Re-Evaluating the Values and Purpose of Civic Tech

Ian G Johnson*

Open Lab, Newcastle University, ian.johnson2@ncl.ac.uk

1 INTRODUCITION

Here, I re-introduce a socio-digital community mapping technology used in five deployments with three different organisations (n=136 participants) for purposes of community-led participatory budgeting, priority setting, and to elicit contributions to planning consultations. In re-telling the story of this discontinued civic tech I ask questions about what we should and could value in such place-based projects and begin to reflect on how we could demonstrate different values, outcomes, and impacts of civic tech work within existing reporting and publication paradigms.

1.1 The Value and Purpose of Civic Technology

What do we value in civic tech work? Mass adoption, sustained use, or commercial success? What is the purpose of civic tech? Increase engagement, support civil society, or promote civic action? If we judge the success (or failure) of civic tech by sustained use, are we setting ourselves up for failure? Rather than be judged by the criteria of product designers we should think of ourselves like the R&D part of a company. If we value commercial success then we need to reassess are methods, and budgets, and processes. We are aware it is more than just the best ideas rather a multitude of external factors and leavers including policy, marketing, etc. that go making an invention or sociotechnical system successful by these metrics [2]. But what values should we privilege, and how do we demonstrate this?

Recently, in the UK, the main funding body has suggested a new framework for writing a Curriculum Vitae (CV) [7] which aims at evidencing a wider range of skills and experience (than a traditional academic CV). The R4RI is based on the Royal Society's Résumé for Researchers [6], a tool that allows standard research CV markers, such as publications, funding, and awards to be put in the broader context of the researcher's activities. It provides the space to explain and centre the context of achievements – e.g., which skills you have used to develop ideas, expertise you provided which was critical to the success of a team (including collaborative contributions), and team support, and mentions of engagement with the public sector, clients, and the broader public to show contributions to broader society.

This represents a shift in the value and merit prescribed to researchers and research activity within a funding body, and possibly sets an example of how we might re-evaluate what we count as success and what we set out to achieve in civic tech work, and asks what if there was a better way to report on the collaboration and mentorship, the knowledge-exchange, and other outcomes of civic tech work? Like the R4R and R4RI could we find ways to place value on other relevant outputs or (social) impacts that demonstrate the value if civic tech work?

---

* I am an interdisciplinary researcher based in Open Lab at Newcastle University, UK, working at the interface of sociodigital design and politics. Drawing on political science theory and deliberative democracy research my work has examined the role of civil society and other forms of active citizenship in shaping their communities. I am particularly interested in exploring how social theory ideals are enacted through sociotechnical interventions and the role of the researcher, and stakeholder power and influence during technology deployments related to local decision-making. My recent research focus has been investigating the impacts on the pandemic and other crises within the context of social resilience with underserved communities in rural and coastal areas.
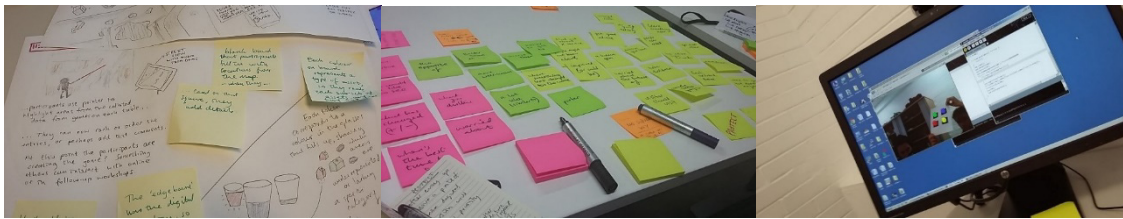
Figure 1. (a) Interaction design process ideas (b) Questions design (c) Testing Software Interface version 0

1.2 Re-introducing a discontinued civic technology

The way we report on civic technology places value on success factors that do not necessarily align with the actual (and perhaps unspoken) goals of civic tech work. In order to question what value we seek from "civically engaged" [1] HCI work and turn attention to process and goal of civic technology research I have re-visited a study to reflect on the way it was reported on and where the value was places in terms methods and evaluation.

In my own work I have completely omitted or "cleaned up" many civic, creative, and learning outcomes in the name of an orthodoxy in presentation style and reporting that is not beyond reproach but is ingrained. The development and deployment of this discontinued tech was predicated in the coming together of five core team members across two universities and about 20 community partners and the process of bringing it to being was full of learning, development, collaboration, transformation, camaraderie, and excitement that was not visible in the published report.

For example, in reporting on the development I reported: *"initial fieldwork […] involved engaging in participant observation. I took field notes guided by the research questions and on observed interactions between organisers and residents."* [5] Quantitatively, this stage of the research takes 3-4% of space in the paper despite taking up more than half of the time, work, thinking, reflection, collaboration, creativity, learning, and value. It goes on: *"The second stage of the study involved exploring the design of tools informed by the initial fieldwork. The subsequent tool we created focused on supporting fairer event facilitation and data capture and provided a means to document the events in ways that might be useable as evidence for decision-making. The third stage involved trialling the tool at events..."* [5].

Here, within the space of one paragraph I cover the design and development process and the organisation of two community events. First, the development process was a lengthy one working together with colleagues across departments and institutions and involved figuring out how to communicate and cooperate across disciplinary backgrounds and experiences (see fig. 1). In the quote, I refer to the purpose of the technology in terms of its affordances but not the impact on the partner organisation or the people who participated in the events. Second, the organisation and running of the community events where we 'trialled the technology" (see fig. 2) involved a team effort from planning to facilitating to tidying up and logistics. This was the result of people 'helping each other out', planning, carrying, setting up, celebrating, commiserating, and learning – none of which was reported. There was so much value and experience for the research team as well as the partner organisation.

The key partner in this study was a community organisation that supports older people in the region through creating a network and arranging social activities for older people (as well as representing older people and having a voice on the city council). For them, these events provided an opportunity to talk about their organisation to a wider audience, create social events for their community (people brough home-made cakes and biscuits to events to complement the catering we provided and talked about relishing the chance to bake for people again – the research team were forced to take boxes of the wares home after each session). It also created new connections and relationships between participants and between participants and researchers (heling a grandson with a university application letter, having a look at a 'broke' laptop, etc.) – none of which was considered important enough to 'write up' or even think twice about at the time.

Figure 2. (a) Camera set-up during session (b) Prompt Cards and Markers (c) Software Interface version 1

To be sure, as bad as this is, the most glaring omissions came in the 'evaluation'. In the methods of evaluation employed as well as the metrics to which we assigned value. Going back to my example for a final time, *"I conducted two evaluation workshops with representatives of the organisations that ran the events. [...] Here participants reflected on the community conversation events that they attended through a range of data (audio, transcription, and video data). Through these discussions we were able to discuss and evaluate how they might use these data and the tool in their consultation and decision-making processes."* [5]

What I didn't do was ask about, or attempt to evaluate, what the benefits or values were for them. This could have been as simple of asking the right questions at the time, or something that happened at a much later date as a follow up – where the emphasis is on, not the impact of the technology, rather the impact of the process – what has changed for people in these communities, what has the social impact been, when how and for and for whom?

Providing details and reflecting on the value in the process and social impacts for both researchers and communities would make important aspects of civic tech work visible. Such visibility may create additional value for collaborators who have their own reporting and evaluation to conduct. It may also provide opportunities for the research community and individual researchers by shifting the focus away from unhelpful evaluation markers and recognising contributions.

2   CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although it may not be fair to say that not everything that we count in civic tech work, counts, I would argue that it is fair to say that we do not count everything that counts (see [3]). Often it is difficult to assess the impact of technology interventions in a short period of time, but we are pushed toward evaluating in weeks, not years. Evaluation of civic tech is often narrow and shallow. This is most likely due to a lack of time. We have also created a research culture where we are rewarded for moving onto the next thing. We need to re-evaluate how we evaluate, what we value, and why we do civic tech. Different from reporting on 'failure' [4], I call for a move towards a template for civic tech researchers (building on R4R and other initiatives) to include a description of other valuable outputs which we could add to appendices of papers. I have also suggested that we open space and potential for longer term evaluations (in future work) and acknowledge the narrow evaluation (in limitations) to account for and promote the invisible and unspoken values and purpose of civic tech research in HCI scholarship.

A barrier to evaluating new outcomes of civic tech research is lack of space to include such details. We can start by working within the current system using the tools at our disposable such as the appendices in papers, which are not included in word or page limits/ guides. The other concern with reporting in this way may be timeframes. Even if this cannot be done in the timeframes of publication cycles, funding windows, or even candidatures and contracts of the academe – this could be noted as future work or made visible in an acknowledgement of limitations/ caveats – in other words, being more open and honest about limitations and ambitious in implications for future work as a driver of a change in approach going forward.

REFERENCES

[1] Mara Balestrini, Yvonne Rogers, and Paul Marshall. 2015. Civically engaged HCI. In *Proceedings of the 2015 British HCI Conference on - British HCI '15*, ACM Press, New York, New York, USA, 35–36. DOI:https://doi.org/10.1145/2783446.2783590

[2] Wiebe E. Bijker, Thomas P. Hughes, and Trevor Pinch (Eds.). 2012. *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology*. The MIT Press.

[3] William Bruce Cameron. 1966. *Modern Social Movements: A Sociological Outline*. Random House.

[4] William Gaver, John Bowers, Tobie Kerridge, Andy Boucher, and Nadine Jarvis. 2009. Anatomy of a failure: How we knew when our design went wrong, and what we learned from it. In *Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems - Proceedings*, ACM Press, New York, New York, USA, 2213–2222. DOI:https://doi.org/10.1145/1518701.1519040

[5] Ian G. Johnson, Alistair MacDonald, Jo Briggs, Jennifer Manuel, Karen Salt, Emma Flynn, and John Vines. 2017. Community Conversational: Supporting and Capturing Deliberative Talk in Local Consultation Processes. In *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems - CHI '17*, ACM Press, New York, New York, USA, 2320–2333. DOI:https://doi.org/10.1145/3025453.3025559

[6] Royal Society. Résumé for Researchers. Retrieved February 15, 2023 from https://royalsociety.org/topics-policy/projects/research-culture/tools-for-support/resume-for-researchers/

[7] UKRI. 2021. UKRI introduces new Resume for Research and Innovation. Retrieved February 15, 2023 from https://www.ukri.org/news/ukri-launches-new-resume-for-research-and-innovation/