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Can Technology Forge a New Relationship Between Government and the Public?

Watching the news, it's easy to conclude that "Yes We Can" has been replaced with, "Actually, On Second Thought... We Probably Can't." We can't plug the damn hole, we can't get rid of too-big-to-fail banks, we can't pass an adequate foreclosures bill, we can't pass an adequate jobs bill. The list goes on and on.

Nevertheless, there are reasons for optimism -- even when it comes to the way our government is being run. One of these reasons is Tim O'Reilly, the tech guru CEO of O'Reilly Media. Among other things, five years ago O'Reilly coined the term Web 2.0. And now he's at the forefront of a movement to apply the concept to the way our democracy is run: Government 2.0.

I talked with O'Reilly at last week's Personal Democracy Forum in New York, a don't-miss annual gathering focused on the intersection between government and technology.

We talked about the need to create a new relationship between We the People and those we elect to represent us -- and the crucial role technology can play in it. For O'Reilly, Government 2.0 isn't about every office in D.C. having its own website and posting reams of data. It's about, as he put it in a blog post-cum-manifesto, "a new compact between government and the public, in which government puts in place mechanisms for services that are delivered not by government, but by private citizens."

It's about government as a facilitator, laying the foundation for innovation in self-governance. It's "government as a platform." As O'Reilly notes:

If there's one thing we learn from the technology industry, it's that every big winner has been a platform company: someone whose success has enabled others, who've built on their work and multiplied its impact. Microsoft put "a PC on every desk and in every home," the Internet connected those PCs, Google enabled a generation of ad-supported startups, Apple turned the phone market upside down by letting developers loose to invent applications no

phone company would ever have thought of. In each case, the platform provider raised the bar, and created opportunities for others to exploit.

To advance the notion of applying this model to government, O'Reilly has created the Gov 2.0 Expo (the latest concluded two weeks ago) and the Gov 2.0 Summit (coming in September).

During his campaign -- and now through Organizing for America -- President Obama has sounded a similar call:

We must use all available technologies and methods to open up the federal government, creating a new level of transparency to change the way business is conducted in Washington, and giving Americans the chance to participate in government deliberations and decision-making in ways that were not possible only a few years ago.

This commitment to using technology to "create a transparent and connected democracy" is what led Obama to appoint Vivek Kundra as America's first Chief Information Officer. Kundra has launched data.gov, which, says O'Reilly, is based on the idea "that government agencies shouldn't just provide web sites, they should provide web services."

Using government as a platform is all about how the massive amount of information at the government's disposal is used, how widely it is shared, how low is the barrier for innovators to access it. As O'Reilly notes, the Internet itself was a government project. The government built the platform and innovators ran with it. Same with GPS -- a "killer app" that originated with the government.

According to O'Reilly, other examples of innovators building on government-provided information and services are popping up all over the country -- and the web. For instance, sites like EveryBlock and StumbleSafely take public crime statistics and remake them into public safety applications (kind of the opposite of a killer app).

Using government as a platform also means changing the way we think about legislating. "Government 2.0 requires a new approach to the design of programs," writes O'Reilly, "not as finished products, perfected in a congressional bill, executive order, or procurement specification, but as ongoing experiments."

Not surprisingly, many of those experiments are going on at the local level. One leader who has enthusiastically embraced the new model is Newark Mayor Cory Booker. "We are one part of a larger democracy that is learning how to master media to drive social change," says Booker, who was on the same panel with O'Reilly and me at the Personal Democracy Forum. "Social media is a forum where people can come together to connect, talk, mobilize, and create a larger sense of community."

Booker has over one million followers on his very active Twitter page. Using Twitter, along with Facebook and YouTube, he maintains an open pipeline of communications with his constituents. He also uses these platforms to motivate them to take part in night patrols of troubled neighborhoods -- patrols the mayor frequently joins. (Also, if you follow the Mayor on Twitter for a couple of weeks, I guarantee you'll have enough aphorisms and inspirational quotes for a season's worth of commencement addresses.)

And last year he formed an advisory working group called the Newark Tech Corps, made up of leading tech executives who advise him on the newest technologies and how he can best adapt them to serve Newark's residents.

The last 18 months have reminded us of the limits to what government can do. Going forward, it's clear that we are going to have to forge a new relationship with our government. "Citizens are connected like never before and have the skill sets and passion to solve problems affecting them locally as well as nationally," writes O'Reilly. "Citizens are empowered to spark the innovation that will result in an improved approach to governance."

We can't expect a government hobbled by centuries-old tools to deal with the challenges of the 21st century. That's why Government 2.0 needs to be taken out of beta and put into practice across the nation.

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