

Tower 08 Speech by Tom Watson MP, Minister for Transformational Government, Monday 10th March 2008

Thank you for your kind introduction and invitation today.

My argument today is this:

That technology enables Government to achieve two seemingly contradictory goals - collaborate at scale and deliver services to citizens with pinpoint accuracy.

That this offers a new relationship between government and citizen - genuinely government of the people.

And finally that this offers challenges that we need to be very careful to understand and meet - but that it presents still more opportunities.

But before I do, I'd like to tell you a bit about myself and what I want to do with this new job, and I want to thank you.

Thank you for your commitment and enthusiasm in the work that you do.

You are all in this room today because you "get it".

You know that the way that government configures public services is going to change beyond comprehension in years to come and you want to be part of it.

We all of us in this room understand the possibilities of technological advance.

Our challenge is to use it to make a difference to the lives of people we are all here to serve.

I began to understand the change going on in the world when I set up a political blog five years ago.

At the time it was seen as a radical act. People could not believe that I had opened myself up to such scrutiny and occasional daily abuse. I sometimes still wonder about that bit myself.

But the blog broke down the walls between legislators and electors in a way that interested me so I persevered.

Yesterday I read with regret the story of an anonymous civil servant blogger by the name of Civil Serf. Her enjoyable and bluntly written blog about life in Whitehall was taken down, after it came to the attention of the national press. Now, I'm not going to say that we should tear up the civil service code, it's very important that Civil Servants play by the rules, nor do I agree with everything she says, but surely a truly transformed government would be one in which speaking engagingly about life in our public services would be far from newsworthy, and far from career wrecking.

When the MySociety people established the theyworkforyou web site, I began to understand how the old order of things was going to change.

Put simply, I began to understand the power of information.

So let me tell you where I stand.

I believe in the power of mass collaboration.

I believe that as James Surowiecki says the many are smarter than the few.

I believe that the old hierarchies in which government policy is made and crucially for you in this room the way in which it is delivered - are going to change for ever.

People tell me that we are entering a post-bureaucratic age. I don't accept that. It's just old thinking - laissez faire ideas with a new badge.

The future of government is to provide tools for empowerment, not to sit back and hope that laissez-faire adhococracy will suffice.

And as Kevin Kelly says the bottom is not enough.

A post bureaucratic age misunderstands the idea of an enabling state one that moderates collaborative activity for a shared social good.

The collaborative state still requires leaders and enablers, doers and thinkers. It still requires public services but services with boundaries porous to external ideas.

I could go on to talk about how ideologies that fail to comprehend the power of sharing, where activity is motivated by non-market production or where, as Stephen Weber says the traditional notions of property rights are inverted - are doomed to extinction, but this is perhaps another speech for a different audience.

Today though, we are going to talk about some smart ideas for the future.

Less than a decade ago, people were just recipients of information, they got what they were given when they were given it.

Today, the most successful websites are those that bring together content created by the people who use them and, crucially, they do at scale.

Mrs Watson is a regular user of Netmums. A quarter of a million people provide I've been there advice to parents and parents-to-be.

Imagine if 100,000 mums decided to meet at Wembley Stadium to discuss the best way to bring up their kids. Midwives would be there dispensing advice. Health visitors, nursery teachers, welfare rights advisers would be there. Even politicians would try and get in on the act.

But when twice this number choose to meet together in the same place online, we just ignore them. That's going to have to change.

Or take YouTube. 8 hours of content are uploaded every minute. Astonishing for a site only two and a half years old.

I could go on. Flickr. Digg. MySpace. Each one is a platform for mass collaboration with the users in charge.

So what does this mean for us in Government?

First, we operate at scale. Government is Britain's biggest organisation. A vast social enterprise, dwarfing any private sector organisation.

- Orange has 17 million customers. We've got four times that.
- HSBC operates in 83 countries. The Foreign Office in 144.
- Tesco has 1,200 stores. The Department for Children, School and Families oversees 23,000 schools. And that's just one department, and just one of its responsibilities.

Second, Government cannot pick and choose its 60 million customers. Our services need to be fair and accessible to all and we know that one size fits all is no longer acceptable.

But we also need to transform not only our services but also our thinking:

* the Henley Centre found 4 out of 10 of people think time is the most valuable one resource in their lives, and that half of us think we have too little of it. Yet too often public services treat people as though their time is not important.

* we need to design our services around what citizens want and need, and around how they now live their lives, rather than around the silos of government and the self-interests of delivery agencies.

* we need to get things right first time every time not just because it's the right thing to do but also because it is self-evidently cheaper to do something once rather than twice or as Sir David Varney's report said, 44 times.

I am convinced that this is the way to go. Citizens now have the ability and the appetite to use government services and information online.

Just ask the 9 million who renew their car tax online and the 7 million visitors a month to Directgov.

This is a virtuous circle. By helping those who want to use our services on the internet do so, we can redesign our other delivery channels so that they better serve those who cannot or choose not to use the web.

This is not just theory the best public service delivery agencies are already doing it.

Look at the remarkable work in Lambeth Council's new customer centre. Residents can access nearly all the council's services under one roof as well as being able to access Lambeth's online services.

By offering internet options, supporting customers in their use and bringing services together Lambeth residents now have a much better and efficient public services.

And thank you for sharing your ideas in response to my email last week.

* Paul Davidson from Sedgemoor said that we need to talk not just about designing services around the needs of citizens but about empowering citizens to design services around themselves. I like that.

* Bob Evans of the Serious Fraud Office said that the vision should be that the boring bureaucracy is done for us by technology so that we have the time to do our real jobs I like that.

* And Robert Crawford of the Institute of Customer Service said that people in public service should be allowed to use their ingenuity and common sense to serve the public to the best of their ability .I like that too.

What's more you sent me more examples of putting these principles into practice. I look forward to learning more about them:

* telecare systems in Rotherham and telemonitoring systems in Southend

* use of Directgov in combination with other channels for the innovative marketing of the Government's new Education Maintenance Allowance.

* Experience Based Design where patients and staff actually work together to redesign health services about which Lynne Maher is talking later in the conference.

* use of technology to improve value for money in procurement from e-marketplace in Essex to X-changewales in Wales.

Well done and keep it coming!

This is all good stuff. But it's really only scraping the surface of what we could achieve.

The fact is that public services have not been making the transition quickly enough.

I see my job as helping you to accelerate the pace of change. Over the next few months, we will be

- pushing through the closure of our hundreds of unnecessary websites.
- improving our online content including minimum standards for the content of remaining websites.
- Ensuring that all content held on government web sites is fully accessible to the major search engines.
- Embedding data mash-up into thinking across all of government not just the early adopters within departments.

Driving through the cultural change in all our communications that sees the internet, mobile and other new media as the norm

- ensuring better innovation and much faster implementation. Build stuff small, test it out then iterate, iterate, iterate.
- capturing the skills, talent and energy we need for change - from within the public service and from outside. Over the next few weeks I hope to say more on this.
- using new media to engage more directly and more effectively with individuals and communities.

And the most frequent question my civil servants will hear from me is Why not??

If you want to know what underpins my thinking, I would ask you all to read the Power of Information report. To me it touches on a fundamental design principle for everything we do.

Our customers are used to being able to access information and services when and where they want to. And to shape them too.

That's why Tom Steinberg and Ed Mayo's Power of Information report is so significant.

Because it recognizes the huge opportunities offered by this new relationship between technology and information.

Good use of information enables services themselves to work more efficiently and effectively. Good information systems are the basis for providing more tailored, personalised, and accessible services.

We've already started to implement many of the recommendations since the Power of Information was published last year and I will shortly be reporting on progress to parliament.

And as the PM said in his Liberty speech it is the public's information.

There are circumstances where public servants have to act as the custodians of people's data. But there are others where this is simply no longer necessary - where we really should just give it back.

Make it freely available to a wider community to find solutions to problems we can't even begin to imagine.

There are three rules of open source: One, nobody owns it. Two, everybody uses it. And three, anyone can improve it.

Our future thinking must view government more like a giant open source community. So far government ticks boxes one and two no one person owns it and everybody uses it.

Our task is to crack the elusive point three ensure that every citizen has the ability to improve it.

But imagine what could be achieved if we could.

Just imagine if every incident of crime could be geographically tagged. It could transform community policing.

Or what could be achieved if the travel times of every bus in Britain for the last ten years could be handed over in an API that can be mashed up with peak traffic flows on every UK Road.

The possibilities are endless. That's why I'd like to commend Vanessa Lawrence of Ordnance Survey for trialing a new licensing system for mapping data. Her brave step will be the first of many made in years to come.

There will be hurdles and barriers along the way. I do not want to prejudge the O'Donnell review on the security of Data Handling or the Data Sharing Review by Richard Thomas and Mark Walport.

But we need to build public trust and confidence in how we handle data and when we share it. We need to be more transparent about what we are doing, and make a stronger case for how data sharing benefits people.

And as Gus O'Donnell's interim report made clear, agencies need to be more accountable for how they handle data.

I have this hunch that for every civil-libertarian who is furrowing a brow about government departments sharing data, there are 20 customers tearing their hair out that we make them join up the gaps themselves.

Only this weekend retired engineer visited me at a constituency surgery to complain about the number of times he had to write to a department about a matter involving a loved one.

He used to design fuel delivery systems for car and plane engines. The golden rule he said, was to have only one point of entry. Why can't you do that with government services he said?

Now, I know there are lots of reasons why government services can't work like that but his point was essentially one we all have to understand: citizens do not distinguish between government departments in the way we do. Many of them do not even distinguish between services provided by central and local government.

Truly customer focused services are going to have to cross departmental borders.

That's why I'm delighted to be part of today's launch of the standard designed to help public services deliver the culture change we all want to see.

Customer Service Excellence will give organisations the tools to assess their current service and identify ways in which they can improve.

I hope you find today's workshop on the new standard of interest and use to your organisation.

Many hard working public servants deserve our thanks for making this new standard the success I'm sure it's going to be.

I'm pleased to say the Cabinet Office will be working to ensure we meet the Customer Service Excellence standard as soon as possible.

I want to conclude by reflecting on a law that has underpinned the business models of many of the world leading technology companies. I think it will help you picture the scale of change we are going to contend with over the next decade.

Kryder's law states that digital storage space will double every 13 months, or about 1,000 times over just over a decade.

Ten years ago, I had a Discman and a few hundred CDs. It was a big collection.

Today, my iPod holds thousands of songs, including nearly everything ever written by the Jam.

According to Kryder, by 2012 my iPod will be able to carry a year of video on it with no repeats.

By 2015, it will hold all of the commercial music every produced.

By 2019, it could carry a lifetime of video, 85 years of it.

And somewhere around 2020, just 14 years away, all the content every produced could be stored on a device that fits into my pocket.

Back in 2000, at the launch of UKOnline, Tony Blair described the potential of the internet as profound. He said What is happening is no dot.com fad that will come and go. It is a revolution.

But I don't think, even those few years ago, he could have predicted the changes that all of us in this room will contend with when it comes to providing services to citizens and customers.

But this is a story of opportunities, not of problems.

I'm making it my job to seize those opportunities.

I know you will too.