crowdfunding
Visualization and mapping	Neighborhood/citizen forums
Data utility	Information crowdsourcing
Resident/citizen feedback	Community organizing

Public decision making	
Data access and transparency	

Source: Trends in Civic Tech, Knight Foundation (2013)

Conclusion

Civic tech is a young and emerging space and has no “industry standard” definition yet. There is a lack of understanding of how ‘civic tech’ platforms are used and how they may be designed for maximum effectiveness. Because of the fuzzy nature of the space, it is sometimes difficult to assess who can be part of the community or what constitutes civic tech. The examples of Airbnb and Twitter (civic externalities) can further blur the contours of civic tech. Therefore it is critical to define civic tech in terms of achieving specific “civic outcomes”. The role of civic tech is to use it for the public good and to develop and build social capital.

Civic tech includes using digital tools and platforms that inform, engage and connect citizens with their government, and one another. Tools and platforms that provide the public information about the government's budget allocation, delivery of public service, and voting process are examples of civic tech. The outcome is ultimately to drive transparency and accountability in

government processes and improve service delivery by the government for the public.

It is necessary that civic tech tools and platforms have a citizen-facing component for citizens to engage directly with the government. Some tools and platforms enable citizens to be involved in decision-making processes with the government.

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