Generation Y? Bridging the participation gap in an online world

There is a common perception that public services are struggling to engage with 'Generation Y': the young people and young adults born since the 1980s who have come of age with ubiquitous Internet access and surrounded by a proliferation of multimedia communication tools. This article argues that it is a mistake to suggest that what we are facing is only a generation gap that can be addressed by changing the way government is presented. Instead we need to examine the significant 'expectations gap' brought about in an online world where citizens of all ages want to interact with public services and democratic institutions in new ways: expectations created, in part, by the interactive possibilities and participative culture of modern communication technologies. Addressing this deeper gap involves re-negotiating the way that public services, policy consultation, and democratic engagement, all operate. Renegotiating public services delivery in an online era should also offer us the opportunity to challenge the common exclusion of children and young people from policy debates, and to dedicate resources to addressing the social inequalities that would otherwise prevent the most excluded from benefiting from a more interactive, digitally connected, public sector.

Young people, young adults and public services

Over the last ten years I've been involved in an number of successive projects by UK Government agencies to address a perceived gulf between government and young people. Framed at first by concern about falling rates of voter turnout amongst young adults, and more recently by narratives about a digital generation, spending their time connected to online entertainment and to each other through social media, but disconnected from local communities public services and formal politics, government has felt unable to engage with so-called 'Generation Y'. And, as participants at this year's annual conference of the Paris-based Institute for Public Management discussed, as Generation Y enter the workplace, public services face new challenges accommodating the working practices and expectations of those who have never known a time without ubiquitous Internet access and connectivity. Public services increasingly feel out of touch in a digital world.

But are these challenges really generational issues? Is the problem really about 'Generation Y', as the Institute of Public Management's conference implied? Or do we need to look deeper to understand how public services can be transformed in an online era?

Generation Y?
The term 'Generation Y' is usually used to pick out the generation born between 1980 or 1985, and the turn of the new millennium. Children, young people and young adults in this bracket in Europe have generally grown up in an environment packed full of digital technologies: multi-channel TV, mobile phones and widespread Internet access. Commentators describe 'Generation Y' as multi-taskers, impatient and uninterested in hierarchies, gamers, 'digital natives' and active users of almost all new media and communication technologies. The 'net

generation', and for the later part of this cohort, the 'Facebook generation' are other labels applied to us. And yet, defining a generation by drawing a boundary around it and assuming that there is more similarity between children, young people and young adults born over a particular span of years, than there is similarity between certain sections of that group and other age groups, and emphasizing the commonality of the generation over it's diversity, can be extremely misleading.

The digital platforms that particular groups of teenagers and young adults choose to use, and importantly, how they choose to use them, are affected not only by their age, but by their socio-economic status; by the pressing concerns at particular stages of their lives; and by 'network effects'. Understanding networks and network effects helps us to understand contemporary communication. If, for example, the thing that is most important to you right now is communicating with friends, you will choose the communication tools that best allow you to do that. This will likely be the particular tool where most of the network you want to communicate with are, and that offers you the most appropriate way of communicating with them. That's why we saw students adopt Facebook on campus when it first emerged as a college-only network; and why we now have lots of accounts of young people in the UK turning to the Blackberry phone and it's BBM Blackberry Instant Messenger tool as their communication platform of choice: it offers low-cost instant messaging, with the important advantage that you can control who is on your friends list and retain some privacy. This has been seen as increasingly important as Facebook, a former platform of choice, has shifted it's privacy settings to a more public default *and* become a place where young people's parents are increasingly present in the network. However, just because a group of young people are seen using a particular digital tool, doesn't mean they all use it in the same way, or that they are all connected to each other in a single 'networked space'. Recent riots in London saw people of all ages using social media, and particularly BBM, to both organise (in small, often private, communities) disorder, whilst other group turned to the same tools, although often to more open platforms like Twitter in this case, to organise positive citizen responses to it: co-ordinating clean-ups of affected areas and engaging in discussion about what had happened.

Even when we understand that Generation-Y is diverse in itself, and that no-one approach will engage a whole generation, we also have to also recognise that communication technologies, although often adopted and explored en-masse first by young people (who have fewer existing patterns of technology use to replace or break out of), the same technologies diffuse throughout society over time. E-mail; smart-phones; Digital TV; Facebook accounts; online shopping: these are all digital innovations that have seen widespread adoption across the whole of the working-age population. If we focus our analysis public service engagement challenges on Generation-Y as *'the digital native'* generation, we risk missing the bigger picture of social change driven by communication technology, and with advocates and opponents in all age groups. We also risk identifying current challenges as problem that government will 'grow out of' as digitally aware young adults move up through the ranks of hierarchically structured government into positions of management. A Generation-Y analysis suggests that we should seek to make minor changes to accommodate members of this new generation within existing

public service structures, rather than challenging us all to transform the way we practice public service. Lastly, the Generation-Y analysis confuses the message with the messengers. It is within the nature of youth to seek change, and to bring new ideas into communities and workplaces. The largest source for new ideas right now is the technological domain and the vast opportunity space opened up by the Internet, and so inevitably many of the ideas and innovations advanced by young citizens and young public servants have a technological component. However, even if public services can better engage with modern technologies, they also need to address deeper issues of how they engage with young people as young people: as even after 20 years of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, with it's revolutionary Article 12 setting out the right of Children and Young People to be involved in all decisions that affect them, many areas of our public services and our democracy continue to discriminate and exclude on the basis of age.

In the following section this paper looks in detail at the gap between public services and citizen expectations in a digital era, before the article turns to explore a number of promising examples of online engagement that could be adopted by public services and governments.

Identifying the gaps

There is undoubtedly a gap between the way public services communicate, and the way many citizens want to communicate with their government. That gap has been created, to a significant extend, by communication technologies. But we can understand that gap in two different ways. Firstly, we could understand it as a channel gap. Government is not communicating through the right channels. It's still using letters, leaflets, posters and broadcast channels as it's default mode of communication. Where government is online, which is almost always now is, it creates static websites with limited opportunities for interaction. The channel gap analysis highlights the need for government to be present where citizens are - taking government onto YouTube, to Twitter and to Facebook - providing services on digital TV and mobile phones - and being more dynamic in how government information is presented. However, the gap is not just about the channels through which government communicates. Having a Facebook page isn't what really matters for digital public service. Modern communication technologies have also created an expectations gap.

The expectations gap is far harder to bridge: but much more important to address than the channel gap. It involves far deeper organisational and cultural change in the way we do government. What new expectations have we got to meet?

An expectation of open information - with the cost of publishing brought near to zero - the expectation is that all content should be available just a search query away. Yet much public sector information remains hard to find. Information remains buried away in downloadable documents, or deep in websites, if it is published online at all: and often the information governments publish is structured around their internal organisational structure, rather than around citizen needs. Some areas of the public sector have been embracing open data,

establishing open data portals like data.gov and data.gov.uk, but even with these platforms most data on what government is doing remains hard to find, or hard to make sense of if it can be found.

Furthermore, in a world where consumers can also access manage their own personal data when ordering products online, checking up on delivery dates and account balances with retailers and banks, the lack of direct access to the personal details public services hold on you may seem out-of-step with the wider world.

An expectation of comment - research by Consumer Focus found that "UK consumers are leaving well over 100 million comments a year" on the web about services they have received. A number of those comments will be about public services. Consumer Focus also found people are far more likely to trust what other consumers are saying about a service than what the company (or government) are saying. E-commerce and community websites right across the modern web have comment features, 'like' buttons, or other way to leave your mark and share the content with social networks. How often is that the case with government spaces?

An expectation of interactivity. Getting good information online and making space for citizens to leave comments as feedback, or as peer-support for others, is relatively easy. Meeting expectations of interactivity requires more attention. More than once I've posted comments on Twitter mentioning particular companies and problems I'm having with their services, and within minutes I've had replies from those companies offering to help solve the problem. The expectation of responsiveness created by instant communication highlights the slow replies I get when I contact my local council, or the even slower replies (if there is any feedback or reply at all) when I engage in a public consultation.

An expectation of collaboration. When communication was slow it made sense to to package problems up into processes based on a limited number of communication transactions. Citizens might fill in a form, or respond to a survey; government thinks about it; maybe a request for more information is made; the citizen replies; a decision is made. A slow process, and one of correspondence rather than collaboration. But when tools like Google Documents hold out the promise of collaborating together instantly on documents and plans; when citizens realize that they can input better into the policy process by joining online discussions rather than filling in consultation forms; and when digital technologies allow communities to self-organise and take ownership of their own problems, the need is for government able to collaborate through new communication tools, not just use some new channels for old processes.

These are by no means universal expectations. Many of the most excluded in our societies have learnt to expect very little from governments when it comes to participation and policy making - and we must pay attention to managing expectations - both by helping the most demanding to understand (and engage with) the challenges of government, and by working to raise the expectations of the most disadvantaged. However, these expectations (perhaps more common amongst younger demographics who don't have other expectations to replace them, but

expectations that are, in practice, widespread across society) present the real challenge for governments to meet.

Bridging the gap: case studies

Many of the expectations that form a digital era expectations gap result from a comparison of private sector innovations with public sector practices. But the public sector is not a company, and it operates under a different set of constraints from those that are present in the worlds of global corporates or agile start-up enterprises. Bridging the expectations gap is not about government simply replicating private sector ways of working, but needs to involve a renegotiation of how services are delivered, and how debates take place. I've already suggested that any social-justice focused renegotiation also needs to address the inclusion of young people, and so in this section you will find a number of short case studies, based on my own experience exploring digital government and youth participation. These examples seek to highlight approaches that can provide useful inspiration, insights and lessons for governments and public services working out ways to renegotiate their practice to be more open, inclusive and effective for a networked world.

Open online engagement
Over the last few years digital innovators within the UK Government have experimented with a number of different initiatives to get citizens to comment directly during the policy making process. Successive projects have explored replacing long and boring consultation documents with draft policy documents that allow paragraph-by-paragraph comments to be posted, and using a range of home-grown and commissioned crowd-sourcing tools to gather policy ideas and quick consultation responses from citizens through accessible websites, and even directly through online communities, embedded content in blogs, and through social networking websites. Although many UK government consultations still take place through inaccessible word processor documents to be downloaded and returned; after the change of Westminister administration in 2010, the new coalition government announced a number of high-profile crowd-sourcing engagement activities, including a consultation on the coalitions 'Programme for Government', a 'Spending Challenge' inviting ideas for ways to cut the governments budget, and, more recently, the 'Red Tape Challenge' inviting input into deregulation.

Each of these consultation exercises made use of a dedicated consultation website where visitors were able to submit their comments and suggestions for what government should be doing on the particular topic of consultation. Whilst in the case of the early Programme for Government consultation this involved having open comment boxes on an already agreed programme of activity, without a clear presentation to visitors of how input would be used, by the time of the 'Spending Challenge', considerable thought had gone into the whole engagement process. Technology only makes large-scale engagement more plausible: effective engagement still requires a good process. Firstly, the Spending Challenge, which invited visitors to suggest areas where government could make financial savings, was opened up to input from public servants before it was made publicly available: recognising that good public engagement that

ignores staff engagement can be counterproductive. Digital tools can be used to crowd source from internal crowds - as well as experts and those with ideas outside the organisation. Secondly, the Spending Challenge, when opened to the public, maintained an active blog detailing how a team of civil servants were analysing the input being submitted, and giving general feedback about issues they had identified as emerging themes. Although the Spending Challenge website itself was built for under £20,000, it required a staff team to be brought together from across government to analyse and respond to the large number of incoming suggestions for savings to be found (over 100,000 submissions, including 60,000 or so 'ideas'). Thirdly, during it's public phase, the Spending Challenge published all received submissions online, with a rating system in place to allow site visitors to 'vote up' submissions they supported. This was perhaps the most controversial part of the site in it's initial phase, with concern about offensive comments being available on the site, and slow moderation of comments, as well as criticism that unrepresentative online voting simply allows those who can mobile the most friends/supporters to vote on proposals get more attention for their ideas, rather than ideas being assessed on merit.

The recent Red Tape Challenge has built further on experience from both the Programme for Government consultation and the Spending Challenge. Using open data on legislation from the http://www.legislation.gov.uk website, the Red Tape Challenge is hosting successive thematic dialogues on particular areas of legislation, linking directly to the legislation under discussion, with the potential to support more informed dialogue and discussion.

Of course, good online engagement also needs to be framed around good questions, and there are valid criticisms to be made of the way that The Spending Challenge and Red Tape Challenge have been framed in ways that assume citizens want to suggest cuts to spending or regulation, and these are undoubtedly examples of politicised consultation.

Politics aside, however, my own experiences of these projects highlighted some positive signs of interactive government engaging well online: not through creating dedicated engagement websites, but through listening and engaging via social media. With a focus on youth engagement, I noticed that, although many young people were adding their own ideas and comments freely to the site, the terms and conditions of the Programe for Government consultation prohibited anyone under 16 commenting on the site without parental consent. Under 16s have a right under Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to have a say in issues that affect them - so to require parental consent before engaging in public policy debate seemed exclusive and unhelpful. I wrote a brief blog post to that effect to express my concern. And very soon after the Central Office of Information, who were responsible for the terms and conditions, got in touch asking for more details of why they should, and how they could, update the terms and conditions to be more inclusive. Through a brief collaboration, started on a blog and by Twitter, and continued by e-mail and phone-calls, this 'accidental' exclusion of young people through the selection of terms of conditions was removed, and the default terms and conditions for future projects updated. This experience also highlights that renegotiating public services for a digital world involves enabling individual staff to make use of social media tools in

their own practice.

Interactive front-line services

Often when public services start to explore social media they identify it as an issue for their press and communications departments, focusing on the 'media' element, rather than on the 'social'. However, social media tools can be used effectively right across an organisation, including in front-line services, and including in work with young people.

Around three years ago I found myself working with youth workers who wanted to involve excluded teenagers in decision making. They found that, with young people living across a wide geographical area, it was expensive to get groups together to talk about issues face-to-face: and the inconsistency of the groups who could get together at meetings made developing conversations difficult. Based on feedback from young people, they started to explore using social network sites like Facebook as a low-cost tool for holding discussions and talking about young people's views on key local issues. It involved the youth workers switching to a new channel to engage with young people, and to support them to identify how to get their views into the policy process. Some of that work feeding into the policy process still involved writing reports and making presentations - but it was facilitated online. But more than a new channel, it involved youth workers finding new ways of working. The youth workers had to develop their skills and working practices in order to operate in a new environment. Although youth work has always been based on the principle of voluntary engagement (young people can choose whether or not they want to participate in any youth work activities, unlike the compulsory nature of school), when interacting online youth workers had to accommodate a new power dynamic that meant young people could far more easily 'block' the workers or exercises the choice not to engage. In the Youth Work and Social Networking Report (NYA, 2008) we identified how youth work values remain just as relevant in social networking contexts, but how they are put into practice requires careful thought. We also identified the importance of each professional group working out and negotiating how their professional values are affected by digital communication - rather than adopting a single one-size-fits-all organisational policy about social media.

The choice of Facebook worked *because* the workers understood it was a space based on relationships. There are many different ways to be present in Facebook, from using it as a broadcast channel, through to engaging in participative conversations. The workers had to identify the right approaches for their participation project, not simply accepting the defaults of the social networking space, but equally not rejecting the norms and cultures present there. Managers also had to adapt: instead of seeing social media as a communications department issue, they have had to trust many of their staff to communicate in semi-public and public spaces through social media tools, relaxing procedures that previously asked for all public statements to be routed through the communications department. Managers have needed to consider how they supervise and support online interactions, adding a discussion of digital engagement to regular supervision sessions and discussions about staff development.

The 'Frontline Social' wiki at http://frontlinesocial.wikispaces.com/ explores in more depth how

public services can make use of social media in delivering services directly to citizens, highlighting some of the potential for efficiency and effectiveness gains alongside the need to use social media to engage people where they are.

Co-creating policy

Even when online consultations, or direct engagement with citizens via social media are used to bridge some of the expectations gaps that arise in a digital world, the policy process often remains relatively unchanged. There are new inputs; but the way that public service policies or government legislation is drafted is still stuck in an analogue era. Two recent examples have shown me it doesn't need to be like that - as young people and young adults came together to collaboratively draft policy statements using online collaboration tools.

Conventionally at International youth participation events a number of days of discussion will take place, with the goal of producing a statement or communique to capture and advocate for young people's policy ideas. Such statements are often drafted late into the night before they are due to be presented, with one individual sat at a laptop, and many others trying to argue for particular issues or phrases to be included. The process is not far different from how much government policy is drafted, although perhaps in that case there is less crowding around a laptop, and more sharing of documents with tracked changes and scribbled notes. However the process works, in general, a small number of people are gatekeepers of the document - with significant influence over what is included or not. And getting something included in the document depends more on how loud you shout, than on how good your ideas are.

At the 2010 Internet Governance Forum in Vilnius, young people as part of the Dynamic Youth Coalition on Internet Governance tried a different approach. Using an online collaborative document editing tool called etherpad, they opened their laptops during a meeting, and started working together, from their own computers connected over the Internet, on a single text. Etherpad colour codes each persons' contribution to the text as it builds up, providing quick visual feedback about how inclusive or not the text is. Etherpad also keeps a full revision history, increasing the accountability of contributors. By using Etherpad a larger number of participants were able to contribute directly to the statement made by the Dynamic Youth Coalition in the closing plenary of the Internet Governance Forum, including participants who were not physically present in Vilnius, but had been taking part in the meeting remotely via webcast. The increased influence on the document of younger participants, and those with English as a second language, was notable in this collaborative process.

A similar online document process was adopted at the 2011 Youth Forum of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum in Cardiff. There, sub-groups drafting a communique each used Google Documents to record their proposed recommendations, able to see what each other group was working on in real-time, increasing the face-to-face contact between groups as the text that participants saw on screen sparked conversations between the groups about their different areas of focus.

Of course, real-time collaborative document editing is not suited to all policy-making processes, and brings it's own power dynamics: but used in both face-to-face meetings, and used over time to crowd-source citizen input into policies and documents, it can provide a powerful new way of working.

Renegotiating public services

If your analysis of the challenges public services face in a digital world comes down to identifying a 'channel gap', and difficulty communicating with 'Generation-Y', then it is natural to think the solution lies in investing in new platforms and new channels for communication. But if we accept not only that the advance of communication technologies has created an expectations gap, but that it also offers new tools for public services to use in innovating and working in more inclusive, democratic and effective ways, then the real investment needs to be in culture change and in skills. For all that is new about the digital world, many of the components of how we can respond to it in public service are long established in the theory and practice of organisational change. I want to suggest there are three stages to bridging the expectations gap, whilst remaining true to public service principles.

Firstly, we need to start from understanding broad public service values, and allowing different public sector professionals to re-examine their professional values in a digital world. For youth workers that means taking the principles "meet young people where they are", and recognising that the online world is a place where young people are spending time, and so making sure they are available here. It also means taking the youth work principles of "support and challenge" to ensure youth workers help young people think critically about the role of constant Internet connectivity in their lives: we all need space to be critically reflective about how technology affects us. For others in the public sector, and exploration of values will often involve consideration of universal service. The commercial enterprises setting many digital-era expectations have the strong advantage that they can segment their customer-base, and even choose not to offer products in non-profitable sectors. Government rarely has that choice. Understanding the values underneath key public services should help us identify when technologies offer an opportunity to be more efficient; to offer a better service to everyone; or to make savings across most of the service-users, and to dedicate newly freed-up funds to those service-users most in need who might not have the resources to get the most out of online self-service e-government.

Secondly, public services need to remove the many small barriers that stop public employees and politicians from engaging effectively online. Many of the case studies described above involved staff having to work around restrictions placed by IT departments, or battling with out-of-date policies and procedures. Virtually all the barriers that prevent digital innovation in public services are easily solved: but rarely is management attention and political will put behind getting the barriers removed. A short-term focus on this could unlock massive potential for public sector innovation. The Interactive Charter 'Social Strategy' wiki lists 50 different barriers that stop public services bridging the expectations gap: http://interactivecharter.org/socialstrategy/ and

has space for visitors to add their own suggested solutions.

Third, we need to provide support, encouragement and frameworks for public sector staff to develop their skills and confidence in order to be able to apply widely available technologies to their professional practice - both to work collaboratively inside the organisation, and to engage with citizens from outside[1].

And lets not forget, citizens come in all ages.

References / further reading
An earlier version of this article with links to additional resources is available at
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Shirky, Clay (2008), Here Comes Everybody

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[1] In fact, in an era of communication technologies that change the very basis of organisational theory (Shirky, 2008), those categories of inside and outside become less relevant.

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