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## **Civic Tech: Some Historical (and admittedly Eurocentric) Reflections**

Civic Tech is widely used to describe recent innovations in civic participation. But what does it mean and how does Civic Tech differ from other civic movements?

There is no universally agreed definition of Civic Tech. In fact, Forest Gregg, one of the partners of DataMade, has famously said that “one of the wonderful things about civic technology is that no one really knows what it means” (Gregg, 2014).

Civic technologists tend to see Civic Tech as a movement (Jackson, 2018; May & Ross, 2018). Andrew Schrock (2018), in his book *Civic Tech: Making Technology Work for People*, describes it as “a cultural movement” of people, who “think about politics, and design technologies to be radically accessible and participatory” (Schrock, 2018, p. 5).

The dominant narrative suggests this movement emerged in the aftermath of the 2007-2008 global financial crisis. The collapse of the world economy was (correctly) blamed on neoliberalism and free-market capitalism, and Civic Tech was part of the global pushback.

Because of this, Civic Tech is generally associated with centre-left activism (Haikin, 2017). Civic technologists are “agents of change” that “need to be aware of [the] persistent threats of paternalism and neoliberalism” (Schrock, 2018, p. 112).

In the eyes of many civic technologists, this makes Civic Tech unique. Recent technological advancements and the collapse of the world economy have provided a once-in-lifetime opportunity to redistribute power, and the role of Civic Tech is to lead the charge.

This narrative overlooks an important perspective. Civic Tech is nothing new. Throughout history, technological advancements have produced civic movements that have tried to use technology to reduce the distance between power and people.

In France, in the aftermath of the 1789 revolution, the invention of the telegraph was seen as a way to bring people closer to their leaders. Reflecting on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's argument that direct democracy is impossible in large constituencies, Alexandre-Théophile Vandermonde commented that the telegraph "may address by itself the objections to large [direct] democratic republics" (Mattelart, 1999, own translation).

In Russia, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the introduction of movable types produced what historians have referred to as the "printers' movement" (Ruud, 1981). Advancements in printing technology, introduced from Western Europe, "attracted the interest of radical revolutionaries", who saw the press as "a crucial instrument in the 'class struggle'" and "made political use of the printing press during the Revolution of 1905" (Ruud, 1981, pp. 379–380).

In the US, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, radio was greeted with "the sense of extraordinary new possibilities and greatly expanded horizons" but also "anxieties about radio's effects on public and civic life" (Goodman, 2011, p. xiii). In the 1930s, these anxieties gave birth to the 'education movement', which sought to "teach the population to deal critically with broadcast propaganda" (Goodman, 2011, p. 247).

A few decades later, also in the US, the emergence of cable TV was seen "as offering a technological fix to the many practical constraints on more direct participation in governance" (Dutton, 1992, p. 505). In the *teledemocracy* era, democracy would be fundamentally reinvented, and institutions would move towards "a more deliberative and direct model of citizen engagement" (Peixoto & Sifry, 2017a, pp. 44–45).

Around the same time, the global Appropriate Technology movement emerged and presented its alternative to the Vietnam War's inhumane use of technology. In his book, *Small Is Beautiful*, E. F. Schumacher (1973) described how technology could be

ecologically sensitive and locally designed. President Jimmy Carter invited Schumacher to the White House and famously put a solar panel on its roof.

Seeing Civic Tech as the latest iteration of something larger, rather than confined in time and space, has implications. First, it changes our conceptualisation of technology. Civic technologists tend to see technology only as digital technology (Peixoto & Sifry, 2017b). However, if we broaden the perspective, technology becomes any “designed, material means to an end” (Agar, 2020), including the telegraph, the printing press, including radio and TV etc.

Second, it challenges the perceived association between Civic Tech and centre-left activism. While many civic movements certainly have had centre-left inclinations (civic movements often have, given the historical association between power and centre-right ideology), there is nothing inherent in this association. When power is held by the left, power can be challenged from the right.

Where does this leave us in terms of defining Civic Tech? In a way, it makes the very concept of Civic Tech meaningless. If we accept that any definition of Civic Tech has to be technology and ideology neutral, meaning technology can be ‘pen and paper’ and power can be challenged from the right, there is no difference between Civic Tech and any other civic movement we have seen throughout history. What they share, and therefore what perhaps can be said to be intrinsic to Civic Tech, is the commitment to democratic values and principles.

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