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SMART CITIES AND SHARING CITIES:

How to foster collaborative local public services

An interview with Elisabeth Lulin

Managing Director of Paradigmes et cætera, a research and consulting company



Elisabeth Lulin founded Paradigmes et cætera, a research and consulting company specialising in forward-looking studies and innovation, in 1998. Before starting the business she continues to head up today, Elisabeth Lulin was a senior civil servant. She began her career at the French Inspection Générale des Finances, served under prime ministers Edouard Balladur and Alain Juppé as special advisor then technical advisor, and ran the external communication and marketing department at INSEE, the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies. She also works with several think tanks in France and abroad including the Aspen Institute France (inter alia as chair from 2007 to 2010), Futurbulences (as chair) and the Lisbon Council (as board member).

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At a time when traditional public service is struggling for financial, social and even political reasons, public-service co-production by governments and citizens seems poised to emerge as an alternative model for public administration. The advent of new technologies and the population density inherent in cities seem likely to pave the way for new participatory public services. Elisabeth Lulin provides real-life examples of community-based websites and applications to shed light on the concept underlying “Public Service 2.0”.

David Ménascé: You've been promoting an alternative public-service model, which you call "public service 2.0", for several years now. The idea basically revolves around users co-producing services, and digital technologies are opening up exciting opportunities for this type of model to flourish. Can you tell us more about this concept?

Elisabeth Lulin: Sure. Public service 2.0 is a model where citizens co-produce a number of public services. The goal is to build systems where people do more than just use public services: they also use their skills, talents and time to help provide public services.

In Switzerland, for instance, there is a very simple system to encourage mutual aid. People living in a village or a neighbourhood can stick pictograms on their letterboxes or front doors to tell others about any services they are willing to provide within the community (lending a drill, helping children with their homework, etc.).

MySOS is a similar idea, but uses digital tools. It's a civic social network that people can use in an emergency in France. It's an app you can use if you're in danger, to warn the people you have listed and the relevant rescue services. So you can use this platform to alert everyone who is willing to help you, in seconds. And you can also sign up as a "guardian angel" to help other people in the network when they need it.

The interesting thing here is that public service 2.0 is a third option. It steps in when the public sector is unable to help (for financial or practical reasons) and the private sector is uninclined to provide a service (because the market is too small or not lucrative enough). The goal, here, is not to create brand new collaborative public services in areas where the traditional public sector is already doing a good job: it's to use this approach in specific areas on the fringes of the services that others are already providing.

D.M.: Do you think cities are the best scale to provide participatory public services? In other words, is the public service 2.0 you are championing mainly supposed to target municipalities and cities?

E.L.: Yes. Most of these initiatives – which can be for-profit, not-for-profit or relate to the social and solidarity economy in other ways – are actually emerging in cities today. For a simple reason: these services work better when the population density – meaning the number of people on the supply side and demand sides – is higher.

But they don't just work on a citywide scale: the possibility of networking cities is also opening up very exciting opportunities for these services to proliferate. Some apps actually got off the ground when they started connecting cities. In the UK, for instance, you have Spice Time Credits, a digital system you can use to earn points every time you help someone out through the platform. And, if you don't use your points, you can now give them to someone who will – usually an elderly relative living in another city. So you can see this kind of inter-city network effect at work there.

D.M.: The public service 2.0 approach you are talking about sounds very bottom-up. It's the people themselves who set things in motion. Does that always work? What role can local government play in the production of these new types of public services?

E.L.: Yes, the bottom-up approach is essential – but it's nowhere near enough by itself. These initiatives are very fragile without proper channels or matchmaking mechanisms to encourage people to opt in. So the challenge is to connect the services that people co-produce with the issues public service is addressing. The big issue here is service continuity.

From this perspective, "platform tooling" is essential. One of the main things that the public sector can do is supply initiatives with the structures and tools they need to thrive. The government-as-a-platform concept was developed in 2009 by Tim O'Reilly¹, an Internet theorist who also coined the term "2.0". What he says is that, when government provides a platform that puts people and the administration in touch with each other, it can coordinate collective action among citizens. Following his line of thought, a public-service platform is a tangible or intangible piece of infrastructure that helps people contribute and get involved – i.e. produce and consume services – and consolidates their contributions.

One great example of the role that these platforms should play, including the bottom-up approach, is participatory science. Vigie Nature is one of the many participatory science programmes out there today. The Muséum Nationale d'Histoire Naturelle is running this platform to provide everyone with an opportunity to further research by observing biodiversity. Vigie Nature gives you a set of simple, solid tools (instructions, scientific protocols, reporting forms, etc.), which are essential to help people who are not professional researchers to contribute.

On the other hand, many cities that embarked on open-data policies to share a wealth of data with the public are having trouble now. This shows that intermediation and proper tools are important. If you throw a mass of raw data at people, they can't do much with it. It's the same with carpooling: for the system to work on a large scale, someone had to invent the Blablacar platform to provide a proper framework and make the service convenient.

¹ Tim O'Reilly, "Gov 2.0: The Promise of Innovation", Forbes, 10 August 2009

“PUBLIC SERVICE 2.0 IS A THIRD OPTION. IT STEPS IN WHEN THE PUBLIC SECTOR IS UNABLE TO HELP AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR IS UNINCLINED TO PROVIDE A SERVICE.”

D.M.: Do you think communities – especially cities – are in the best position to provide this kind of service? Couldn't private platforms do it just as well, or maybe even more efficiently?

E.L.: Well, we can always make believe public services aren't there and try to imagine the whole system from scratch. But would that really be the most productive way to go about it? We're starting with something that's already there, up and running, and which will be there for a long time. It makes more sense to think about how we might improve the time-tested foundation we already have.

There are at least two reasons why governments should take over digital tools to develop service platforms in-house rather than let someone outside do it: (1) the public sector is in a position to provide a service that the private sector is reluctant to provide because it will have trouble monetising it, and to build enduring economically sound models, and (2) cities need to keep control over a few key areas or they'll lose their sovereignty.

Carpooling is an example of the first reason: Blablacar did a fantastic job making money from long-distance prearranged carpooling services. But many startups tried and failed to move into the short-distance non-prearranged carpooling market. And many of the issues the public sector is trying to deal with have to do with short-distance non-prearranged travel, precisely. Then Ecov, a French startup established at the end of 2014, managed to find a model and signed its first partnership agreement with Val d'Oise departmental council. This partnership includes a €150,000 subsidy to set up stops for local non-prearranged carpooling services near secondary schools, suitable signposting and bays for passengers to get in and out of cars safely. This service also blends into the local travel scheme. So the public sector stepped into this market where it's not easy to monetise services, and played a vital role. And the subsidy it granted is only a fraction of what it would have had to pay to provide public transport services for those schools. In this case, the fact that the public sector got involved turned the situation into a win-win deal.

D.M.: Where does that leave the public sector's responsibility for control and regulation?

E.L.: Municipalities have every reason to keep an eye on new platforms emerging from the collaborative economy, to make sure that those platforms provide proper public services and, most importantly, that they don't undercut the council's sovereignty. It's interesting to look at two initiatives, reflecting very different attitudes, in Boston and Columbus. The mayor of Boston organised a mobile app connected to a digital map – Citizen Connect – that anyone in the city can use to report and geolocate any problems on the streets (graffiti, broken lights, etc.). Boston developed this app in-house so it still owns the data. Columbus, Ohio, on the other hand, ran a call for tenders to improve mobility in the city and decided to team up with Sidewalk Lab (Alphabet/Google). But Google stipulated a number of conditions: it wanted to be able to decide what modes of transport it would use and embed a payment platform. So, if a bus stop is crowded, Sidewalk Lab can decide to send chauffeur-driven cars to pick up some of the passengers. The problem is that the day Sidewalk Lab decides to pull out, Columbus will have nothing. This is one example of the technological dependence that can appear.

I can think of another example: privately-developed apps such as Waze raise issues relating to a city's sovereignty. Waze tells users what alternate routes they can take to get to where they need to go. The thing is that the algorithms that calculate these backroad routes don't factor what the municipality wants into the equation. So, for example, they could route more traffic onto roads where the city wants less traffic (near primary schools or kindergartens for instance) or onto roads that need repairs. If the council can't have a say on the routes that Waze recommends, it is de-facto relinquishing some of its power over traffic in its city.

D.M.: In what other ways can the public sector do a better job than other players?

E.L.: In a society that has trust issues, most people still look to the public sector as a trusted third-party that guarantees universal rights and equal opportunity. That's not entirely the case but it's the goal.

The main advantage of Pôle Emploi (the French government-run job centres), for example, is that they endorse vacancies. Pôle Emploi checks every vacancy it advertises, so it's safe to assume that the job will comply with employment legislation, that there will be no discrimination in the recruitment process, etc. It's true that other channels may be very efficient but they don't provide the same kind of guarantees. You can argue that mechanisms to score and rank those channels could serve the same purpose as official endorsement but there's still a long way to go before we can rely 100% on these new mechanisms to build trust in the system. There will be plenty of room for both models for a long time.

The public sector is also at the centre of the value chain that collaborative models are trying to enhance or improve. For instance, hospital-patient unions can do a great job when it comes to defending their general interests without necessarily being active in a community. But, when one of their members needs medical care,

they can do a lot more when they have a direct line to the nearest hospital. Collaborative initiatives usually work best at local levels (meaning in a local school rather than the ministry of education, a local hospital rather than the ministry of health and so forth).

D.M.: If people have little or no financial incentives to get involved, how can you encourage them to help out with one of the cornerstones of France's public service, i.e. service continuity? And do you think that the fact that stewardship is in public or private hands will make a difference in the way people will contribute?

E.L.: The key to prompt people to get involved is to foster their sense of community. That is what encourages them to serve interests beyond their own. The public sector holds sway precisely because it can nurture this shared sense of belonging more than anyone else. Private-sector businesses can do a great job but, at the end of the day, people will always tend to see themselves as customers, not as members of a community. And the local level is the best place to kindle this sense of community, by harnessing local pride.

That said, some companies have managed to create very strong bonds. Blablacar is a great example. It opened an online forum where new users can ask questions and experienced users can answer them pro-bono. Today, more than 90% of the questions that people post on this forum are answered in seconds! That's much faster than any professional customer service system can respond.

But there are other ways to motivate people to contribute to participatory public services. Gamification, one of them, encourages people to opt in by providing a symbolic reward and using fun. That's a powerful tool. The Fun Theory, an experimental action-research programme in Sweden, has shown that this works in several ways. To encourage Swedes to recycle glass, for example, they have developed "smart" bins that make jackpot-like sounds when people drop the right kind of items in them. In Australia, ticket-stamping machines enter passengers in a lottery, meaning passengers get a chance to win a prize every time they stamp their ticket on the bus.

Social currencies are another way of rewarding contributions. When he was mayor of New York, Michael Bloomberg introduced a time bank, under the NYC Service initiative, in several boroughs. So anyone who spends a few hours providing a community service can use their account for similar services they need in return.

These mechanisms are important, and complement the feeling of belonging in a community. But you need to innovate a lot if you want them to keep on working over the long term.

D.M.: Your study² on public service 2.0 was published three years ago, in 2013. Do you feel that mayors and councils have warmed to the idea of participatory public service since then?

E.L.: Yes. We've seen some significant steps in the right direction. A few years back, central and local governments were very uncomfortable with this idea. They were worried it would undermine their legitimacy and authority or simply zap their control over the services they provided. Today, there are several experiments underway, led by startups (the Ecov carpooling app and other cutting-edge solutions) and led by public authorities. Voisins Vigilants, for example, is a neighbourhood-watch platform that puts people living in the same neighbourhood in touch with each other to help prevent burglaries. So, for example, people can let their neighbours know when they will be away on holidays, send alerts if they see anything suspicious, etc. Hundreds of French mayors are supporting this initiative and the interior ministry has backed it.

At central government level, the Secrétariat Général pour la Modernisation de l'Action Publique (SGMAP) has introduced a number of programmes, including Futurs Publics (basically using design-thinking methods to revamp service processes, often including a collaborative component). Over in the digital arena, Etalab is running about 30 projects – called Start-ups d'Etat (State startups) – in many cases using open data and digital architectures to devise new services or simplify existing procedures by focusing on the bottlenecks (for example complex administrative protocols).

In a similar move, the CNAF (the family branch of the French social security system) organised a hackathon for 17 developer teams in October 2015, for its 70th anniversary. All the projects that came out on top included a collaborative element. One of the projects, WeCAF, for example, involved a search engine for beneficiaries to get in touch with each other and help each other out.

So the public sector is starting to understand this collaborative component and to feel comfortable with the idea. But of course we still have to take it further and move faster. And, most importantly, an administrative ecosystem where system thinking and conforming have traditionally prevailed needs to embrace a more experimental approach that involves a lot of learning through trial and error.

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2 Elisabeth Lulin, "Service Public 2.0", L'Institut de l'Entreprise, July 2013