Meet Up and Mash-Up

New Models of Collaboration Rooted in Old School American Values

Building Communities:
Historic Analogies for New Models of Collaboration

During the 18th and 19th centuries, communities across America organized themselves — through intense competition among small towns that aspired to become big deals — around 3,065 county seats. Throughout the West, county seats were placed at a distance of one day's ride on horseback from each other. Implicit in the arrangement was an assumption that there were vast distances in which people would organize themselves without much (or any) direct governmental presence. Much of the country was already doing so.

In the early 1700s, when the New World settlements added up to a sparse population of just more than 3 million, neighbors came together for barn raisings — one- or two-day events during which they assembled a barn for one family in a nascent community. Volunteer barn raisings were central to community development because tradesmen were unavailable and it was more than any one family could do by themselves. The tradition continues largely unchanged in certain ethnic and religious communities and its echo can be seen in community-based housing initiatives such as Habitat for Humanity.

As towns grew and the country's population approached 4 million by 1790, so did the need for medical care. In response, religious orders and other philanthropic organizations opened charity hospitals to meet the needs of the growing communities. Many hospital names still reflect such origins, even if their ownership and control has shifted to the public or private sectors in the intervening centuries. That said, many remain as they were — including the storm-tested New Orleans Charity Hospital, the oldest operating charity hospital in America.

By 1880, when the country's population crested the 49 million mark, company towns dotted the landscape. Founded to get labor close to mines, mills and plants, company towns have been both romanticized and reviled by historians, but they were communities where people lived, worked and raised families. The towns themselves either withered when their namesake employer pulled up stakes, or evolved into more diversified, modern communities with a municipal government run by elected officials.

Scalable Government Service Delivery through Partnerships

During the 20th century when U.S. population ballooned from 76 million in 1900 to 281 million in 2000, governments remained reliant on private parties and civic organization to do the public's business. Early government efforts also relied on partnerships[1] with so-called subagents that handled routine transactions between citizens and government where there was limited or nonexistent formal governmental presence. Local merchants who also served as post masters are perhaps the best known example of these arrangements. But even today, local "mom and pop" businesses commonly act as government agents for automobile registration renewals, and bait and tackle shops remain the most popular venues for obtaining fishing and hunting licenses.

For example, the state of Utah Tax Commission and Department of Motor Vehicles have partnered with many state-approved vehicle inspection stations as diverse as Jiffy Lube, Elmer's Car Clinic and major auto dealerships to provide on-site vehicle tag renewals. Once the required emissions and safety inspections are performed, the garage technician can directly access the state system, process the renewal and provide the registration sticker to the customer before they leave the facility. Utah has given the private sector the freedom to set and adjust convenience fees in order to drive additional traffic to their businesses.[2]

Digital Barn Raising:
Playing to Strength

The introduction of the commodity Internet in the mid-1990s created new opportunities for extending and transforming governmental capacity through private hands that did the public's business. Many states contracted with private Internet companies to be online subagents for the sales of things like fishing and hunting licenses. As transactional services moved residents from in line to online, it raised a classic question about who should do what in the evolving public service delivery mix.

The question was not trivial, especially given the defining characteristic of governing in our time: public service demands are infinite, while resources are finite. A fair reading suggests that government cannot do everything that is expected by a growing, aging and more demanding population by itself.

As the demands of governing continue to grow, a number of observers (including the team of David Osborne and Peter Hutchinson) saw value in redefining the role of government more narrowly as a "'steering' (policy) organization … [that] can purchase results from any 'rowing' organizations — public or private [or civic] — that can best produce them."[3]

For its part, the Center for Digital Government has written widely about the renewal of collaboration across the public, private and civic sectors though the "decoupling of government's unique steering function and the rowing functions (the burden of which can be shared with any number and configuration of third parties) [which] increases

capacity exponentially while focusing government on its unique core competence."[4]

In *The Sawyer Principles: Digital Government Service Delivery and the Lost Art of Whitewashing a Fence*, the Center argued that, "once the data elements, business processes, and business rules of a governmental process or form have been defined, documented and published, anyone can do the work of government through a customer agent, commercial service or software product."[5] The U.S. tax code constitutes one of the more elaborate and well-documented sets of data elements, business processes and business rules.

It is therefore not surprising that in 1955, when the U.S. population was pegged at 152 million and the newly rechristened IRS discontinued its practice of preparing tax returns at no charge to taxpayers, third parties wanted to exploit the change as a business opportunity. Third parties were able to do so because the rules for filing income taxes were documented.

Henry and Richard Bloch (who subsequently changed the company name to Block because no one could spell or pronounce the original family name) transformed a small bookkeeping company into the now familiar tax preparation firm, H & R Block. Taxpayers who did not want to prepare tax returns themselves now had affordable help whose first loyalty was to them. The tax return would be completed independently of the IRS, which was the collector of revenue and enforcer of the tax code.

It is worth noting the increased level of complexity that comes with expanding rules, increasing populations and attendant rise in the volume of money flowing through the system. In 1955, tax form 1040 came with 16 pages of instructions. By 2005, those instructions had grown to 191 pages for that tax form alone. The increased complexity reinforced the need for agents to help bewildered taxpayers, be they accountants, tax preparers or software.

Tax preparation assistance eventually came out of office buildings and strip malls and entered the home through the introduction of the personal computer. Tax rules were automated and the tax software industry was born.

The heady days of the dot-com era put pressure on governments to move service delivery to the Web. It was really a call to do things differently. But rather than governments reversing the IRS's earlier decision to get out of tax preparation, the software industry responded with a new kind of digital agent. The industry automated the tax code by reducing it to computer code and created software agents that, like their human predecessors, confronted the code's complexity and made it simple for individuals to prepare and file tax returns.

Change Agents:
Poor Taxpayers Helped through Corporate Philanthropy

The automation of the tax code, coupled with an act of corporate philanthropy by the makers of the dominant tax preparation software product, was the catalyst to what is known as the Free File Alliance. More than 25 million federal returns have been filed through Free File Alliance since its debut in 2003 — at no charge — through private sector software and services companies. At current thresholds,[6] 70 percent of taxpayers are eligible to file free of charge.

The federal experience has been, in turn, a catalyst for state-level Free File Alliances among tax software companies, the IRS, state revenue agencies and importantly, civic organizations and nonprofit service organizations that work with low income and underserved taxpayers in the 20 states that have embraced the Alliance. Indeed, this public-private-civic partnership has helped raise the rate of electronic filing and helped the federal and state governments collect more of what is rightfully owed — all without having to develop their own systems or develop the related expertise. Not bad for free.

In the full scope of history, the Free File Alliance may matter most because it modeled new and noble means. It provided a model of collaboration between a regulatory agency and a services and software industry that acted on taxpayers' behalf (the efficacy of which was further amplified through a partnership with the nonprofit sector). In its design, it defied the status quo in Washington, D.C. The Alliance's legal architect, Stephen M. Ryan, said it "overcame [the] very structured approach that is normally taken to these things and [resulted in] a relatively unprecedented partnership"[7] in ways that neither expanded nor contracted the role of government. Among the Free File's other innovations was that a private-public partnership should subject the original idea to public scrutiny under the Administrative Procedure Act, and "change the program accordingly." This was a nod to the federal government process that Ryan regards as a "very important and a very small 'd' democratic way of reaching and ratifying this agreement."

Rob Atkinson, president of the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, would add another innovation. The Free File Alliance is prototypical of what Atkinson appropriately calls "turbo government" (the nod to the name of popular tax preparation software is noted). Atkinson describes turbo government as having the "potential to dramatically boost the uptake of digital government services, cut costs for both government and users, and make the experience of dealing with government less frustrating." Intermediaries such as the Alliance "can play two key roles: in building and operating function-based, and creating digital integration tools."[8]

Indeed, under this model, government taxing authorities maintain and enforce the rules while the software industry automates them to make transactions convenient and cost effective for all parties involved. The government and taxpayers reap the public benefit from the private innovation by getting easy access to proven technology and the most current information

available without having to expend tax dollars in developing duplicative infrastructure. Moreover, as nonprofit civic organizations have embraced Free File in working with disadvantaged populations in communities across the country, they have been able to extend the reach of the services in ways that public and private organizations could not have done by themselves. Such are the advantages of community-based organizations that have intimate knowledge of the communities they serve, and are nimble enough to act and adapt quickly without the burden that comes with large bureaucracies. In fact, the experience of the Alliance is that the civil sector is able to provide guidance to their larger partners in making optimal use of corporate philanthropic and taxpayer funds.

This new model of collaboration also serves to resist what Nobel Prize winning economist Joseph E. Stiglitz cautioned was a tendency in a digital economy to assume "a larger public role than in a bricks-and-mortar economy" because of "public good nature of production." A fair reading of Stiglitz suggests two reasons why government expansion need not follow the transition to digital government. The first is the risk of what Stiglitz calls "government failure [which] may be more pronounced in the context of rapidly moving information-laden markets than in traditional bricks-and-mortar markets."[9] The second is the common sense observation that it simply may not be necessary when the partners to the collaboration — public, private and civic — are each able to play to their respective strengths.

The New Language of Collaboration:
Alliances, Wikis and Mash-Ups

When previously discrete organizations play to their respective strengths — as different as they may be one from another — they avoid unnecessary duplication of effort and investment while making the unexpected, unpredicted and (sometimes) unprecedented happen. Not only does such collaboration, powered by speedy networks and robust digital technologies, multiply the quantity of work done through this channel, but the pooling of respective strengths increases quality as well. This is because the interplay among various agencies creates an environment for self-correction based on a full and multidimensional view of the opportunities, challenges and what's at stake.

Not only has the Internet been instrumental in piercing silos within government, they have "brought the walls down around government — blurring the lines between serving the citizen and helping your neighbor. In fact, if the first decade of e-government was about dot-com'ing government, the next decade may be defined as dot-gov'ing Jiffy Lube, Wal-Mart and thousands of local businesses across America." In fact, it is already happening.[10]

Indeed, with governments now facing the daunting challenge of scaling service delivery to meet the expectations of a U.S. population that exceeded 300 million in 2006, "now is the time to learn the great lessons of the Internet (massively federated with innovation at the edges), Internet search engines (massive scalability) and the Long Tail (the colloquial name for a long-known feature of statistical distributions in which the cumulative value of the long end of the distribution may exceed the concentrated mass that gets all the attention)."[11]

When new models of collaboration manifest themselves on the Internet, they are christened with names that are equal parts technological, geeky and descriptive — a *mash-up*.

While mash-ups defy a single definition, there are some common characteristics. Mash-ups are new, often more valuable and interesting Web services created at incremental cost, effort and time by combining data from two or more existing (but formerly discrete) online sources. The mash-up experience is seamless to the user, but the relationship between the mash-up and the previously discrete applications that are part of the mix is readily transparent to the developer.

It is not all in the name, but the names often tell you a great deal about what is going on underneath the covers of a Web mash-up. Take *WikiMapia.org* which, as the name suggests, mashes-up wikis and mapping to tie intensely local information to its locality. Fire stations, airports, community centers, libraries, bus stations, hospitals and businesses of all shapes and sizes have staked claims on WikiMapia to tell their stories, their way.

More than 3.5 million places have been voted into existence by members of the WikiMapia community, a nod to democratic self correction that typifies online communities. Hundreds of places have been plotted and annotated in smaller communities, such as Casper, Wyo. (113), Boise, Idaho

(197), Fargo, N.D. (335) and Des Moines, Iowa (854), while larger centers now have WikiMapia counts in the thousands — Los Angeles (5,566), Washington, D.C. (7,068), Dallas (3,085) and Seattle (4,289).

Like the real places it maps and describes, WikiMapia shows how and where public, private and nonprofit entities share a space or, more properly, make up a bigger place, together. Make no mistake, public agencies have begun taking their place here, but there is no sense of the range or availability of public services at street level — something for which mash-ups seem ideally suited. Further, mash-ups stand on the shoulders of initiatives such as the Free File Alliance in that, when parties are playing to strength, there is no need to defend turf that has never been central to one sector's function but is core to another. With lengthy negotiations and turf matters settled, the parties are freed to mash up with their respective contributions focused on those things that they do uniquely well.

For their part, governments are increasingly well-positioned to exploit these opportunities. The determined shift to service-oriented architectures (SOA) in many jurisdictions has been leading to a fuller range of possibilities that are probably not yet included in most government's strategic IT plan.

Further, it is not difficult to imagine (and not much more difficult to build) mash-ups of mash-ups that layer these combinations on top of each other. In the name of economic development, a community could start with existing online applications for tourism, real estate and shopping, add others specializing in crime statistics, air quality and school performance tracking, layer in another for finding Wi-Fi access, and then — of course — finish with a view of public facilities and services. (The eternally vigilant may want to add *globalincidentmap.com*, a disturbing icon-intensive mash-up of terror threats or incidents that gives particular attention to public infrastructures such as airports, bridges, railways and roads.)[12]

Globalincidentmap.com and other mash-ups do not have to be expert in all things. They just need to have relationships (technical and, if necessary, contractual) with parties that are expert in the specific component-things that add up to a solution greater than the sum of its parts. Perhaps that is the great lesson of the Free File Alliance. Governments brought authoritative knowledge of the tax code which the software industry did not have to replicate; the software industry had unique knowledge of how best to turn arcane tax code into intuitive computer code that government did not have to replicate; the nonprofit civic sector lacked the resources to interpret the tax code or invest in the computer code, but had intimate knowledge of the needs of underserved taxpayers who were previously out of reach for both government and industry.

This new mashed-up sense of place adds up to a new world of collaboration — even among those who have never met — where government does what it is uniquely able to do and others do the rest. It is the common sense approach in a complex country with 300 million residents.

Endnotes

1 Unfortunately, these partnerships are not well documented.

2 Todd Sander and Paul W. Taylor, *ENGAGE: Creating e-Government that Supports Commerce, Collaboration, Community and Commonwealth*, Center for Digital Government, 2007.

3 David Osborne and Peter Hutchinson, *The Price of Government: Getting the Results We Need in an Age of Permanent Fiscal Crisis*, New York: Basic Books, 2004: 13.

4 Paul W. Taylor and Richard J. Varn, *The Sawyer Principles: Digital Government Service Delivery and the Lost Art of Whitewashing a Fence*, Center for Digital Government, 2005. www.centerdigitalgov.com/publications

5 http://www.irs.gov/efile/article/0,,id=118986,00.html

6 The criteria for the 2006 tax year: an adjusted gross income of $27,000 or less (or eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit) for civilians; and an adjusted gross income of $52,000 for the armed services (Active Military, National Guard, Reserve). The threshold changes between tax preparation companies.

7 Interview with Stephen M. Ryan, Partner, Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, LLP, Washington, D.C., June 8, 2005.

8 Robert D. Atkinson, "Turbo-Charging E-Government," *Public CIO Magazine*, June 2006.

9 Joseph E. Stiglitz, Peter R. Orszag and Jonathan M. Orszag, *The Role of Government in a Digital State, A Report Commissioned by the Computer and Communications Industry Association*, October 2000: pp. 4, 36.

10 The state of Utah Tax Commission and Department of Motor Vehicles have partnered with many state-approved vehicle inspection stations as diverse as Jiffy Lube, Elmer's Car Clinic and major auto dealerships to provide on-site vehicle tag renewals. Once the required emissions and safety inspections are performed, the garage technician can directly access the state system, process the renewal and provide the registration sticker to the customer before they leave the facility. Utah has given the private sector the freedom to set and adjust convenience fees in order to drive additional traffic to their businesses. See Todd Sander and Paul W. Taylor, *ENGAGE: Creating e-Government that Supports Commerce, Collaboration, Community and Commonwealth*, Center for Digital Government, 2007.

11 Paul W. Taylor and Richard J. H. Varn, *Simple.gov: It's Time to Change the Story*, Center for Digital Government, 2007. www.centerdigitalgov.com/publications.

12 Excerpted from Paul W. Taylor, "A Renewed Sense of Place," *Government Technology*, February 2007.

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