

Transformational Cooperative Volunteerism

John Speck

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As credit markets seize and governments around the world throw astronomical sums of money at the problem, many of us are taking a cold, hard look at the situation in an attempt to prepare for what's coming. And the outlook is bleak. Our new reality is very, very austere.

This crisis is demanding action, and very quickly governments are reaching their capacity to help. As the Fed, the FDIC and central banks around the world scurry to save as many of our cornerstone financial institutions as possible, private forces are stepping up to deal with the "major" institutions. Warren Buffet has made key investments in Goldman Sachs and General Electric to the tune of \$10 billion. Wilbur Ross is talking about putting up a \$1 billion bankroll to create a new level of private securities insurance in an attempt to jump start "corporate paper."

It's getting harder and harder to tell the difference between public and private entities. They face the same crisis, share the same goals and have the same tools at their disposal. The only difference I see is one of scale.

Many thinkers feel it's inappropriate for the public sector to be taking such an important role in the private sector. But I disagree. At a time of crisis, only government has the capability to take action massive enough to have an effect.

This financial crisis stands as enduring proof that private entities of a certain scale become, in effect, public institutions because their impacts are of a national or international scale. And it is clear, at least to me, that we need to carefully review issues of fiduciary responsibility for entities like these. If, for example, US auto manufacturers will expect a public bailout, they must keep the public interest in mind. In good times as well as bad.

As this crisis rolls through various aspects of society and the economy, state and municipal governments seem poised to be the next entities in crisis. Already, California and New York have announced major deficits and are seeking financing to cover their shortfalls. Surely, these states won't be the only ones to face this situation. They are simply the first.

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My state of Rhode Island and my city of Pawtucket face these same problems. Both of these are particularly corrupt, particularly incestuous, and particularly closed to the scrutiny of the press and the public. Just as in the private sector, our elected and appointed officials are culpable and possibly even more incompetent. And, like the private sector, we cannot simply fire everybody, but we must fire some.

Unlike the private sector, these public entities cannot be allowed to fail. They must continue to provide essential services. Failure would result in a catastrophic breakdown of the fabric of society.

So the public sector, like the private sector, must face the consequences of their lack of foresight, poor planning and incompetent management of the public trust. But it must happen in a way in which they, and not society, pay the price.

I propose that one way would be through transformational, cooperative volunteerism. Web 2.5 for short.

Transformational

Clay Shirky, a professor at New York University, has proposed a concept that he calls the "cognitive surplus". The cognitive surplus is just what it sounds like - excess, unused brain capacity. In the United States, our cognitive surplus is enormous. Shirky puts forth the following statistics as evidence:

- » The work time required to create and edit all of Wikipedia is about 100 million hours
- » The time spent by Americans watching television in a single year is about 200 billion hours

In other words, for every hour spent creating Wikipedia, Americans watched 2,000 hours of television. Conversely, in just the time Americans spend watching commercials in a single weekend, they could create Wikipedia.

A cognitive surplus, indeed.

Shirky also suggests that America - and western society in general - is waking up from a decades-long "bender" brought on by technology's radical transformations of work and life. The drug of choice on this bender was television. If that's true, then this crisis is the cold shower that will bring us rapidly back to reality. And, if the analogy holds, we can expect a substantial hang-over.

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The Wikipedia example is an apt one here. What started out as a whacky idea has become the go-to source for information on anything and everything. Like a traditional encyclopedia, Wikipedia has in-depth articles on a wide, wide range of more-or-less traditional topics. But, unlike a traditional encyclopedia, it also has articles on events, individuals, etc., that would never be considered “important” enough to be printed. I was able to create a page for my friend and bandmate, artist and musician, the late Gene Severens. Gene's memory is important enough to me to have a page on Wikipedia. The folks over at Britannica might disagree.

Critics of Wikipedia argue that ‘if anybody can edit the articles, how will you know if the information is any good?’ They widely predicted that Wikipedia would be full of mistakes and misinformation. But they have been widely wrong. In Web 2.0 circles, you often hear the expression “Wikipedia doesn't work in theory. It only works in practice.”

To apply this approach to the day-to-day operation of governments requires a fundamental change on the part of government, and I think it's already beginning to happen. Cluetrain accurately predicted the Web 2.0 phenomenon, although at the recent 10 year anniversary conference, the authors lamented the slow pace of change.

I have a slightly different view. While there has not been the rapid dissolution of the wall between customer and corporation, there has been a slow, steady whittling away. And the pace is accelerating, if only from a crawl to a walk. Clearly, there is greater and greater connection among individuals as they cluster around concepts, interests, industries, and, importantly here, locations. Further, these communities of interest tend to attract highly intelligent, exceptionally well-informed people; what we might call emergent leaders.

The corporate world's response to this change is very surprising to me. At a recent conference focused on the application of open sharing technologies in the enterprise context, the leaders tend to be very large organizations, specifically, IBM and the CIA. Both of these organizations have entered this space following critical misjudgments. IBM completely missed the software industry, foolishly focusing on hardware. The CIA completely missed the 9/11 attacks even though key facts were known. The dots were never connected.

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Both of these organizations have pushed strongly to develop communities of knowledge, and both have enjoyed rapid success and genuine results. There is demonstrable proof that this approach of open networks delivers better results faster. For these organizations, application of this technology and this thinking has been transformational.

On the government side, there is a growing movement for “community engagement” or “public outreach”. To me, this is highly ironic that government of, by and for the people needs to develop strategies that help it engage with the public. But it shows clearly that there is a direct, inverse connection between the staffing levels and civic engagement. Every new paid government position eliminates an opportunity for a citizen to be involved.

Our Web 2.5 concept, then, involves the gradual replacement of paid government workers with a network of volunteers. More specifically, there should be a rapid embracing of these networks by governments followed by the gradual elimination of paid positions.

This would require a rapid opening up of government, a rapid dissolution of the wall that separates people from their government. This is the essence of the Web 2.5 upgrade. The technology exists already. On the citizen side, the connectivity exists already. The major upgrade here is the rapid expansion in connectivity between citizens and their governments.

Really, this should not be a problem. Citizens own the government. We are the shareholders. We are the board of directors. Elected officials and appointed bureaucrats have proven themselves unable to meet our requirements. We can replace them however we choose, whenever we choose. This may be extra-legal, but we are the law.

The choice for these officials is simple: cooperate, engage and enable this transformation, or be swept aside.

There's plenty of upside for those government officials who would enable this kind of direct citizen engagement. They'll be able to take some of the credit for our successes. And our successes will be rapid and they will be substantial.

Virtually everybody who has participated in an open sharing network (Web 2.0) has found that they get better ideas and they find them faster. Because more

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people participate, the ideas are better vetted, so implementations go faster and smoother. And because some many people participate in the concepting and planning, there are more people to participate in the implementation.

The result of Web 2.5 would be an upwelling of innovation. We stand at the threshold of a new wave of widely dispersed, small-scale programs that bring innovative approaches to long-standing problems like education disparities, poverty, health care and wellness disparities. Because Web 2.5 would not be bound by the patronage and partisan in-fighting of traditional politics, our approaches per force would be bipartisan, and, therefore, more likely to enjoy wide-ranging support.

To my way of thinking, Web 2.5 is the most sensible approach not only to dealing with the current/impending needs of state and local governments, but also to finding workable, lasting solutions to the social problems that are dragging this nation down.

Cooperative

Let's be clear. We in the Web 2.0 space have already developed a highly cooperative ethos. The cooperative aspect of Transformational Cooperative Volunteerism is the cooperation between government and its citizens.

Governments know they need all the help they can get. Or if they don't, they will soon. We The People can do a lot to help our governments and therefore ourselves. But only if governments stand aside to some extent and allow us to participate in a far more substantial way than paying taxes, voting and occasionally participating in a neighborhood clean up.

The model for this new level of cooperation between government and citizens has already been proven out in both the social and business spaces in the form of Open Source. Open Source is particular type of software in which the underlying (source) code is available to all for free. But the term also refers to the collaborative method by which this software is created.

In the open source development world, large numbers of workers develop self-organizing sub-groups to attack specific problems that the groups themselves identify and prioritize. Open source development is a true meritocracy that draws its strength from the bottom up. There is no leader who approves projects and selects team leaders. Instead, teams self-select around specific projects.

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Applying this approach to Web 2.5 will be much like applying Web 2.0 to business. In both cases, the new way of working represents a direct threat to the weakest links in the chain, regardless of their position in the hierarchy. According to The Dilbert Principle, the least productive workers in an organization are systematically moved to that place where they can do the least damage. And that place is Management.

All kidding aside, the application of Web 2.0 to business has exposed the need for a particular kind of enlightened leadership that allows anti-hierarchical technologies to grow despite resistance from those who benefit most from the hierarchy - the leaders themselves. At a recent conference, we started calling these people Ghandi Leaders. The Ghandi Leader recognizes that the organization does not exist to support his/her position; the organization exists to do its work. The Ghandi Leader serves the organization by finding the most efficient and effective way for that work to get done.

The Leader serves the Organization. The Organization does not serve the Leader.

Sidebar: On Eliminating Government Jobs

Anybody who works in government might be horrified at the thinking behind this essay. As always, 3D Politics seeks to limit systemic shocks, instead transitioning as smoothly as possible to whatever new state is necessary. As a general rule, this plan should include a transition plan for workers to be retrained and blended into the general workforce.

In this particular case, the Web 2.5 movement would need the years of expertise that current government employees hold, especially the 'front line' workers who actually do the business of government. Their functions would be the easiest to replace with a volunteer network, so these workers should be prepared to get additional training and transition into the general workforce.

Mid-level workers also have key experience and knowledge that will be crucial in allowing this movement to succeed. However, these workers are also the easiest to re-train because they have the greatest amount of job-ready skills and probably hold a college degree. They are also best prepared to play key management roles in this new schema.

Top management, on the other hand, should be prepared for a rapid departure from the scene. Many should resign or retire. Simply put, these people have

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done an atrocious job of 'driving the bus'. We're in the ditch. Thank you for your service. Please exit, stage left.

Government is the last bastion of artificial scarcity, a concept from the Web 2.0 space that says institutions try to hold good and services as closely as they can to prevent an over-abundant supply from driving values down.

When it comes to ideas and information, any perceived scarcity is, in fact, artificial. Information and good ideas are everywhere, and they become more abundant every day. Newspapers, for example, no longer control the flow of news information. Thanks to the Internet, any observer can communicate news information faster than a publisher. This is why users of the micro-blogging site Twitter routinely hear about important events before those who rely on the mainstream media.

Government, under the guise of protecting citizens but in truth to protect their own advantage, has shrouded its every move in secrecy. From policy meetings to vendor contracts, opacity rules. If you doubt this, answer this question: Why would a democratic form of government need specific laws with names like Freedom of Information or Open Meetings?

The truth is that the business of government is not rocket science, but it is complex and detailed. The isolation of information from those whom this information serves has created most of the problems of bloated bureaucracies, redundant jobs and departments, and policies that work at cross purposes. The more that the underlying needs are known by the widest group of people, the more resources can be found and the easier it is to apply these resources to the needs.

With or without Web 2.5, the way government functions will change. Absent our involvement, the crucial services on which people depend will be reduced, with potentially dire consequences. With our involvement, services could improve significantly, and many seemingly intractable problems could find lasting solutions.

For the good of all, those most averse to change must be the first to step aside.

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Volunteerism

The Web 2.0 space is a massive ball of energy. Everyday, tens of thousand of very bright, well educated, highly knowledgeable people put their careers at risk to discuss those things for which they have true passion, often on company time. The more enlightened companies not only permit, but encourage this because they know that allowing their workers to actually be human beings makes them better, more productive workers.

On any given day, I engage in conversation about economics, the environment, all kinds of professional issues, music, art, and, of course, local issues. But I've always felt frustrated that it's just discussion. Web 2.5 gives us the opportunity to put this vast amount of energy to good purpose. Coordination and organization are the first order of business. But, as in the open source development space, this organization must be allowed to emerge organically.

Laws remain laws. Policies remain policies. Schedules, deadlines and all the rest stay the same. The difference is that many more eyes are looking at the needs as well as the methods and resources to address those needs. And many more hands, feet, eyes, ear and brains are available to apply the resources to the needs.

The changes will come in surprising and unexpected ways. Much that government buys can be donated. Many services for which we currently pay workers can be volunteerized. And many, many aspects of government operations can be virtualized. If I never have to fill out another paper form again, it will be too soon.

Key here is the creation of protocols that will keep bureaus and departments connected to the new forces of Web 2.5. I say "keep" them connected, but really, I mean "force them to remain connected." I do not doubt that there will be resistance to these new forces of Transformational Cooperative Volunteerism. It is, in fact, a direct threat to those in government who do little actual work and deliver little actual value.

That is because, with a realistic eye to the future, we will be volunteers - for now. Again, again, again: no systemic shocks. Rather, we need to keep money coming in and money going out as we ratchet down budgets without forcing a

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decline in services. In time, we'll want to find a way to give the largest contributors graduated tax breaks in return for exemplary or extraordinary service. Eventually, select contributors may actually become full time employees, replacing existing workers at a one-to-many ratio.

But these outcomes are far, far down the road. For now, we need to get ourselves organized, find our key Ghandi Leaders within government, and get about the business of saving ourselves from ourselves.

Conclusion

Our over arching aims.

1. To radically reshape state and local government in a phased approach that limits shocks and keeps services running. We need to deliver:

- » The same services at the same price - the initial phase brings volunteer forces to bear with minimal staff reductions
- » The same services at a lower price - this phase produces a budget surplus that pays down our debts
- » More services at a lower price - the end phase is government as it should have been all along

2. To enable innovation on a massive scale. The collaborative space finds the best ideas and implements them with great speed. This is our advantage.

3 . Reconnect people with the government, and reconnect government with the people.

- » We all share the same goals, and we should all share the work to the greatest degree possible.
- » In this work, party affiliation is unimportant, and we should expect, no, DEMAND an absence of partisan strife and friction.

Participation is optional, not mandatory. Not everybody can or should participate, although many will choose to.

As in the Web 2.0 space, the community watches, and the community reacts. In this space, it is very difficult to take advantage or game the system or even to push an agenda that is at cross-purposes to this work.

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We also recognize the overarching obstacles to this work - entrenched interests and incumbents. They probably realize the depth of the crisis we're in and their role in creating it. So they probably recognize that the light at the end of the tunnel is actually a train. And that train is Web 2.5.

Again, I say to those in government, your choice is simple:

- » Enable us. Help us. Join us.
- » Be Swept Aside.