Enough of Experts:
Data, democracy and the future of expertise

Professor Beth Simone Noveck
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Beth Simone Noveck is the Rogatz Visiting Professor at Yale Law School and Hultin Global Network Professor at New York University’s Tandon School of Engineering, where she directs The Governance Lab. Her research, teaching and activism focus on the impact of technology on public institutions and solving public problems. Beth served in the White House as the first United States Deputy Chief Technology Officer and director of the White House Open Government Initiative (2009-2011). Former UK Prime Minister David Cameron appointed her senior advisor for Open Government, and she served on the Obama-Biden transition team.

INTERRODUCTION

I want to talk about the failings of closed door governance that have, in part, led to a Trump victory but, above all, what to do about them by taking advantage of new technology to create open systems of governing that are both more legitimate and more effective.

Dangerously today, we lack public institutions – a participatory bureaucracy and open parliamentary processes – that know how to tap into the collective intelligence of our communities and draw power from the participation of the many rather than the participation of the few. I would argue that it is in the absence of those more open institutions in which we can participate as equals, this failure to create concrete, specific and workable mental models for taking account of the views and voices and know-how (the citizen expertise) of the many disaffected people who voted and the many who did not during Brexit and the US presidential election, that a vacuum arises that charismatic demagogues end up filling.

As much as the economy and immigration are causing distress and resentment, I consider that it is the failure to reimagine and reinvent our governing institutions that is equally at fault for the populist backlash.

My hope therefore is to shed some light on how we might create the bridge from today’s closed institutions to tomorrow’s more open and collaborative ones.

THE POPULIST BACKLASH

Right now President Elect Trump is gearing up to appoint an almost all-male cabinet comprised of Trump-loyalists and big donors whom the New York Times editorial page refers to as “hacks and flatterers.” There are those with experience, mostly recycled Republican ideologues like Senator Jeff Sessions. Once deemed too racist to be appointed to a judgeship, he is being put forward as the person to head the Justice Department and enforce civil rights and liberties in the United States. Former General Michael Flynn will become the national security advisor. Though a distinguished combat leader, Flynn was fired from the Obama Administration in 2014 for being an abusive manager and a fanatical Islamophobe, whose loose command of the truth gave rise to the term ‘Flynn Facts’.

Congressman Mike Pompeo, who will head the CIA, is not without qualifications. But expertise has little to do with the proposed appointments. Pompeo was a staunch Trump supporter from the “lock her up” anti-Hillary camp. Even Sarah Palin – notorious for her “drill baby, drill” anti-environmental positions – is on a short list to head the Department of the Interior, an appointments list that includes Goldman Sachs bankers and venture capitalists and others with no governing experience.

None of this is any surprise from one of the most inexperienced of people to run for political office in modern times who has labelled global warming a ‘Chinese Hoax’ and whose campaign for President was punctuated (and thrived in terms of media attention it garnered) by his willingness to play fast and loose with facts.

Tellingly, Trump has named his national security and CIA picks before choosing the foreign minister or the treasury secretary, offering an early indication of his priorities. Nonetheless the world still knows very little about what President Trump’s plans are.

What we do know is that, despite complaints about government dysfunction, Trump has no strategy or position on how to fix government save his most recent ‘kill-two-regulations-for-every-new-one enacted’, a page taken from Prime Minister Cameron’s Red Tape Challenge. Rather any movement toward evidence-based, data-driven and informed policymaking that had been underway in the Obama Administration is likely to be systematically rolled back – or at the very least ignored – under President Trump.

There’s nothing to suggest that the White House nudge unit (emulating the UK model) which champions policy experimentation informed by social science research, nor the data-driven criminal justice initiative that convenes local jurisdictions to commit to empirically measurable reform projects, nor investments in precision medicine which rely on massive quantities of data to deliver more targeted care and wellness, least of all the longstanding open data policy priority shared by the United States and the UK, will survive the chopping block.

Despite his privileged background as the son of a real estate magnate, Trump has successfully invented himself as the leader of a right-wing populist movement who will save Americans from what he has termed the “ruinous rule by a handful of elites.” The United States is not alone in the pervasive contempt for expertise. “We’ve had enough of experts,” infamously said Michael Gove. The Guardian laments that Prime Minister May reshuffled the British cabinet without any regard for whether her appointees know much about their future portfolio: “…without a shred of analysis linking policy effectiveness and administrative boundaries.” The Daily Telegraph writes about a sinister strain of anti-intellectualism. Europe and the USA (though interestingly, not Asia or Latin America) are in the grip of a populist and ideological upsurge. Although there are profound differences between events in the United States, Hungary, Austria, France and elsewhere, there is a common thread of anti-elitist, anti-establishment sentiment.
As economies stagnate and technology displaces (or threatens to) whole swathes of workers, rates of trust in government hover at all-time lows. The sense that government, though important, is disconnected from everyday experience, has provoked a backlash that was completely predictable and has been percolating for some time.

Whether because of (or perhaps despite) their xenophobic and racist overtones, the Brexit vote and the Trump campaign, as well as the success of populist candidates around the world, highlight a distrust of traditional government institutions that is manifesting itself as a dislike of credentialed expertise.

It is no wonder that expertise is a bad word. The so-called experts got it wrong when they predicted a Clinton victory. The experts got it wrong when they failed to foresee the subprime mortgage crisis in which they were complicit and the subsequent failure of Lehmann and Bear Starns or the economic crisis of 2008. Ditto, says Habermas in The Lure of Technocracy, the handling of the Greek economic crisis. Habermas has written trenchantly against “technocracy” and rule by elites and bureaucrats without democratic legitimation. Similarly, now the Bank of England is coming under fire for engaging in anti-democratic experiments that exacerbate inequality.

Any elite consensus that most complex questions of governing should be delegated and managed by what are perceived as EU-centric, business friendly, globalizing technocrats is under siege.

**EXPERTISE IN DEMOCRACY: THE PROFESSIONALISED POLITICAL CLASS**

You might say: this is nothing new, expertise has always been problematical and in tension with democracy. After all, Churchill said, “experts should be on tap but not on top.” In a democracy, there has long been a conflict — one that has come to the fore again — between governing by experts and democracy, which should be rule by, for and with the people. Expertise is not compatible with the ideal of equality.

This populist backlash against traditional political elites is not new to the TPP. It has been long in the coming with the rise of a professional, ‘expertocratic’ political class.

Before the mid-nineteenth century (and even later in the US), there was no formal professional civil service with its system of merit based exams and appointments. To be clear, even though the US was late to the game, the absence of a professional public service and extensive constitutional provisions about the administrative state did not mean there was not already plenty of administration.

The levying of taxes, collecting of duties on ships, and establishment of a private patent system, for example, were of vital importance, especially to generate revenue. Doling out pensions to veterans and their widows and the provisioning of relief to those suffering from disasters were among the welfare state initiatives of the early nineteenth century. But, administration was a patchwork of practices, mostly local in nature and merit was not considered the key factor for employment. There were no political science departments to train those who worked in the government. Policy sciences only emerged fifty years later. Indeed, the social sciences did not yet exist as an organised academic field. Neither was there any stabilized, cross-cutting concept of administrative law.

In the new communities of the wide-open American Northwest, ordinary people participated actively in public affairs as they had done in Colonial Times. Frederick Jackson Turner extolled the amateur governance of the American forest and frontier in his seminal book The Significance of the Frontier in American History: “Every militia muster, every cabin-raising, scow-launching, shooting match, and logrolling was in itself a political assembly where leading figures of the neighbourhood made speeches, read certificates, and contended for votes.” The roster of offices to be filled and operated was blank, and men of no previous political experience had to do the job.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, the Age of the Founders had passed. With it died the idea of gentleman lawmen and laissez-faire frontier democracy. It was replaced at the national, and even at the local, level by professionals who decided and governed. Lost were both the informality of access and the robustness of informal participation that characterized life before industrialization, when everyone had to play their part in running things.

As the nineteenth century progressed and technology advanced, progressive concerns about urban problems — labour and social welfare, municipal reform, and consumer protection — and agrarian interests in railroad, tariff, and trust regulation took shape in opposition to the excesses of the emerging capitalist economy. In turn, these fuelled a demand for stronger government.

In contrast to the 780 government employees (excluding deputy postmasters) in the United States at the turn of the nineteenth century, there are more than two million civilian ‘professional’ public servants employed in the federal Executive Branch in the United States and half a million members of the civil service in Britain supported by attendant think tanks and lobbyists, who help to generate the information needed for governing.
This growth of professional public administration in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was designed to apply scientific principles to governing while reducing corruption, patronage, and inefficiency.

As science gave rise to tools from timekeeping to mechanized transportation and electric lighting to enable the orderly management of society, so, too, emerged the utopian vision of the meritocratic society controlled, managed, ordered and run by middle class university graduates trained in the newly minted political and social sciences. But, this model of professionalised governance excluded the public from meaningful participation in governance by design.

Although in small communities people can master knowledge of their environment, in a large and complex society, opined both Walter Lippmann and John Dewey in the 1920s, individuals cannot be omni-competent. Hence the need for experts: “It may be accepted as a fact, however unpleasant,” lamented Theodore Roosevelt, “that if steady work and much attention to detail are required, ordinary citizens, to whom participation in politics is merely a disagreeable duty, will always be beaten by the organised army of politicians to whom it is both business, duty, and pleasure.”

Walter Lippman put forward that the best way to organise intelligence was rule by expert elites. Lippman’s goal was to elevate the position of government experts — the professional public service as advisors to the best and brightest. In his review of Walter Lippman’s Public Opinion in The New Republic magazine, Dewey disagreed only in so far as he thought education of the masses by the media was of equal importance. But neither disagreed about the competence of the public to participate in democracy.

At the same time in Great Britain, RH Tawney was writing about the importance of specialised and professional experts as the means to institutionalise ethics and civic morals in order to elevate governing above baser self-interest and rein in the materialist excesses of industrialization.

For too long, we have had institutions designed around the conviction that citizens must be spectators in the democratic process. They express opinions based on values, but rarely expertise rooted in lived experience or scientific fact. Cognitive incapacity, lack of interest in government, and passivity in the face of usually closed and sometimes corrupt bureaucratic and political institutions, prevent the public from participating productively. Because of this widely held view, citizen engagement is classically confined to elections, opinion polls or jury service — asking people what they feel, not what they know and can do.

At the same time, the rise of the professionalization of governing gave rise to a backlash against the experts. Far from being neutral mandarins who speak truth to power in the view of Tawney or Lippmann or Durkheim, experts often turn out to be on someone’s side (and that side is not usually ours). Think Nazi doctors or Lysenko’s agricultural policies and it becomes manifest that Tawney’s professionals have clay feet. Hence we live with the permanent embarrassment of expertise that violates the equality among citizens that democracy presupposes and denigrates democratic values.

I suggest that this dichotomy between equality and expertise, between democracy and professionalism, is false.

In fact, expertise is widely distributed in society. We have witnessed a shift away from credentialed experts to citizen experts in everything from restaurant reviews to medical advising. There are many more academic researchers than those who are lucky enough to advise government. Expertise is also not limited to academics and no longer synonymous exclusively with universities of higher education that create them. As Reiner Grundmann writes in last week’s Guardian, “…doctors are challenged by patient power.” NESTA has done great work on the strategies for mining the collective intelligence among communities of patients and sufferers.

People have always possessed skills, experience and knowhow. But technology is making it possible:

- First, to credential new forms of learning: think digital badges for activities done online;
- Second, to measure that knowhow in new ways: think scores we get for answering questions, or having the most cited papers, or mastering a language on Duolingo;
- Above all, thirdly, we have the technology that is making it possible to make that expertise searchable and to match the demand for knowhow to the supply of it; LinkedIn or Google Scholar are but two of the proliferating expert network platforms for searching for expertise.

**OPEN INNOVATION: LINKING EXPERTISE TO GOVERNING**

So how do we link this distributed expertise to governing? How do we create more participatory institutions? After all, there is scarcely a public decision which could not benefit from an infusion of greater expertise both credentialed and experiential from outside government. We design the delivery of social services without the benefit of insights from the people...
who receive that service. We craft policies about antitrust or education without the benefit of the latest and most diverse thinking from the academy and from industry. We make health policies designed to prevent a pandemic without a clear understanding of what people do and do not know about a disease.

Enter crowdsourcing. Now online tools are making it possible for institutions systematically to get more diverse help and more members of the public to participate actively in problem solving by sharing knowledge and skills. And when the questions asked in these open innovation processes are relevant to people’s lives and experience, they participate in ways that both enhance the legitimacy and, perhaps surprisingly, also the effectiveness of governing.

A recent case in point is Mapatón CDMX: an effort on the part of 35 collaborators from 12 different organizations in Mexico City who created an app that allowed riders of Mexico City’s system of 29,000 microbuses (peseros) to enter GPS data into a shared database and thereby map these 1,500 informal bus routes while riding. Participants who mapped the most pesero routes could earn points toward tablets and cash prizes. The software used an algorithm to assign under-mapped routes higher point values. In two weeks in February 2016, riders mapped almost the entire system and, with this data in hand, innovators were then able to create an SMS-based service that allows a commuter to enter an origin and destination and get route information.

Take, for example, the United States federal government’s Challenge.gov platform, which hosts requests by government agencies to the public to tackle hard problems in exchange for cash prizes and other incentives. Since its inception in 2010, federal agencies have run over seven hundred challenges, turning to the public to help ameliorate problems such as decreasing the “word gap” between children from high- and low-income families or increasing the speed at which saltwater can be turned into fresh water for farming in developing economies.

Since the 1970s when Eric von Hippel at MIT illuminated a new view of innovation where customers are as important sources of innovation as producers themselves, what was viewed as an oddity – community innovation (also known as open innovation) – has now become mainstream in every sector. The whole concept of customer-driven innovation draws on Greek ideals of citizen engagement as its antecedent but the practical experience gained in companies has, in turn, given new momentum to open innovation and crowdsourcing in public life.

As governments continue to seek solutions to big and complex problems, the concept of open innovation (often backed by the incentive of a prize and known as a prize-backed challenge) has widened the pool of potential problem solvers beyond the ‘usual suspects’ and created a new way of working that brings together the talent, abilities and expertise of government and the governed on a wide variety of topics from improving methods to find asteroids that could threaten the Earth to reducing the amount of time required for highway construction projects.

Crowdsourcing is more than brainstorming. It goes beyond asking people to come up with ideas or supply information and includes asking people to perform tasks. On Amnesty International’s Decoders Network, more than 8,000 volunteers from 150 countries participate in projects to identify human rights violations using satellite photographs.

But the challenge of transferring the success of examples like Mapatón or Decoders to transform how public institutions work and tap into citizen expertise is the limitation of the ‘open call’. Although Mapatón did attract a small crowd, those with the greatest knowhow and passion often do not hear about the opportunity to participate.

We cannot govern on the basis of happenstance and serendipity. Challenge.gov is neither well-known nor widely used and represents a one-off adjunct to government more than a regular part of institutional practice. Rather, for all forms of engagement – whether driven top-down or bottom-up – to be more effective, we need to increase the likelihood that the opportunity to participate will be more widely distributed and made visible to those most likely to want to participate.

This is why in San Pedro Garza de García in Monterrey an open innovation process is currently ongoing to ask citizens and civil servants to collaborate systematically to solve hard problems facing the municipality. What is unique in that citizen engagement effort is not simply the turn to crowdsourcing on a massive scale. Communities from Redbridge to Russia have begun practising some form of crowdsourcing; more than 70 countries are signatories to the Open Government Partnership, which has civic engagement as one of its pillars. But that the lion’s share of that effort went into marketing the opportunity to participate to a broad and diverse citizenry as well as coaching participants to ensure that ideas, once suggested, can be implemented.

TECHNOLOGIES OF EXPERTISE

The Inter-American Development Bank, in collaboration with four Latin American governments, partnered with the GovLab, the organization I run, on what we called a ‘smarter crowdsourcing’ process, namely one in which we curated and matched global experts to specific problems that needed solving in
connection with the fight against mosquito-borne diseases. Taking the larger problem of Zika and breaking it down into fifteen constituent issues, such as the accumulation of water in standing water and the challenges of long term care, we have been able to recruit and organise hundreds of participants from dozens of countries to share knowhow about innovative and implementable alternative approaches that work. Now that curated, smarter crowdsourcing process is resulting in real changes in how those countries are responding to the pandemic.

Building on these manual curation processes, in the future organisations can employ the technologies of expertise – or what many in the private sector call people analytics, namely big data tools for understanding one’s audience and targeting those civil servants, citizens and global experts most likely to want to participate – to identify and reach out to possible audiences, enabling citizen engagement to become a sustainable component of how government works at scale.

Already an accelerating practice in the private sector, where managers want to increase the likelihood of finding employees with the right skills (something they cannot do easily from transcripts alone,) public institutions are beginning to follow suit. The World Bank created its own expert network called SkillFinder to index the talents of its 27,000 employees, consultants and alumni in order to be able to better organise its human capital to achieve the bank’s mission of eradicating poverty.

In the United States, there are early efforts to help civil servants better target expertise among their colleagues at the rank-and-file level. HHS Profiles is a project designed to help the Department of Health and Human Services more quickly find employees, for example, to staff medical device safety review panels. The Environmental Protection Agency’s Project Marketplace enables the posting of project descriptions together with requests for help with specific assignments, the skills marketplace helps to match talent to those opportunities to use it. The marketplace encourages teams focused on outcomes rather than affiliation.

The use of big data tools to curate processes of engagement is not limited to civil servants. In an early (and now defunct) experiment in the small community of Torfaen, Wales, they built a matching system to connect local citizens with experience in managing diabetes and Alzheimer’s to other citizens newly diagnosed and needing help. Now Bill Gates in his annual New Year’s letter last year is calling for the creation of a global citizens’ skills database to tackle poverty.

In an era of online dating in which it is commonplace for companies to use technology to target employees and customers to promote and improve their products, the idea of matching might sound obvious. But, in public life, it represents a radical departure from entrenched but anaemic conception of citizenship as something associated only with the act of voting.

With today’s technologies for pinpointing and targeting people based on what they know, people need not be able to name an MP or a congressman to participate in governing. Rather, the technologies of expertise can enable us to work neighbour-to-neighbour to tap into one another’s skills for public benefit so that patients with a common disease can help others or people with a demand can get matched to those with a supply of relevant skill or passion.

**CREATING MORE PARTICIPATORY ENGAGEMENT**

**How do we get there?**

To take advantage of the opportunity that the technologies of expertise provide to enable us to create more participatory governing practices, we need:

1. **First**, to overcome the assumption that the purpose of engagement is purely about legitimacy building. It is not. If the goal of participation is simply communication between government, citizens and interest groups, then participation is focused almost exclusively on discourse and we miss the epistemic and knowledge-building aspects of crowdsourcing that enable us to find missing information, generate alternate hypotheses, gather facts in support of a plan, undertake tasks, and get more eyeballs on a problem or more boots on the ground.

2. **Second**, we need to move past the assumption that participation must be mass-based and instead, construct a multiplicity of different practices that speak to people’s knowledge, experience and passions, whether to spot problems, to design policies and services, to work on drafts or to participate in implementations that tap citizens, civil servants and global participation.

3. **Third**, in an era of networks, we must move past the assumption that engagement is limited to interest group representation – church, union, women’s groups – so called ‘multi-stakeholderism’ and, instead, look to broader networks of people with innovative ideas to contribute. In the Smarter Crowdsourcing for Zika project, although we invited the World Health Organization, we also invited the technologist from MIT who knows how
to build trash-spotting drones, the researchers from Pakistan who are using predictive analytics to spot dengue, and the social entrepreneur from Brooklyn who has designed an app to coordinate school children to pick up trash.

4. **Fourth**, there is still too little understanding of the models of engagement and of what works and when in terms of improving both legitimacy of the process and the effectiveness of the resulting policies and services. We need to accelerate research on governance innovations. For example, there are questions of:

- **Design**: Do more time-intensive models of participation decrease diversity? How does asking people to undertake tasks versus generate ideas change the outcomes? What are the conditions necessary to recruit diverse and, especially, vulnerable groups and individuals?

- **Incentives**: What kinds of participation and engagement are most likely to lead to desired outcomes? What incentives are most likely to attract ‘unusual suspects’ and deliver desirable outcomes?

- **Targeting**: How does the use of the technologies of expertise to match people to opportunities to participate impact engagement? Does matching work better on the basis of credentials or experiences?

- **Legitimacy**: What’s the influence of these kinds of exercises in the perception of government? How well represented are the interests of the most vulnerable communities?

Such research would draw upon and be informed by research on open innovation in companies and in online communities but, by necessity, needs to be adapted in order to take account of what it means to do research ‘in the wild’ with real communities, where the ultimate goal is not the research but to improve people’s lives.

Finally, will all or any of this happen at the national level in the next four years in the US or the UK? It is unclear, at best. But, at the regional, state and local level and around the world — increasingly in Latin America which is throwing off its own populist leaders — we must invest in institutional innovation.

**DEMOCRATISING EXPERTISE**

In conclusion, around the world governments are faced with a challenge: deliver services, make policies and solve problems in ways that are more effective and transparent. Innovations such as open and big data, citizen science, and prize-backed public challenges to engage citizens — programmers, activists, journalists, teachers — are being presented as the first steps in helping governments become more open, more participatory, and more accountable. These more ‘conversational’ approaches to administration are aimed at getting new opinions and ideas into government, but also at benefiting from the elbow grease and expertise of both citizens and civil servants.

This requires going beyond thrusting the occasional reformer into an open government role, or recruiting the Shoreditch or Silicon Valley techie to do a tour of duty. Improving the level of expertise in government while, at the same time, democratising participating requires more than tweeting a question or implementing a one-time, open-call crowdsourcing project. Instead we need to train today’s public servants to know how and to want to use new tools to unlock talent and systematically connect motivated innovators both inside and outside of government to solve problems.

The internet is radically decreasing the costs of identifying diverse forms of expertise and segmenting audiences on the basis of credentials, experiences, skills, and interests. New technologies of expertise like expert networks are multiplying the number and type of expertise — including skills and experiences — that can be systematically searched. Because expertise can now be identified and collected both manually and automatically, and can be calculated based on different traits and characteristics, it is possible to quantify expertise differently and more diversely than before.

Marry the dissatisfaction with current educational models to new platforms for expressing expertise — from LinkedIn to Stack Exchange to Khan Academy, which provides detailed analytics of how a student learns — and making new kinds of expertise systematically discoverable and it becomes possible to demand experience over credentials, certified skills over mere certifications, and practical ability over status hierarchy.

By divorcing the concept of expertise from elite social institutions and creating tools to enable neutral identification of talent and ability — whether of those inside or outside of government, with credentials or craft knowledge — technology is democratizing expertise.

When we can see with precision who knows what, we can harness that knowhow for the public good — it is possible finally to realize what philosopher Danielle Allen describes as the “egalitarianism of co-creation and co-ownership of a shared world, an expectation for inclusive participation that fosters in each citizen the self — understanding that she, too, he, too, helps to make,
and is responsible for, this world in which we live together.”

People may not be conversant in the sport of politics, but they do possess expertise, understood broadly, in spades. It is incumbent upon those who govern to get at that knowhow, not occasionally, but continuously.

Yet, for too long – as a result of history, theory, and institutional practice – citizens have been largely excluded from governing. Our institutions are not designed to allow let alone encourage rich, ongoing collaboration. There is no more important public issue today than how to develop our governing organizations to make them smarter and better able to tackle the myriad and complex challenges we face.

Over the next fifty years, we will face challenges that no previous generation of humanity has ever had to deal with. To overcome, we have to run our communities and our institutions differently. The crisis of human capital, to paraphrase Sir Ken Robinson, is our other climate crisis – making real use of what people know.

When we make expertise of all kinds systematically findable, participation has the potential to become robust and commonplace, citizenship has the potential to become more active and meaningful, and institutions have the potential to become both more effective and more legitimate.

Centralized government, based on bureaucratic control enforced by law and reinforced by closed-door tradition and hierarchy, is out of date. The open and networked governance institutions of the future will work more effectively and more legitimately. They have to.

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