
Collaborative Commons: Civic Tech in Toronto

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Introduction

In July 2020, Civic Tech Toronto (CTTO) celebrated its 250th weekly hacknight and its 5th year of existence. Since 2015, CTTO has carved out a space for residents and visitors to come together to learn and collaborate on shared matters of concern. In this time, CTTO has consistently offered a space for projects, for speakers, and for community to emerge. My research examines the way that 'civic' or 'public interest' technology practise occurs in Toronto, a large metropolitan city in Canada. CTTO has organized weekly hacknights where participants to work on civic technology projects, and brings civilians and public servants into direct and sometimes sustained contact. I offer to the workshop reflections and preliminary findings based on a year of action research as an organizer in CTTO, including interviews with participants, workshops, and participant observation.

The work of building democratic institutions can be adequately described as (but not reduced to) a process of sociotechnical systems design. Government institutions seeking to improve their policy-making processes now frequently turn to computer-supported practises in order to include citizens in a more participatory way. The technical and situational expertise of citizens suggests they can be extremely valuable collaborators in policy-making[12, 6], both in terms of their epistemic contributions, and to the democratic legitimacy that participatory governance can help to build. How-

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Sidebar 1: Phases of CSP[9]

Creativity

Researcher builds understanding of the situation alongside participants using modelling techniques, interviews, etc

Choice

Participants choose a framing and approach to an aspect of the situation (potentially including specific techniques from systems thinking)

Implementation

Participants agree on a course of action, and undertake to enact it

Reflection

Researchers reflect on the other phases, both throughout involvement, and at the conclusion of the action research

ever, it is not enough to design a system to receive public contribution; the way that those interactions are structured will determine what interactions can take place[7], and the processes by which these contributions become decisions must be accepted as legitimate. Relationships of power and expertise can still inhere in 'participatory' or 'co-designed' processes, especially when corporate and governmental entities seek to maintain control of the agenda, which can be described as "pseudo-participation" [14]. For example, Sidewalk Labs and Waterfront Toronto ran a robust consultation process that spanned over years, but without really ceding any control over decision-making[11].

Civic technology is not merely about using (or designing) digital tools to interact with institutions (or to circumvent them), it is also about the production, discussion and development of technologies *as a form of civic engagement*. In other words, civic technology describes processes just as much as it does products, and for some, the prioritization of process over product is a defining feature[15]. Focusing on civic technology groups, such as CTTO, as well as civic technologies, can show us how community and cooperation are essential to realizing the democratic potentials of civic technology.

Methodology and Workshop Themes

CTTO hacknights are a construction of space and time where civilians offer their views or expertise on matters of public interest, and actively work to address these matters through voluntary commitment to ongoing projects and discussions. Reproducing this space is key to creating and maintaining relationships between civilians and the state[10]. In this respect, studying civic technology practise requires approaches to observe and analyze gatherings that constitute and maintain the group, and to understand the technologies that enable their cooperation. However,

focusing on a single site for this research poses risks, especially if our singular case excludes other examples of contemporary practise, omits the way that the CTTO community relates to other similar communities, or where critical reflection is lacking.

To structure this engagement, I have adopted the methodology of Critical Systems Practise[9] (CSP), which has four nonlinear phases: Creativity, Choice, Implementation and Reflection (see Sidebar 1). I have conducted the research as two phases of CSP, the first intended to prime a theoretical, social, and geographic understanding of the state, or situation, of civic technology in Toronto, and a second phase focused on intervention and participation within CTTO. Below, I provide a bit more detail on the research process, relating it specifically to the workshop themes.

Social Worlds and Situational Analysis – Locality and Infrastructure

CTTO is not the only group in Toronto that centres their discourse on 'technology', or that makes technology development or deployment core to their practise. Furthermore, in some cases CTTO's goal is less to intervene in a specific situation *per se*, but to create the conditions by which participants can address situations, often, but not always, with computational or design interventions. Using 'situational analysis' (SA) methods from Science and Technology Studies (STS)[4], I explore how CTTO is located within a larger social arena of contemporary and historical groups in Toronto using technology and design practises to address matters of shared concern. By describing the relationships amongst these groups, as well as with public institutions, I believe that researchers and practitioners can explore if and how public service organizations can build empowering and democratic ways of interaction.

SA has proven quite useful for explaining some of the particulars of my localized case. In particular, the concept of a *social world*, composed of participants operating and working together to address matters of shared concern, supported by “shared discursive spaces”[4, 16, 17] has allowed me to explore how CTTO bridges gaps between professionals, public servants, laypeople, and activists. CTTO has, at least at times, created a uniquely heterogeneous space for projects to form, to grow, and even to outgrow CTTO entirely. Part of my work has been to reveal a history of connections and collaborations. In particular, this has meant examining how the community, in terms of hacknights and projects, interact with government. In some cases, this has been based on formalized partnerships, the in other cases, has been based on the informal overlap between CTTO members and the government. There are many interesting examples from CTTO to compare and critique.

Action Research – Methods and Strategies

Cooperative work is central to CTTO, required to intervene in an identified situation through a process of ‘making’ where information systems or other technology products are created to serve some purpose, or to explore a specific topic. I also adopt a methodological framing from Soft Systems Methodology[2, 3] (SSM) which connects action research to the elicitation of emergent research themes, and is well suited to CTTO as a group. This environment is highly pluralist, consensual, based around personal choice, discussion amongst peers, and the need to continually maintain work on projects as well as to maintain the group as a whole. In that spirit, my research has situated me in CTTO as a participant, where my research agenda advances in light of conversations with participants, and my understanding of the groups organization is in part constituted by the experience of doing the work of organizing events, booking speakers, running projects, conducting

outreach, etc.

In this capacity, I argue that CTTO can be productively considered as a sort of commons, where the reproduction of the community assures that the goal of producing more social relations is assured[8]. Distinct from public and private ways of governance, commons are governed by the communities that use them[13, 1]. In this case, CTTO produces community as a resources which can be contributed to, and drawn on, by any participant. Volunteers organizers work to reproduce the hacknights, and to do so in such a way that is consensual (because voluntary commitment is required), and transmissible, as organizing roles are in continual churn, with the average tenure between 6 months and a year. In particular, workshop participants may be interested in hearing about CTTO’s hard pivot from in person to virtual hacknights in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has forced the group to systematically reconsider the hacknights in terms of purpose, accessibility, and community support. They may also be interested in hearing how online assets support the in-person hacknights, in some cases allowing them to be run with minimal effort, while at other times becoming a major support for transformation and community organizing.

Closing

The Relational State[5] neatly underscores a key problematic of democratic governance that the workshop draws attention to. Are states actually the kind of entities that can relate directly with citizens, or should they focus on supporting local improvements in diverse and pluralistic contexts through common institutional standards that allow citizens to pursue much of this work themselves? The thematic tension here is one of centralization and decentralization: should civic tech groups orbit around the state, addressing themselves to a central bureaucracy, or do they manage to

achieve their goals and projects with a more autonomous relationship with regimes of policy-making and allocation of resources?

Either way, the need to develop and document practises, relationships, and activities for engagement, as well as the technological objects to support them, is key to realizing the democratic potential of civic tech. The character of these relationships matters, especially when we consider how these practises might constitute enduring features within our societies. I look forward to discussing how trust can be built between civic commons and public institutions, particularly insofar as trusting commoners means giving them power and responsibility to address civic issues. In general, I believe I would be a suitable participant in the workshops, and really look forward to meeting more scholars engaged in civic tech research, and to become acquainted with the CSCW community.

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