Could you outline the National Science Foundation (NSF) Workshop on Participatory Platforms with a Public Intent and its main aim?

The Arizona State University (ASU) School of Public Affairs and Center for Policy Informatics hosted the NSF Workshop on Participatory Platforms with a Public Intent on 22 May 2012. The purpose of the workshop was to bring together a diverse group of government, business and nonprofit practitioners, faculty and students that have expertise and experience creating, participating in and studying well designed participatory platforms with a public intent. Participatory platforms are an emerging governance approach that leverage information, communication and computation technology, such as websites and social media, to engage the public in addressing relevant social issues.

The workshop consisted of micro-presentations by most of the attendees, followed by dynamic breakout discussions and group Q&A sessions. This enabled platform stakeholders to delve deeply into the critical purpose and design considerations of participatory platforms to help guide their future interdisciplinary and cross-sector systematic study and successful practice.

How will participatory platforms empower expertise and entrepreneurial enthusiasm to address shared public challenges?

It is important for participatory platforms with a public intent to not only inclusively engage individuals with diverse interests, perspectives, experiences and expertise, but to educate the public, connect people with one another and promote action. Nearly everyone wants their community to thrive and, while most have good ideas, there are few pathways to see ideas proposed by the public translate into social action. Government has developed practices that can be tough to understand and even more difficult to navigate. Engaging the public in the process of decision making can enlighten them to meaningfully contribute to social outcomes.

What is the potential impact of well designed participatory platforms?

If designed well, we believe that participatory platforms with a public intent pose an incredible opportunity to transform how we govern society by liberating information, increasing civic engagement, establishing regular interactions between government and the public in a problem-solving context and empowering individuals with the capacity to participate in the decisions and actions that affect their lives.

The ASU School of Public Affairs and Center for Policy Informatics are actively involved in designing, conducting and studying participatory platforms. Can you briefly highlight a couple?

The Policy Challenge and 10,000 Solutions are two key participatory platforms designed, conducted and studied by the ASU School of Public Affairs and Center for Policy Informatics.

The Policy Challenge was a year-long, two-stage national competition executed in 2012 in partnership with 16 public policy and administration academic and professional institutions in response to the White House Startup America Policy Challenge. It asked teams of students, faculty and practitioners to generate ideas, expertise and energy to improve their community. The key is that this participation does not go into a vacuum, but actually results in social action that improves communities.

Democratising governmental processes

The Arizona State University (ASU) School of Public Affairs and Center for Policy Informatics are studying the impact of intentional design on the quality of public participation and platform performance.

**AS THE CAPABILITIES of information, communication and computation technologies continue to increase, so do the opportunities for innovative approaches to government. Participatory platforms with a public intent provide governmental bodies and organisations new capabilities to disseminate a larger amount of public data in real-time. They also tap into the democratic surplus of the public to gather a greater diversity of local information, ideas and actions to address social issues. If well designed and responsive, participatory platforms offer pathways for government to engage, enlighten and empower the public to interact with data, identify and deliberate problems, and develop solutions**
Their hope is to develop and understand different platform models that can be applied in a variety of contexts and fields, such as education, energy, environment and health. The Policy Challenge and 10,000 Solutions are national and local platforms designed, conducted and studied by the Center that contribute to advancing this research agenda.

**MACRO LEVEL UNDERSTANDING**

One of the biggest challenges for government agencies and organisations to understand is how to design and execute participatory platforms to engage the public in collaborative efforts that are meaningful, efficiently and effectively address public issues. Johnston and his colleagues recently held a National Science Foundation (NSF)-funded workshop on participatory platforms with a public intent in an attempt to address this issue. “While nearly everyone saw the long-term promise, designing and implementing platforms in practice without understanding the ‘how’ and ‘why’ behind the approach could set the overall effort back significantly,” explains Johnston.

Since the techniques have only been in circulation for a few years, the overall effort to involve the public in decision making is somewhat disjointed, lacking cohesion and direction. For this reason, the NSF workshop put a great deal of effort into generating a dynamic discussion among platform stakeholders to collectively illuminate a macro level understanding of the principles of public participation technologies.

**DIVERSITY OF PARTICIPATION**

Researchers, practitioners and students with diverse backgrounds, expertise, experience and interests in governmental activities and information, communication and computation technology attended the NSF workshop. “The workshop helped create new connections and deepen existing relationships which can only serve to assist those involved at every level,” Johnston enthuses.

The workshop culminated in an official report, which not only provides a multidisciplinary, cross-sector appraisal of the historic trends that have brought about participatory platforms with a public intent, but also underlines their relevance for assisting good governance. The report lays out a number of important opportunities and challenges concerning issues that are important to them and society.

Ongoing studies at the ASU School of Public Affairs and Center for Policy Informatics are exploring the possible applications for this emerging governance approach, both in terms of how its design can be improved and how meaningful public participation can be integrated into regular practice. Dr Erik Johnston is leading the research efforts with doctoral students and graduate research associates Chase Treisman and Tanya Kelley. They are working in coordination with the faculty and administration at ASU and the White House, among others, to design, execute and study integrative platforms which can democratise the day-to-day governance of social spaces.

For participatory platforms with a public intent to be successfully integrated into future governmental operations, an appropriate and bespoke structural and procedural design is paramount. Participatory platforms are highly flexible. Depending on the purpose, participation can either be open to anyone or targeted to a specific audience and a variety of incentives – both monetary and non-monetary – can be employed to engage and encourage meaningful participation.

A mismatch between the purpose and design of platforms to engage the public – including what motivates the targeted participants and the incentives offered for contributing to the platform – can stunt the level and quality of participation. However, thoughtfully designing platforms to best fit its particular purpose can improve the level and quality of participation. As such, participatory platforms can be used as a democratic tool to encourage the public to take an active role in the process of governing and addressing shared challenges, resulting in the increased legitimacy, effectiveness and efficiency of governmental processes and outcomes.

The new Open Government Initiative launched by President Barack Obama demonstrates the support of government to use participatory platforms to grapple with pressing societal issues in meaningful ways. However, these platforms could lead to business-as-usual rather than an evolution of practice. Ultimately, the success of participatory platforms rests not only on how well they are designed, but the willingness of public agencies to change governance norms and practices as directed by society. Johnston and colleagues conclude: “To be effective and legitimate, governments must be willing to change the way they conduct their business.”

**OPTIMISING THE DESIGN**

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**INTELLIGENCE**

**PARTICIPATORY PLATFORMS WITH A PUBLIC INTENT: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE PRACTICES**

**OBJECTIVES**

- To bring together stakeholders from academia, government and business at the leading edge of researching and designing participatory platforms with a public intent to start a conversation exploring the diversity of design options, experiences and challenges
- To illuminate the design tensions, applications and implications of platforms that promote legitimate, effective and efficient governance processes and outcomes
- To foster an interdisciplinary and cross-sector community of practice that advances the systematic research of participatory platform design and its successful practice across diverse communities, contexts and uses

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**TANYA M KELLEY** is a PhD student and Research Associate at the ASU School of Public Affairs and Center for Policy Informatics. She is part of an NSF-funded research team studying the ASU–led 10,000 Solutions platform, and is actively engaged in conducting and researching participatory platforms. Her research interests are in policy informatics, participatory democracy, online participatory platforms, design and participatory outcomes and public and governance collaborations.

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