

Collaborative e-gov: services that get better the more people use them

Submitted on 16 Nov 2011 by David Osimo

Recently we presented the interim results of the [study on collaborative e-government](#). Interesting [workshop](#), with lots of debate for example on new funding instruments for the web. But for me, the key finding was another. I struggled a lot in the course of this project to find a good definition of collaborative e-government. In particular, how to convey that collaborative e-government is more than “cool apps built on open data”?

My first answer was to [include emphasis on citizen-generated data](#). The study and the workshop provided me with a better answer, mutated from [Tim O’ Reilly](#): **public services that get better the more people use them**.

Traditionally, in public services, the quality of services is measured in such a way that increased usage corresponds to lower quality. In health or education, countries are compared in terms of hospital beds per inhabitant, or teacher per pupil. In this way, when expenditure remains constant, increase in usage lowers the quality of the services.

When we refer to e-government, this increase in uptake has not a negative impact on service levels: the service level of attending an online training, or filling a form, is not affected by additional users using the service. With constant cost, the quality of service remains constant even with increase in uptake.

Quality of service vs number of users. By David Osimo

With government 2.0 or collaborative e-government, **additional usage actually increases the quality of service**:

- the more citizens signal problems in their city in [seeclickfix.com](#), the more value the application has, the faster the problems get solved
- the more citizens provide feedback on hospitals in [patientopinion](#), the better service it can provide and the better services hospital will provide
- the more citizens contribute to [peertopatent](#), the better patents are assessed
- the more citizens “adopt” information on public website, the more accurate the information gets ([LineaAmica](#))
- the more citizens play with [DigiKoot](#), the better catalogue the Library of Finland can provide
- the more mums discuss on [Mumsnet](#), the better they can take care of their kids
- the more citizens search on the Delaware.gov website, the better the portal gets in showing the most relevant information

and so on...

This definition provides a new way to think about public services which conveys the message that collaborative e-government is NOT about a few geeks developing apps with open data, but taking advantage of the skills and goodwill of large numbers of citizens, with different degree of e-skills.

Citizens are uniquely placed to co-produce services because they:

- have unique skills (e.g. in assessing patents, raising kids)

- have the users' perspective on public services (e.g. in using hospitals)
- are many (e.g. in DigiKoot and SeeClickFix)!

In conclusion, the recommendations will focus on encouraging government to think about what unique contribution citizens can make to public services.

This is even more important in times of crisis: it offers a path to increase the quality of services without substantial additional investments. And to learning faster about successful and unsuccessful ways to spend public money, avoiding waste.