

Map the Future:

"We don't want bright young technologists just criticizing government," says Jennifer Pahlka, founder of Code for America. "We want them to become interested in making it better."



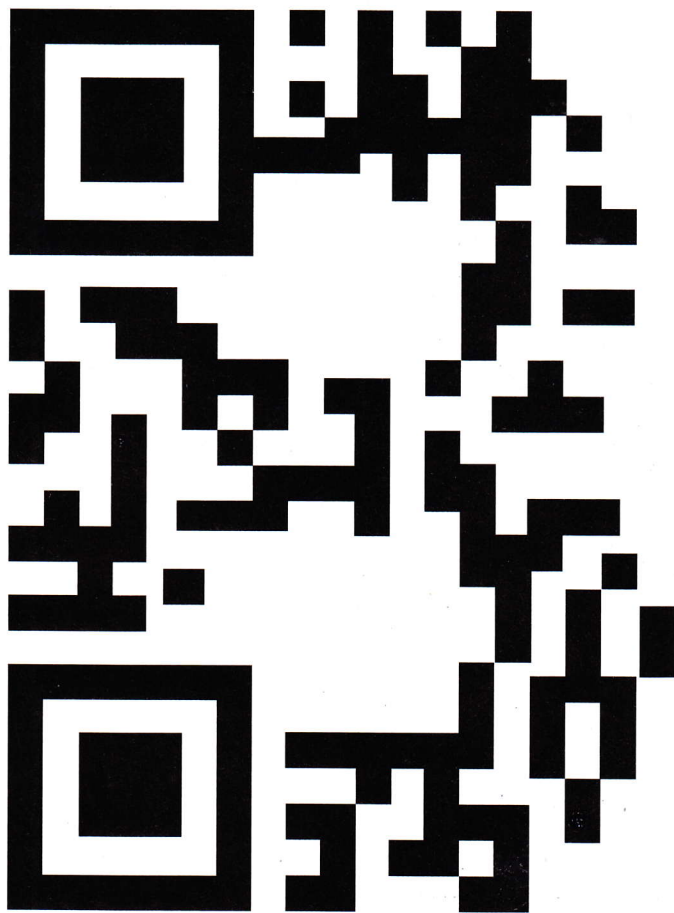


iCitizen

STILL WAITING FOR A FULL REBOOT IN WASHINGTON, D.C.,
AN ARMY OF CITIZEN TECHIES IS
REDEFINING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ON A HYPERLOCAL LEVEL.

By Anya Kamenetz

Photograph by Kurt Iswarienko



Ben Berkowitz had a problem. His block of State Street, an expanse of charming storefronts and wood-frame houses that stretches from the border of Yale's campus into New Haven's grittier East Rock neighborhood, kept getting hit with graffiti. The

31-year-old did everything a good citizen was supposed to do: He called the city. He left multiple voice mails. He urged his neighbor to speak up. Eventually, he founded the Upper State Street Association to foster neighborhood pride. But still, the spray paint lingered. "I was feeling that helplessness when you've left three messages, you don't know what the resolution is going to be, and you don't have a way to hold anyone accountable," he says.

A programmer by trade, Berkowitz sought a technological outlet for his frustrations. What if reporting graffiti or a broken traffic light or a clogged storm drain was as easy as snapping a photo with your mobile phone? What if that report was sent directly to all the groups that might give a damn, including city hall, the police department, the local utility company, and the neighborhood watch? Even better, what if all your neighbors could see those nearby reports and lend their own voices to apply pressure and get problems fixed? His solution, SeeClickFix, launched in beta in March 2008.

This open 311 has transformed the dialogue between residents and government in New Haven. That spray paint on State Street is gone—and 2,700 other user-submitted community problems have been dealt with as well. New Haven's mayor, John DeStefano Jr., notes that the system reduces departmental redundancies in tracking and fixing a problem. He asked the local Department of Transportation, Department of Public Works, and police department to respond to complaints logged via SeeClickFix. DeStefano is such a fan that he sent letters to 100 U.S. mayors, urging them to consider the system.

"I had a Google alert on 'pothole' for awhile," says Berkowitz. "I always say that potholes are the gateway drug to civic engagement." SeeClickFix now operates in thousands of communities, from the usual suspects like San Francisco and Washington, D.C., to Dallas, Detroit, and smaller towns across Connecticut and western Massachusetts. Hundreds of thousands of people have participated; this October, there were 61,000 active issues on the site. In Boston, which built its own SeeClickFix-like platform, people can send concerns straight from their mobile phones to the dashboard computers of public-works trucks, meaning a click in the morning can lead to a repair by the afternoon.

Advocates of this kind of public-spirited innovation, typically known as "e-government," "we-government," or "gov 2.0," say they're employing social media and mobile technology to build not only a more responsive, collaborative, and effective government but also a more engaged citizenry and a richer civic life.

This January, a new organization called Code for America, with support from Yahoo, Microsoft, and others, will launch, aiming to leverage the idealism of a generation of young programmers, this time from within city hall. Modeled on Teach for America, it could not have arrived at a better time, given that budget deficits—half a billion dollars in L.A., nearly \$655 million in Chicago, \$3.8 billion in New York—are killing city services around the country. "This transcends political ideology," says Jennifer Pahlka, Code for America's founder. "One thing that people of different backgrounds can agree on is that government needs to get better."



Like web 2.0, gov 2.0 is a term coined by Tim O'Reilly, the founder of O'Reilly Media, who's had a hand in almost every important web trend of the past 20 years. "An innovation bubble around open government has opened up over the last few years," he says, pointing to 2005's ChicagoCrime.org, the second-ever Google Maps mashup, which tapped the city's crime blotter. Enthusiasm for this vision of a more open, participatory, and wired government coalesced around the 2008 election with the massive online movement built for Barack Obama by, among others, Blue State Digital cofounder Clay Johnson and Facebook cofounder Chris Hughes.

On his very first day in office, January 21, 2009, President Obama signed the Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government,

"YOU NEED TO PAY ATTENTION TO THE LOCAL LEVEL BECAUSE CITIES ARE IN MAJOR CRISIS. IF WE DON'T CHANGE HOW THEY WORK, THEY'RE GOING TO FAIL."

—ANDREW GREENHILL, CHIEF OF STAFF TO THE MAYOR OF TUCSON

calling on all federal government agencies to begin mapping out how to make valuable information available online and solicit public feedback. Since then, though, advocates have bemoaned the pace of progress in D.C. The response to this call for open data has been

uneven; some agencies, such as the EPA, released robust blueprints for becoming more responsive and transparent, while others have resisted any plan. Some high-profile gov 2.0 appointees have already left their government posts. “We are 20 months into the administration, and it’s time for us to begin to see some of this stuff,” says Ellen Miller, executive director of the Sunlight Foundation, the most prominent transparency advocate in Washington.

But transparency activists and programmers aren’t waiting for a superman to emerge from the capitol. Instead, folks like Pahlka are making gov 2.0 happen now—at the local level. A funny, down-to-earth, divorced mom who looks and sounds much younger than her

40 years, Pahlka is new to social entrepreneurship. Her background is in events, running the Game Developers Conference and then launching the Independent Games Festival. More recently, she worked for TechWeb, producing the Web 2.0 conference with O’Reilly Media.

In 2009, while she was working with O’Reilly on the Gov 2.0 Summit, she heard from Andrew Greenhill, chief of staff to the mayor of Tucson—who happened to be married to her childhood friend Valerie. “I was tweeting and blogging around gov 2.0,” says Pahlka, “and Andrew was telling me, ‘You need to pay attention to the local level because cities are in major crisis. Revenues are down, costs are up—if we don’t change how cities work, they’re going to fail.’”

Greenhill, a Vassar graduate with a master’s degree in English who spent two years with Teach for America, may not seem like the most likely tech advocate in government. But he had brought a customized version of SeeClickFix to Tucson, and had also helped introduce a Live BusTracker app. In 2009, he cofounded OpenTucson, a not-for-profit dedicated to developing more apps for the community. His motivation is as much financial as technoutopian. “Our entire general fund budget was at one point about \$493 million. Now it’s down to \$443 million, and we’re facing a \$51 million deficit in fiscal year 2012,” he says. “The application of technology in government can do as much as anything to make government more efficient and effective, more transparent, and more participatory and collaborative.”

Greenhill and Pahlka began discussing the outlines of what eventually became Code for America, a one-year fellowship recruiting developers to work for city government. They decided that any potential fellows would have to go through a rigorous application process, and that they would be equally ruthless in demanding buy-in from the cities they worked with. Only then would programmers be embedded in city hall, to spend a year working closely with city managers to design web solutions to public problems.

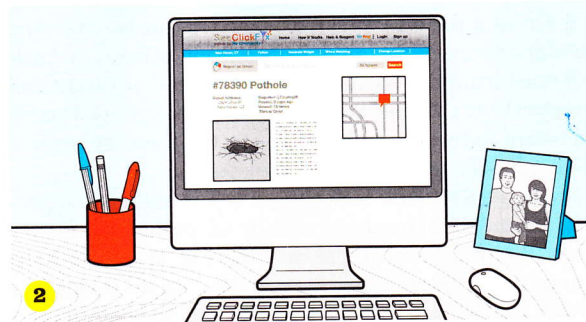
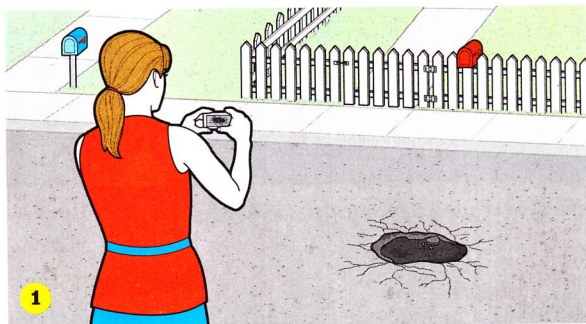
While knee-deep in planning, Pahlka attended Transparency Camp West, a brainstorming “unconference” held at Google’s Mountain View campus by the Sunlight Foundation. “I was late that day because I was busy registering Code for America’s domain name,” recalls Pahlka. “I walked in at lunch and the first person I saw was Leonard Lin.” Pahlka pitched the idea to Lin, who had been working on civic-minded projects since selling his company, Upcoming, to Yahoo in 2005, and Lin immediately shared it with his tablemates—city employees who worked on technology for Palo Alto and San Francisco. Clay Johnson, then at the Sunlight Foundation, sat within earshot. “He overheard us,” Pahlka says, “and in his deep, booming voice, really loud, said, ‘I’ll fund you for that!’” (Code for America did get seed money from Sunlight; later funding has come from the Omidyar Network and the Knight and Rockefeller foundations.)

“I’m excited for Code for America,” says Johnson, who’s since left Sunlight to blog at infovegan.com. “I think developers are often treated like people who live in their basement and don’t get out much. The stereotype gets them out of having to contribute to society as much as their skills give them the capacity to. This is a chance to get a lot of really smart people involved in changing how government operates.”

In January, the first batch of 20 fellows will be

UPRIGHT CITIZENS BRIGADE

Like a collaborative 311, SeeClickFix connects citizens to city hall—and one another—with a few simple clicks. The system is now thriving in thousands of communities. Here’s how it works.



(1) You spot a non-emergency civic issue, such as a pothole, in your community.

(2) Using a computer or mobile phone, you head to SeeClickFix to create a ticket. You geotag the problem, write a note, and upload any photos. Your ticket is sent automatically to relevant groups: city departments, neighborhood watches, utility companies.



(3) The city gets to work, fixing the problem. No more pothole.



Government Reboot: Dustin Haisler has transformed Manor, Texas, into a nationwide example of gov 2.0 technologies in action.

assigned to Boston, D.C., Philadelphia, Seattle, and Boulder, Colorado. Proposals include a platform to connect public-school students, teachers, and parents (Boston) and a new online neighborhood watch (Seattle). To ensure that solutions don't stop at the city limits, all the fellows and city managers will meet at the end of the year to share their programming code—and any lessons learned during 2011.

Pahlka thinks she can change what it means to work at city hall. "Right now, if you're a talented developer or designer, government is what you go into if you can't get a better job," she says. "We're hoping to change that story. The zeitgeist is already changing—Pew Research shows that millennials really do want to work in government. We're giving them a way to try out public service." Code for America fielded 362 applications for its first 20 slots, and the quality of applicants was high. Abhi Nemani, a 2010 graduate of Claremont McKenna College in Claremont, California, deferred a job offer from Google to serve as CFA's director of strategy and communications. "Choosing Code for America is a risk," says Nemani, "but an attractive one because of its optimism and originality. Its core idea is that a small group of talented, passionate, and, yes, risky individuals can change the world."



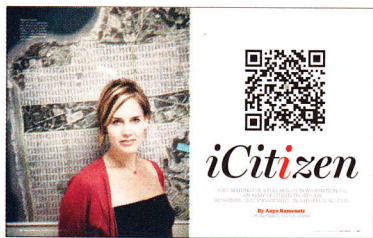
If the geeks do take over city hall, the result may be something like what's happening in the tiny town of Manor, Texas. Four years ago, the dusty Austin exurb of 6,500 didn't even own a server.

Today, it's building a nationwide reputation as an early adopter, right down to putting "beta" on the town seal. "A lot of our innovation started out of a need to survive," says Dustin Haisler, the town's assistant city manager, chief information officer, and all-around tech mastermind. "We have no commercial tax base and dwindling property-tax values. We wanted to meet our needs now, but we didn't want to finance technology—by the time you're done paying off the debt, the technology is obsolete."

So Manor uses its \$107,000 tech budget to leverage citizen participation. It became the second city to fully adopt SeeClickFix for mobile phones. It partnered with the University of Trento, in Italy, to mount matrix bar codes, called "QR codes," on all major city assets. Starting this winter, residents will be able to hold up their phone to, say, a maintenance truck and find out how much it costs and how quickly it's depreciating. Zapping the QR code on a local historical battle marker or the town water tower (made famous by the film *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*) will send info to your phone for a self-guided tour.

Discouraged that only 15 or so people would show up to regular city-council meetings, Haisler partnered with Stanford University and tech company Spigit to launch Manor Labs, a website where citizens can propose and vote on ideas to improve the town. Since October 2009, hundreds of ideas have been submitted ("Please build Manor a grocery store. . . . Dollar General just isn't cutting it!")

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is a top post, with 485 views), and roughly 2,000 people—nearly one-third of the town's population—have voiced their opinions on the site. Six ideas have been implemented, including online bill payment of city utilities and an RSS feed for public-works orders. Citizens are encouraged to vote and comment with participation points, which can be swapped for city swag like T-shirts. If anyone ever gets to a million participation points (called Innobucks), says Haisler, that person will be named mayor for a day.

"Manor has triggered a movement of municipal innovation," says Margarita Quihuis, a researcher at Stanford University, who worked with Haisler to cocreate Manor Labs. "It's changing the way citizens and government behave toward each other, from the adversarial atmosphere of a typical city-council meeting to the kind of friendly constructive brainstorming that might go on at a design firm like Ideo. We launched this with essentially no money. We're not talking about a New York City that has millions of dollars. If we can do it in Manor, that means 90% of America could do it as well."

Another Manor Labs player who is bullish on the gov 2.0 business is Paul Plushkell, chief executive of Spigit, which designs idea-management software for companies such as AT&T, Pfizer, and Southwest Airlines and created CitizenSpigit, the software behind Manor Labs. "We have experienced a significant growth in interest from all levels of government," Plushkell says, including city clients in Maryland and Arizona.

Meanwhile, Haisler, a 24-year-old father of three whose roots in the area date back to the 1800s, has been traveling the country talking about how technology has reenergized his tiny town. Manor recently extended a hand to the city of De Leon, in central Texas, to help it implement programs like Manor Labs, SeeClickFix, and better record keeping. "In government, the smaller you are, the more flexible," he says, "the easier we can adapt and implement some great changes."

OF COURSE, FOR ALL the posts and enthusiasm, folks in Manor are still waiting for that grocery store. Logistics, combined with the

reality of political stasis, can make gov 2.0 sometimes seem like a monorail of the 21st century, more hype than a real solution. And the talk of getting "smart people" involved in government can grate. Just as the infusion of thousands of bright-eyed Harvard and Brown grads into public-school classrooms for two-year stints has failed to magically transform school systems, there's an inherent arrogance detectable in the idea that folks conversant in Ruby on Rails are somehow best equipped to deal with the intractable problems faced by cities across the nation, from crack vials in playgrounds to police brutality.

"One of my criticisms of gov 2.0 thus far is that there tend to be a lot of transit apps—Where's My Bus," says Nigel Jacob of Boston's Office of New Urban Mechanics, a city-hall incubator for tech initiatives. "Those are good things, but we have a huge demographic of our city for whom their major challenge is getting access to high-quality food, or getting their kids into school. It's not so much that the developer

"It's not so much that the developer community doesn't want to tackle hard issues, they just don't know about them," says Nigel Jacob of Boston's Office of New Urban Mechanics.


community doesn't want to tackle hard issues, they just don't know about them." Entrepreneurs, he points out, are understandably used to solving problems for people like themselves, the largely upper-middle-class and educated. That's why Jacob's office is working to connect citizens who need help to the laptops of developers who can fix their problems, both online and through face-to-face meetings.

To spread beyond the early adopters, gov 2.0 will have to save real money for cities. While some e-government applications, like those that allow you to pay some speeding tickets online, do certainly save time and money, and others can improve the efficiency of city services from mass transit to EMTs, it's hard to pin down how an app that encourages people to register more complaints with city hall will save a mayor serious cash. One solution Code for America is developing, in partnership with OpenPlans.org, is an open-software exchange called Civic Commons. The network allows cities and towns to share solutions by sharing code and avoid the pricey step of writing everything from scratch.

The biggest way gov 2.0 could cut costs would be to leverage mass participation not just through voice, but through action. "I'm interested in how citizens help each other and add value in a community and lessen dependence on government," says Tucson's Greenhill, "especially in difficult economic times like these." Ideally, a civic app doesn't just make public data more visible; it makes them actionable, allowing or inviting the public to make a positive contribution. For example, in New Haven, a local carpenter saw an open ticket on SeeClickFix for park benches in need of repair. So he grabbed his tools and fixed them himself.

But the community building that happens every day on the site—and the effect that can have on everything from crime rates to local perceptions of government—is harder to quantify in dollars and cents. Citizens in New Haven started using SeeClickFix more than a year ago to report pedestrian safety problems on the Court Street bridge in the Wooster Square neighborhood. When the economy took a dive, people began reporting muggings clustered around one area. Families with the same complaints used the site as a platform to connect with one another and to lobby both local businesses and the city for better lights in the area. Finally, neighborhood activist Karri Brady printed out the SeeClickFix reports and marched into city hall. The city responded by installing permanent solar lights. At the end of September, neighbors held a party on the bridge to thank the city and SeeClickFix. The side benefit of their successful campaign was the creation of a strong neighborhood organization that has since shifted its efforts to funding outdoor activities for kids.

Depending on your generation and your perspective, you might see this as the real-world equivalent of the generosity and public-spiritedness people show online in tending a site like Wikipedia, or simply the age-old tradition of being a good neighbor.

"At this point in the evolution of our society, neither big government nor small government is possible as an outsourced, packaged service that we simply buy and forget about," Pahlka has written. "It just doesn't work. We must all learn to pull weeds when we walk." But is this really a feasible vision? "The way I feel about it is the same way I feel about most innovations," says O'Reilly. "In the short term, they don't live up to their promise. In the long term, you see how enormous the changes are." 

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