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How crowdsourcing helped Haiti's relief efforts

Tech-minded volunteers quickly pitched in with a variety of communication and data services in the days following the Haiti earthquake. One company -- crowdsourcing platform CrowdFlower -- repurposed its service as a text-message translation tool to aid [Mission 4636](#). CrowdFlower founder and CEO [Lukas Biewald](#) shares his story in this guest post.

Before January 12, I knew little to nothing about Haiti or the role of crowdsourcing in disaster relief. My company, [CrowdFlower](#), offers a crowdsourced labor platform to clients who are mostly Silicon Valley tech companies. The January earthquakes in Haiti ignited a completely new type of emergency response that involved the contributions of individuals, companies, NGOs, and staffed by thousands of volunteers around the world. On a more personal level, it led to the discovery of a very surprising application of our product.

Despite the massive devastation of buildings in Port-au-Prince, most of Haiti's cell tower infrastructure remained intact. Within 48 hours of the earthquake, Josh Nesbit of FrontlineSMS:Medic and Katie Stanton of the U.S. State Department convinced DigiCel, the largest telco in Haiti, to set up a short code -- "4636" -- that any individual could text for free to get help. Robert Munro of Energy for Opportunity and Brian Herbert set up a workflow where Kreyol-speaking volunteers could translate and classify the messages for aid workers to send relief.

Once the system was working, [InSTEDD](#) (in collaboration with Thompson Reuters) worked on the ground to broadcast the existence of the "4636" short code to as many Haitians as possible using radio and other means. Through word of mouth, the number of volunteer translators grew throughout the Haitian diaspora.

It was immediately clear that people were using this system to send absolutely urgent and heartbreaking messages. Here's a few examples:

"I am in the town of Jeremie in the Grand'Anse Department. My boyfriend died, I'm 8 months pregnant, I don't have any money. Whatever you can do for me will be a deliverance" ([More info here.](#))

"My name is J. W. my brother is working in Unicef and I live in Carfour 11 Alentyerye I have 2 people that is still alive under the building still ! Send Help!" ([More info here.](#))

As the volume of urgent messages grew, there became a growing need for a more robust workflow platform. At CrowdFlower we specialize in the creation and management of high volumes of microtasks completed by hundreds of thousands of online workers. The Haitian SMS translation and classification work, as well as the coordination of contributions by a large number of volunteers around the world, was a natural fit for our system. We began pulling in feeds of SMS messages, facilitating their translation and posting feeds of translated messages.

Before the first earthquake, Samasource (a nonprofit specializing in socially responsible outsourcing) had just set up a work center in Haiti. This Samasource service partner assumed a large amount of the earthquake relief responsibilities, providing not just labor for the emergency message routing but also creating badly-needed jobs on the ground. At peak volume in one hour we processed over 5,000 SMS messages.

Parts of the feed of emergency SMS messages -- and maps generated by Ushahidi -- are now used by a growing number of organizations, including the Red Cross, Plan International, charity:water, U.S. State Department, International Medical Corps, AIDG, USAID, FEMA, U.S. Coast Guard Task Force, World Food Program, SOUTHCOM, OFDA and UNDP.

Craig Clark of the Marine Corps commented on the text message project:

"I wish I had time to document to you every example, but there are too many and our operation is moving too fast ... I say with confidence that there are 100s of these kinds of [success] stories. The Marine Corps is using your project every second of the day to get aid and assistance to the people that need it most."

A few weeks after the first earthquake, I was invited to Haiti immediately on the heels of a sales trip to Europe. The contrast between these two trips was striking. Driving through Port-au-Prince and seeing so many collapsed buildings gave me a sobering understanding of how 200,000 people died in this crisis. Meeting with survivors of the quake was a testament to their motivation to rebuild their country.

The massive number of volunteers and the workforce quickly brought online by Samasource means that there's very low latency when someone sends an emergency message. For messages like "Non mwen se

luÇaint luÇoit madanm mwen ansent li rive lè poul akouche nou nan dèlma 31 ri maryen n 21 nan lakou legliz apostolik anfas site jeremi, mpa" ("condition bloody about. undergoing children delivery corner of delmas 31 and rue marine") it is crucial not just to be fast, but to have local knowledge to get the exact longitude and latitude from an ambiguous 140 character message as well as an accurate classification so that the right aid agency can be deployed. In this case there was a happy ending, USGS responded "just got emergency SMS, child delivery, USCG are acting, and, the GPS coordinates of the location we got from someone of your team were 100% accurate!"

The advantages of a flexible crowdsourcing workflow to managing disaster relief are huge. Businesses like crowdsourced work because they don't have to plan unknown work capacity in advance, and managing a crisis is an extreme version of this problem. There would be no practical way to have thousands of trained Kreyol speakers ready to handle emergency text messages, but through viral channels and a microtask framework it was possible to have thousands of people around the world doing mission-critical work within days.

When you run a company, you worry constantly about whether or not your product is something that your customers really want, whether or not your product is a necessary solution, whether or not it is reliable, etc. It was clear to me through Mission 4636 that our product was capable of not merely changing lives, but of saving them. As saddening as it is to reflect on the devastation and mortality caused by the Haiti earthquakes, the collaborative impact of Mission 4636 is truly inspirational. I hope it will become the model for future emergency relief efforts.

You can learn more at mission4636.org and via the following video:

[Mission 4636 from CrowdFlower on Vimeo.](#)

Four short links: 11 March 2010

1. Digital Inclusion: How Do You Tell? -- *[N]either means nor skills are simple binary states. A while ago, I was talking to a young man looking for a job, and asked him why he didn't look online. Because it's two buses to get to the public library and you only get half an hour, was his reply. Or being in a library myself and watching an older man asking a bit tentatively if he could use one of the computers and being firmly told that he could book a slot for three days time. He turned away looking crestfallen and without making a booking. It didn't look as though he would be back. Remote, uncertain, and limited access is better than none. But it is hardly inclusion.*
2. The Participatory Museum Process -- *inside look at the writing of the book, and the surprises she received writing it. People preferred to comment on a finished draft rather than the work in progress. At the time, I thought people would be MORE excited to comment and help shape the book as I was first writing it than to comment on a complete draft. I was wrong. The second draft was offered to participants with a much more specific, time-limited ask, and it was much more successful than the open-ended "help me as I write it" approach to draft one. This makes sense - the second draft experience was much better-scaffolded - and it made me reconsider the extent to which participants want to be involved in the early development of other peoples' projects.*
3. Finding Pin 1 (Evil Mad Scientist) -- *some interesting knowledge about hardware that'll make you more informed the next time you peer quizzically at a printed circuit board.*
4. January 2010 US Mobile Subscriber Market Share (ComScore) -- *Android just overtook Palm, and is growing faster than the other smartphone platforms. And for a reality check, 28% of mobile customers used a browser on their phone. (via phandroid)*

Gov 2.0 invades Harvard: A report from #gov20ne

Last Saturday (March 6), several hundred folks gathered at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government to spend the day discussing open government. O'Reilly's own Laurel Ruma was one of the organizers, and she sends in this report:

To geeks, bar camps are nothing new. But what we're seeing is a surge in civic-based camps, including Transparency Camp , Participation Camp, Change Camps in Canada, City Camp, Congress Camp, and the ongoing Crisis Camps. However, there is one overarching topic that includes all of the granular subjects: Gov 2.0. The Camp scene is not without Gov 2.0 Camps. Started in Washington D.C. last year by the Government 2.0 Club, Gov 2.0 Camps are popping up across the country. These camps are free and open to the public, and are helping to connect citizens to government officials in a casual and engaging format. Organized by groups of community members from across many fields and experiences, each camp is unique to its geographic area.

Gov 2.0 Camp D.C. hosted close to 500 engaged campers, including policy and government folks, technologists, nonprofits, and government contractors. Gov 2.0 Camp Los Angeles was held in downtown L.A. last month with a focus on "work[ing] to make 'Gov 2.0' more accessible to the public, share advice, and solve common problems." Now, we've just held Gov 2.0 Camp New England this past weekend at the Harvard Kennedy School, and we're just hearing about Denver's own Gov 2.0 Camp Rocky Mountains coming in June.

Gov 2.0 Camp New England was brainstormed one late night, as many good ideas are, with Yasmin Fodil (a masters student at Harvard Kennedy School), Sarah Bourne (Mass.Gov technology strategist), and yours truly, Laurel Ruma (Gov 2.0 Evangelist for O'Reilly Media). We pulled in our friends Rob Goodspeed, who's finishing up a PhD in urban planning at MIT, and Jess Weiss, who works for Mass.Gov as a project and social media coordinator.

We were extraordinarily fortunate to have the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, as the primary sponsor and

host for the event. As soon as the invitations went out, we were close to capacity (300 seats) within one week.

Although participants came from all backgrounds, we had a concentrated amount of representatives from local municipalities and universities. The "govies" included small-town city councilors like Karen Liot Hill ([@NHKaren](#)) from Lebanon, NH and representatives from the city of Boston, the state of Massachusetts, and various agencies.

Gov 2.0 Camp New England was not a strict unconference, but it featured six lightning talks from New England companies such as [SeeClickFix](#) and people who are bring Gov 2.0 to their agency, like Brad Blake, the director of new media from Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick's office. The 24 sessions were created by attendees on the spot and most were live streamed. ([Videos will be posted here soon.](#))

For my part, I found the day very informative. Like most Foo/Bar camps, there was a minimum of boring, because the sessions represented the very real interests of the attendees, rather than a prepared set of talks pushing someone's agenda.

The lightning talk from SeeClickFix was especially interesting, because it represents a concrete example of how open gov can provide greater citizen access to government functions, and also make the work of government employees more rewarding and efficient. I plan to interview the SeeClickFix folks for Radar in the near future.

The break-out sessions were the usual mix of high interest and niche topics, and the "vote with your feet" paradigm meant that no one got stuck listening to something they didn't want to hear about. I attended sessions on mapping in open gov and on replacing the federal Pacer system with something more open. I also led a discussion on how the new media interacts with open gov. There was a nice mix of mid-to-high-level government representatives, as well as developers, graduate students, open gov advocates and private citizens.

Archived notes and links from Gov 2.0 Camp New England can be found [here](#).

We're about to scratch the real-world data itch

Since virtually all of my work is done on the web, I've grown accustomed to granular information. Even a casual look at web traffic reveals insight. I can see the topics that strike a nerve with visitors. I can pick out new or unusual traffic sources. I can even see how usability and design influence click-throughs.

Yet, all that goes away in the real world. My parents, for example, have owned the same retail store in the same location for more than 20 years. They have strong relationships with regular customers and they're committed to their local community. Despite all this experience, many of their decisions are still based on hunches. They don't have much data and their feedback mechanisms are limited to word of mouth and occasional coupon campaigns.

But what if my parents -- or any small business owner, for that matter -- could gather hard data that showed foot traffic broken down by months, weeks, days and times? What if they could experiment with product display hot spots and analyze the sales results? What if they could entice customers back to their store with customized offers?

Mobile location services may soon make this sort of real-world analytics possible -- and not just for the big guys. Foursquare, which we recently profiled here on Radar, is already rolling out an analytics dashboard that will give business owners data about the people who check in to their establishments. That's a huge first step, and I imagine other location services will follow suit with their own analytics packages. Within a year -- maybe even six months -- we'll see a lot more discussion around local SEO and mobile-based social search. And I won't be surprised at all if mobile bar code/image scanners transform from fun fringe apps to core functionality, especially if associated data can be harnessed and analyzed. Put all this together and it feels like we're on the verge of finally scratching that real-world data itch.

Four short links: 10 March 2010

1. The Future of Book Publishing Business Models (Stephen Walli) -- some good thoughts about the book publishing industry and ebooks. *When does Amazon create the iPhone/Android app and the programme that will allow bookstores to receive a cut of every Kindle edition they sell? I scan the book's in-store barcode with my smartphone, and I get the Kindle edition delivered, and the store gets its cut. Why is this different in concept than Borders on-line store being run on Amazon, or any of the independent book sellers that front through Amazon? It's not the normal book mark-up, but people already browse bookstores and buy on Amazon. This is better than no revenue. (When was the last time you went to a travel agent?)*
2. Google Apps Enterprise Marketplace -- this is sweet. It looks like the play is to become the home page for authenticated apps rather than to make commissions from selling the apps themselves. This may be the Google business model vs the Apple business model in a nutshell. (via Marc Hedlund)
3. iPad Application Design -- some fantastic notes about the kinds of UI design that iPad encourages. I've avoided covering The Second Coming of The JesusPhone but this is interesting because of the middle ground it stakes out between phone and laptop. *The primary warning about designing for the iPad is: more screen space doesn't mean more UI. You'll be tempted to violate that principle, and you need to resist the temptation. It's OK to have UI available to cover your app's functionality, but a bigger screen doesn't mean it should all be visible at once. Hide configuration UI until needed. Look like a viewer, and behave like an editor ... There's been a history of modes getting some bad press on the desktop. The issue is that they trade stability (things always being in exactly the same place in the UI, and not changing) for simplicity (not having too many controls to look through at once). On the iPad, it's clear where the winning side of the balance is: simplicity. Modes are completely appropriate on this device.* (via Marc Hedlund)
4. The Howtoons Visual Creation Guide -- we teach grammar and spelling in schools but not visual communication. This short booklet is a good start to remedying that. (via BoingBoing)

The state of open government in Canada

Open government isn't about just one government. That's why I got in touch with David Eaves, a public policy entrepreneur and a speaker at this week's Gov 2.0 International online conference. In the following Q&A, Eaves weighs in on the state of open government in Canada. He also talks about the ironic adoption of open government *behind* firewalls, and he calls government's insistence on only releasing completed projects a "collectively imagined limitation."

Canada's local traction

Mac Slocum: Is open government moving forward in Canada? How does Canada compare to other countries?

David Eaves: The real successes of open government have occurred at the local level. Vancouver was the first city to adopt an "open motion," which directed city staff to start sharing data, using open standards, and exploring the use of open source software. It was the second city in North America (after Washington D.C.) to launch an open data portal. Toronto and Edmonton have followed suit. These cities all have politicians who understand the potential of open government and are willing to be champions.

Also exciting are the pockets of success at other levels. I've been speaking with the staff at Canada's Parliament buildings and they are increasingly interested in sharing Parliament's agendas, bios of MPs, bills and other data that could help citizens better understand what is taking place in the nation's capital. This is an important and exciting development.

At the provincial level, there has been very little discussion. The debate is virtually non-existent at the federal level. This isn't to say there aren't open data sets. Some federal ministries, in particular Natural Resources Canada, have been sharing geospatial data freely and openly for a number of years now. But this is an isolated exception. There is no effort to rethink policy around open data or open government at the federal level or in any province that I'm aware.

Broadly speaking, the open government movement in Canada has not penetrated governments -- and in particular the political class -- to the same degree it has in countries like the United States or Great Britain.

Federal challenges, private use

MS: What are the biggest challenges open government faces in Canada?

DE: There are several. The biggest is the lack of political leadership around this issue at the provincial and federal levels. Indeed, I know of IT vendors who have talked to key federal officials about this idea -- citing the developments in both the U.K. and the United States -- and they have been rebuffed.

In addition, the resources for advocacy in Canada are more limited than in the U.S. or the U.K. In the U.S, organizations like the Sunlight Foundation can show the government how it can be more transparent, hold the government to account on promises, and take non-machine-readable data and make it more accessible. Canada -- due to its smaller size and, interestingly, tax law -- has fewer foundations and donors who can sponsor such a project.

MS: Is there more adoption of social media and open government principles behind government firewalls?

DE: Definitely. This is an important debate that is presently taking place within government. The Canadian public service has actually led with some of the most innovative approaches, especially around the use of wikis behind a firewall. Natural Resources Canada has been drafting Deputy Minister briefing notes on a wiki, and GCPEDIA -- a MediaWiki install -- is available to any public servant who wishes to use it. [*GCPEDIA is not publicly accessible -- Ed.*] I just wrote an article on this very subject in the Globe and Mail.

There is, however, significant resistance. Some of it is out of lack of understanding and fear of change. But there are also those who see social media as a threat to their capacity to control an issue or area. I've talked to public servants who have been ordered -- by their bosses -- not to work on GCPEDIA. Deeply interesting stuff.

Government needs more beta

MS: Broadly, do you think government's focus on producing "final" projects hinders progress?

DE: Absolutely. Government's obsession with a "final" product is in many ways a relic of the industrial era. The idea that only a finished product can be released to the public -- a public whose needs both the private and public sector often misunderstand -- means that huge cycles are wasted, and launch times delayed, in perfecting programs and products that often don't hit the mark. Everything is a beta today because almost everything can be improved on the fly. What is saddest about this obsession with final products is that it isn't connected to what government does or the technologies. It's a collectively imagined limitation.

My sense is that the rise of social media will help spread the idea of a "patch culture." One in which citizens and public servants are more empowered to offer critical feedback and make changes on the fly.

MS: Your chapter in "Open Government" touches on the DIRECT Launcher project, which is a great example of an external, non-government initiative influencing government projects. Is DIRECT Launcher an exception? Or, do you expect to see more of this external-to-internal collaboration?

DE: I think Direct Launcher is interesting because it is both external and internal simultaneously. It is actually initiated by government employees whose code of ethics and desire to serve citizens more effectively causes them to self-organize, and to circumvent the bureaucracy they are a part of.

Sadly, I believe this is presently an exception. This is a particularly tech savvy community and so they were able to use technology to self-organize in a way that might not be possible in other government agencies. However, as people become more comfortable with online tools, I do expect this type of activity to become more commonplace. DIRECT Launcher is a fascinating example as it demonstrates how authority and accountability will change in a Gov 2.0 world. The story here isn't about how they self-organized, it's about the implications for civil service culture, processes and hierarchy.

Note: This interview was condensed and edited.

Truly Open Data

I'm kicking myself. I have spent a non-trivial number of hours talking to government departments and scientists about open data, talking up an "open source approach" to data, pushing hard to get them to release datasets in machine readable formats with reuse-friendly licenses. I've had more successes than failures, met and helped some wonderful people, and now have more mail about open data in my inbox than about open source. So why am I kicking myself?

I'm kicking myself because I've been taking far too narrow an interpretation of "an open source approach". I've been focused on getting people to release data. That's the data analogue of tossing code over the wall, and we know it takes more than a tarball on an FTP server to get the benefits of open source. The same is true of data.

Open source discourages laziness (because everyone can see the corners you've cut), it can get bugs fixed or at least identified much faster (many eyes), it promotes collaboration, and it's a great training ground for skills development. I see no reason why open data shouldn't bring the same opportunities to data projects.

And a lot of data projects need these things. From talking to government folks and scientists, it's become obvious that serious problems exist in some datasets. Sometimes corners were cut in gathering the data, or there's a poor chain of provenance for the data so it's impossible to figure out what's trustworthy and what's not. Sometimes the dataset is delivered as a tarball, then immediately forks as all the users add their new records to their own copy and don't share the additions. Sometimes the dataset is delivered as a tarball but nobody has provided a way for users to collaborate even if they want to.

So lately I've been asking myself: What if we applied the best thinking and practices from open source to open data? What if we ran an open data project like an open source project? What would this look like?

First, we'd collaboratively build the dataset. This means we'd have a curator who is the equivalent of a project leader, taking patches and filtering for quality. Successful open source project leaders foster a group of developers of different skills, rewarding on merit while fostering new

talent. Like open source projects, the nirvana state is to have a project that can survive the retirement or death of its founder.

But collaboration takes more than leadership--open source projects have tools that help. An open data project would need a mailing list to collaborate on, IRC or equivalent to chat in real-time, and a bug-tracker to identify what needs work and ensure that the users' needs are being met. The official dataset of New Zealand school zones has errors but there's nobody to report them to, much less a way to submit a fix to a maintainer. Oh, and don't forget a way to acknowledge and credit contributors—think not just of *credits.txt* but also of the difference between patch submitter, committer, and project maintainer.

Open source software developers have a powerful set of tools to make distributed authoring of software possible: *diff* to identify what's changed, *patch* to apply those changes elsewhere, version control to track changes over time and show provenance. Patch management would be just as important in a collaborative open data project, where users and other researchers might be submitting new or revised data. What would *git* for data look like? Heck, what would a local branch look like? I have a new attribute, you have a different projection, she has new rows, how does this all tie back together? (I eagerly await claims that RDF will solve this problem and all others)

That's just development. The interface between developers and users is the release. State of the art for a lot of government data is the equivalent of *source.tar.gz*. No version numbers, much the ability to download older versions of the datasets or separate stable and development branches.

Why would we want to download the historic version of a dataset? Because a paper used it and we want to test the analysis software that the paper used to ensure we get the same answer. Or because we want to see what our analysis technique would have shown with the knowledge that was available back then. Or simply to be able to track defects.

The users of data will have to adapt to the idea of versions, like the users of software have. The maintainers of the dataset might release five different versions of it while you're writing your analysis code, so it can't be a painful process to incorporate the revised data into your project. With software we have shared libraries and dynamic libraries, supported by autotools and such packages. Our code has interfaces and a branch that promises backwards compatibility. What would that look like for data? And what is the data version of the dependency hell that software

developers know all-too-well (M 1.5 depends on N 1.7 and P 2.0, but P 2.0 requires N 2.0, and upgrading N to 2.0 breaks M which expects the 1.x set of interfaces from N ...).

And, of course, there's documentation. As with software, I imagine we'll see some docs structured and some unstructured. The state of the art isn't great for government datasets, it has to be said: if you're lucky you get a "code X means ABCD" but rarely are you told exactly how the data were generated, the limits on its accuracy, situations where it shouldn't be used, etc.

Finally, we need to change attitudes and social systems. Data is produced as the product of work done, and is rarely conceived of as having a life outside the original work that produced it. Some datasets will (some won't--think of how many projects fail to interest anyone but the person who started them). This means thinking of yourself not just as the person who does the work, but the person who leads a project of interested outsiders and (in some cases) collaborators and who is building something that will last beyond their time. This is not a natural mindset within government nor, in many cases, science. Funding and budgeting systems at the moment may prevent this, and would need to change.

The good news is that while government datasets are rarely generated collaboratively, science is a little further along. PubMed and GenBank are just two examples of great science collaborations that we can learn from, and I'm sure there are more. Beyond science, OpenStreetMap is an important example of collaborative data gathering and the Open Knowledge Foundation folks may have work in this area already. I'm keen to learn more about the open data projects that *are* more than just data-over-the-wall and share what I find. Time to stop kicking myself and start learning!

Four short links: 9 March 2010

1. Cooperative Behaviour Spreads Through a Group, But So Does Cheating (Not Exactly Rocket Science) -- *Fowler and Christakis suggest that people tend to mimic the actions of those they played with. They could be directly imitating the actions of other players, or they could be looking out for cues that tell them the 'right' or 'normal' way of behaving. Whether it's specific actions or social norms that are spreading, the result is the same - a ripple effect that causes groups of people to act in similar ways. People copy the modeled behaviour that they see. This is why, when you start a new social site, you should seed it with people who behave the way that you wish newcomers to behave.*
2. Tulip -- open source 3D visualisation software of large graphs, homepage here. (via hjl on Delicious)
3. Six Months of Hacker News Front Page Data -- half a million archived records from the Hacker News front page, captured every 15m.
4. Internet Freedom: Beyond Circumvention (World Changing) -- a very thought-provoking post that challenges the idea that all we need to do to help the citizens of (insert censored country here) is to have more people using Tor. *I wonder whether we're looking closely enough at the fundamental limitations of circumvention as a strategy and asking ourselves what we're hoping internet freedom will do for users in closed societies. [...] o figure out how to promote internet freedom, I believe we need to start addressing the question: "How do we think the Internet changes closed societies?" In other words, do we have a "theory of change" behind our desire to ensure people in Iran, Burma, China, etc. can access the internet? Why do we believe this is a priority for the State Department or for public diplomacy as a whole?* (via BoingBoing)

Three lessons from the Chipotle iPhone app

Instant access to burritos bigger than your head is the clear selling point of [Chipotle's iPhone app](#) (iTunes link). But if we put culinary convenience aside, the app itself is an interesting mix of simple design, e-commerce functionality and location tools.

I've been digging into the app for a while (digging does not equal "eating," in case you're wondering), and I found three aspects to the app that could prove instructive for developers and businesses pursuing their own mobile paths.

1. Centralization

I asked, repeatedly and from a variety of angles, for revenue information related to the app -- direct sales, percentage of total sales, etc. [Chris Arnold](#), Chipotle spokesperson, politely declined to answer the money questions. The closest I could get was the total number of app downloads, which is currently at 600,000. And since Chipotle has around 1,000 restaurants, that's considerable overlap.

Arnold did open up about the app's integration into Chipotle's ordering and payment processes. What I found most notable in this regard is the oddly detrimental role of franchises. The Chipotle app represents a case where corporate centralization led to a relatively painless product roll-out.

Here's why: Chipotle owns all its restaurants, and Arnold credits this with allowing the iPhone app to mesh well -- and quickly -- with existing systems. "It can be hard to get all of your franchisees to participate in a new program like that, particularly if investments in technology or other infrastructure are necessary," Arnold wrote in an email. Centralization ensures the Chipotle app works at *all* of the company's restaurants.

Chipotle also benefitted from a pre-existing online ordering system. "If you don't have that infrastructure in place when you start your work on an iPhone app, you're going to be in trouble," said [Pervasant's](#) Stuart Williams, CEO of the development shop that handled the Chipotle app's programming. "It's certainly the case that mobile ordering follows in the footsteps of a decent web order."

2. Defining the use case

Chipotle and its development partners constructed the app with a particular customer in mind: a young, urban professional who needs to grab lunch on the go. That's not to say customers outside this very specific example are irrelevant; non-hipsters can benefit from the app as well. But this defined use case proved important during the development process because it led to functionality and conclusions. Here's two examples:

- Young professionals and iPhones go hand-in-hand, so the justification for creating the app is built in. It doesn't make sense to develop an iPhone app -- or any mobile app for that matter -- if your customers don't rely on app-friendly phones.
- Since lunch is the primary meal in this use case, that means the customer is probably visiting a Chipotle restaurant near his/her office over and over again. As such, the app asks for and remembers location on the first launch, but subsequent location look-ups have to be initiated manually. This isn't a "road warrior" app that automatically discovers nearby restaurants. It's about defined, ongoing convenience.
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3. Limited options

One final observation ...

It would be tough to create a simple, easy-to-use mobile app that encapsulates the breadth of meals and ingredient variations at restaurants with long menus. A website can tackle this task, that's for sure, but the mobile experience carries unique usability issues. Something as simple as going back and forth between screens can get real clunky, real fast on a small device. Chipotle's menu, on the other hand, works well in the app world because it's uniform and limited.

"The app is designed very much around their menu," said Williams. "It's not like you could take this app and service a white tablecloth restaurant. Or even service a Subway. A really well-designed app for

Subway would work different than a really well-designed app for Chipotle."

Four short links: 8 March 2010

1. [China's Cyberposse](#) (NY Times) -- is vigilante justice ok if the cause is right? Is it okay if there wouldn't be justice without it? Does the end justify the means? Many interesting questions raised by this large-scale Internet-based "human-flesh-search" in China. In the future we are all 4chan. (via [waxy](#), who also recommended [this article on the same subject](#))
2. [Questioning "Born Digital"](#) (The Economist) -- an interesting collection of healthy skepticism about how the "born digital" folks will change everything. [...] *many of his incoming students have only a superficial familiarity with the digital tools that they use regularly, especially when it comes to the tools' social and political potential. Only a small fraction of students may count as true digital natives, in other words. The rest are no better or worse at using technology than the rest of the population.*
3. [The Participatory Museum](#) -- a new book by the mighty museum mind, Nina Simon. The ideas are very usable outside of the museum world: raid this for social and engagement ideas for your own situation.
4. [Designing for Digital: What Print-Book Designers Should Know About Ebooks](#) -- course notes covering format choice, tools, and (yes) typesetting. (via [liza on Twitter](#))

Amazon Fires Its Colorado Associates

I just got interesting email from Amazon: *the Colorado government recently enacted a law to impose sales tax regulations on online retailers [...] We and many others strongly opposed this legislation, known as HB 10-1193, but it was enacted anyway. Regrettably, as a result of the new law, we have decided to stop advertising through Associates based in Colorado. We plan to continue to sell to Colorado residents, however, and will advertise through other channels, including through Associates based in other states.* The message goes on to say that they'll pay out all the money they owe me but I won't earn any more money for referring people to them.

Interesting! So let me get this straight: I've done nothing, and Amazon just fired me? Now, I haven't used referrals a whole lot so it doesn't hit me in the pocketbook but this should send chills down the spine of anyone who thought they were building a business, or at least an income, around Amazon services. It's one thing to be fired for something you did (hey doofus, don't cause a heap of MPAA infringement notices to land on Amazon's desk because you were running the new Pirate Bay on EC2) but it's entirely another to be fired for something outside your control.

A farmer friend told me that the goats to keep are female goats: when one doe headbutts another, the recipient then turns to the next in the hierarchy and headbutts them. With male goats, though, you get prolonged headbutt battles that are loud, intimidating, and potentially damaging. Amazon is obviously hoping the female goat scenario plays out: Amazon headbutts me, so I'll go headbutt my representative—punish Amazon's associates and hope they'll pass the pain on. I wonder whether any of Amazon's (former) Colorado associates will turn out to be male goats who, grumpy at being set upon, retaliate....

The full text of the letter follows, and there's [TechFlash covered the new law](#).

Dear Colorado-based Amazon Associate:

We are writing from the Amazon Associates Program to inform you that the Colorado government recently enacted a law to impose sales tax regulations on online retailers. The regulations are burdensome and no other state has similar rules. The new regulations do not require online retailers to collect sales tax. Instead, they are clearly intended to increase the compliance

burden to a point where online retailers will be induced to "voluntarily" collect Colorado sales tax -- a course we won't take.

We and many others strongly opposed this legislation, known as HB 10-1193, but it was enacted anyway. Regrettably, as a result of the new law, we have decided to stop advertising through Associates based in Colorado. We plan to continue to sell to Colorado residents, however, and will advertise through other channels, including through Associates based in other states.

There is a right way for Colorado to pursue its revenue goals, but this new law is a wrong way. As we repeatedly communicated to Colorado legislators, including those who sponsored and supported the new law, we are not opposed to collecting sales tax within a constitutionally-permissible system applied even-handedly. The US Supreme Court has defined what would be constitutional, and if Colorado would repeal the current law or follow the constitutional approach to collection, we would welcome the opportunity to reinstate Colorado-based Associates.

You may express your views of Colorado's new law to members of the General Assembly and to Governor Ritter, who signed the bill.

Your Associates account has been closed as of March 8, 2010, and we will no longer pay advertising fees for customers you refer to Amazon.com after that date. Please be assured that all qualifying advertising fees earned prior to March 8, 2010, will be processed and paid in accordance with our regular payment schedule. Based on your account closure date of March 8, any final payments will be paid by May 31, 2010.

We have enjoyed working with you and other Colorado-based participants in the Amazon Associates Program, and wish you all the best in your future.

Best Regards,

The Amazon Associates Team

Meet the Scanners!

The International Amateur Scanning League held an inaugural meeting on February 11 in Washington, D.C. [[Text of the Announcement](#) | [Photos](#) | [Mailing List](#)] I'm pleased to report that things are going swimmingly, and volunteers have successfully ripped the first 42 DVDs. The duplicator that Public.Resource.Org donated to the National Archives has been supplemented with an additional duplicator the Archivist bought, and procedures have been worked out for volunteers to sign up for times on a spreadsheet, get a large number of blanks from the National Archives staff, and leave their completed DVDs at the reference desk to be sent back to Public.Resource on a weekly basis. We were also pleased to learn that there are currently over 3,000 DVDs at the College Park facility, more than twice the number we had expected.

The only minor hiccup reported by our volunteers is because NARA is a big place and not all of the staff had heard of the FedFlix program. Ordinary researchers are only allowed 6 blank discs per visit, whereas our officially-sanctioned FedFlix volunteers are able to take all they can eat. This was quickly remedied by our prime contact at NARA, Leslie Waffen who is Director of the Motion Picture, Sound & Video Branch. Les sent out a memo to all research staff telling them about the program, and that seems to have done the trick.

But, it also occurred to us that perhaps the volunteers were not properly attired and we shared some of the blame for the miscommunication. Indeed, it was obvious that we had forgot the first thing one needs to do when dealing with an official government institution, and that is to properly badge the work force!

Our design team at [Point.B Studio](#) quickly developed some Official Government Scanner ID badges, which we have dispatched to the volunteers in Washington, D.C. The badges are laminated, have a handy clip, and feature the IASL logo on the back and a FedFlix Government Scanner emblem on the front.

The idea of a badge with the word *GOVERNMENT* on it was stolen from Robert Clifton Weaver. Weaver was appointed to be the first Secretary of Housing and Urban Development by Lyndon Johnson, and he was the first African American to hold a cabinet position. Weaver began his government service under FDR as a newly-minted Harvard Ph.D. in Economics. He worked for Harold Ickes as one of the new breed

of so-called "Negro Advisors" that were brought into senior positions in government in a radical break from the past. He also became one of the founders of the famous Black Cabinet, which exerted influence throughout government. Robert Weaver worked at at the U.S. Housing Authority, a New Deal program to build public housing in the cities.

As Deputy Director of Race Relations, Robert Weaver tried to accomplish two tasks. He mostly failed in convincing cities that the new public housing developments should be integrated. In those days, the government was still laboring under the separate but equal doctrine (which of course definitely meant separate but certainly not equal). But, Weaver was determined that the contractors that took federal funds to build these developments should employ black workers at least in the proportion in which they were represented in the population. Weaver had no statutory authority to require contractors to integrate, indeed he couldn't get these hard-boiled developers to even talk to him. As Weaver told the story later, he got the contractors to sit down at the table and talk to him through a little sleight of hand:

We bluffed a little bit. I had to do the identification for my staff. It looked like an FBI agent. They sealed with 'Government' and stamped it. Nobody ever read it and we got along very famously.

You can learn more about Robert Clifton Weaver's path-breaking career in Wendell E. Pritchett, Robert Clifton Weaver and the American City, University of Chicago Press (2008) or on the Wikipedia.

With the scanning now under way, I thought I'd share with you the ID of a few of the folks that are involved in this innovative program to crowd-source digitization. With no further ado, I invite you to Meet the Scanners!

Patron Saints of the Scanning League

From Left to Right:

Honorable Robert Clifton Weaver, 1st Secretary of H.U.D.

Honorable David Ferriero, 10th Archivist of the United States

Officials of the Scanning League

From Left to Right: Michael Edson, Thomas 'cmdln' Gideon, Justin Grimes

From Left to Right: Liz Pruszko, Badge for Trainees

Shipping and Receiving

From Left to Right: Leslie Waffen (NARA), Carl Malamud (Public.Resource.Org)

Happy Mutants

From Left to Right: Cory, Mark, Xeni, and David

Boing Boing, of course, has no official involvement with these scanning shenanigans, but they've done such a good job covering the story, we thought we'd make them a set of ID badges anyway! You can read some of the prior posts on Boing Boing starting with [International Amateur Scanning League will rescue our video treasures!](#) For further background, see also my previous Radar post on a [National Scan Center](#).

GIW Day Five: We End with Lansing and Boulder

Introduction to Hyperbolic Geometry by Amber Case | Ignite Portland 8

View more presentations from Amber Case at Ignite Portland 8.

Today is the last day of Global Ignite Week. We are still pulling together the number of speakers and attendees, but with over 60 Ignites in one week we know it was a lot. The videos are starting to roll, but in the meantime you can check out some of the slides that are being posted to Slideshare. I've embedded the slides from Amber Case's excellent talk on parabolic geometry.

If you still need a fix you can watch videos on the IgniteShow or streams from Ignite Lansing (stream) or Ignite Boulder.

Open government examples from the ONC

With the sea change caused by the Open Government Directive I know that many federal agencies might be struggling with how to actually implement this new policy. This is a major cultural shift in government and there are always challenges when trying to bring such broad changes to any large organization. Government bureaucracy is certainly no exception. But this last week I was encouraged by one agency's office, which has shown a great start-up mentality in not only moving toward government 2.0 principles, but also achieving some pretty significant accomplishments along the way.

The Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society (HIMSS) hosts an annual event focused around health IT professionals and health IT vendors (Andy Oram has been covering HIMSS). I was fortunate at this year's HIMSS conference to have conversations with staff from the Office of the National Coordinator. Much of the discussion revolved around the rules for meaningful use of electronic health records, the creation of a Nationwide Health Information Network (NHIN), and standards and certification. But of course, I couldn't have access to federal officials without bringing transparency and open government into the conversation.

So what is the Office of the National Coordinator and why are they at a health IT vendor show? An April 27, 2004 executive order signed by President Bush established the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC) within HHS. This office was legislatively mandated in the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health Act (HITECH Act) of 2009. President Obama named Dr. David Blumenthal as national coordinator for health information technology.

As the national coordinator, Blumenthal will lead the implementation of a nationwide, privacy-protected health information technology infrastructure as called for in the HITECH portion of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). When President Bush created the ONC, the goal was for Americans to have access to an interoperable Electronic Health Record (EHR) by 2014. There has been bipartisan agreement that health IT can lower costs and improve quality and clinical outcomes. President Obama has embraced these goals. The effort has been funded with stimulus dollars and plans are well under way.

At least \$20 billion in healthcare funding is included in the HITECH provisions of the ARRA for electronic health records. The ONC was funded \$2 billion, along with additional funds for CMS as financial incentives for physicians and other providers to adopt and utilize EHRs, and funding for states, Regional Extension Centers (REC), workforce development and other programs to assist in implementation.

The ONC has a huge job ahead of it. Ramping up such a large organization is difficult, especially in light of the President's promise in his Open Government Directive that his administration "would be committed to creating an unprecedented level of openness" to "ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation and collaboration."

The HITECH legislation created the HIT Standards Committee and the HIT Policy Committee under the auspices of the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA). The HIT Policy Committee is charged with making recommendations to the National Coordinator on a policy framework for the development and adoption of a nationwide health information infrastructure, including standards for the exchange of patient medical information. The HIT Standards Committee is charged with making recommendations to the National Coordinator on standards, implementation specifications, and certification criteria for the electronic exchange and use of health information. Both of the FACAs formed several workgroups to further their work comprised of stakeholder representatives and subject matter experts. With two FACAs and 10 different workgroups, there was initially some confusion about meeting schedules and difficulty sometimes getting meeting materials or accessing transcripts. There was also times when the workgroups were held in closed session, which made open collaboration more difficult.

On Decemeber 8, 2009, ironically the same day same day the Office of Management and Budget released its 11-page Open Government Directive, the Privacy and Security workgroup under the HIT Policy Committee met in a closed-door session. There was no notification of the meeting being closed in the Federal Register. The Dec. 16, 2009 NHIN workgroup met in public session from 10 a.m. until about 12:50 p.m., then re-convened behind closed doors. This was a troubling trend, and tweets, blog postings and media report from Joseph Conn at Modern Healthcare decried the practice.

Blumenthal responded on the ONC blog by announcing that all meetings would by default be open to the public, and exceptions would

only be at the written request of the workgroup chair(s), reflecting a majority vote by the membership to hold a closed hearing and a justification to do so. But this was only the beginning of continuing efforts at transparency.

Federal CTO Aneesh Chopra has also been using the ONC blog effectively, even asking for examples of struggles and opportunities in EHR adoption. I expect that as the use cases Chopra has asked for begin rolling in, we will see some great success stories and pitfalls to avoid.

Initially all of these meeting schedules were somewhat difficult to track (they have a *lot* of meetings), and sorting through the Federal Register can be tedious. The new calendar that allows you to drill down to meeting materials is extremely handy. This has made keeping tabs on what is going on more efficient and provided a much more open process for citizen participation.

Other areas that have been improved are the transcripts and audio portions of the meetings. But after bouncing back and forth many emails between ONC staff, Altarum (the contractor providing services to ONC) and myself, they were very responsive to making some great enhancements to the site. I'm sure that many of these enhancements were in the pipeline, but the fact that the ONC has reached out in a collaborative way to engage consumers of this public information is a testament to their efforts. The archives of meeting materials and the webcasts are now very well arranged and accessible, such as this December 15, 2009 HIT Policy meeting.

The two blogs, Health IT Buzz and FACA Blog, have been great examples of using social media to encourage participation in the process. With the recent announcement of NHIN Direct, there is another opportunity through this new blog to help expand the breadth of the NHIN to create a means for direct communication between providers. And now opening the @ONC HealthIT Twitter account shows further efforts in using social media to provide a platform for civic engagement. I am very impressed with the ability of the staff to use these tools effectively.

Now of course, there are still some areas for improvement. The organizational chart was updated only after much pestering. And although I know it is not a top priority in their efforts, nor should it be, I hope to see much better transparency in the publication of a listing of public employees and contractors, with some clearly defined roles. The CMS organizational chart is a nice model for the type of information,

although even this could be improved upon. I'm confident that as time goes by we will see the ONC continue to lead in innovative ways of communicating and collaborating using Web 2.0 technologies.

The ONC has a monstrous amount of work yet to accomplish, so there have been and there will continue to be challenges in their efforts to be as open and transparent as possible. But this office has shown a remarkable willingness to think outside of the box and try new ways of operating. I believe that the ONC can truly be a model for other offices within HHS and for other federal agencies that are trying to move toward government 2.0 practices.

Yammer: Will viral work in the enterprise?

I work for a very large company and at some point or another someone started a Yammer account based on our email domain. Starting on whatever day that was, Yammer commenced its viral expansion and its spread has really been quite impressive and rapid. Last time I looked we were approaching 3000 users.

The usage demonstrates all the free-scaling behaviors you'd expect though, so not everyone is yammering away. Still both the growth and the impact have been impressive. We are developing a nice network of the kind of weak connections that tend to "small world" a big enterprise like ours. It's always difficult to quantify the benefits of "soft" collaboration but I'm really happy with what I see and I've personally enjoyed the interactions and my expanded network.

I think Yammer has done so well because it's a really good product with well thought out features that make Twitter seem kinda retro. It has a nice slick interface, threaded conversations, and no pesky 140 char limit (which is countered by a "return key = submit" that inhibits multi-paragraph posts). They are also working to create the kinds of features that enterprises need to feel comfy: an api that includes directory integration, an Outlook module and etc.

However, despite all that, I'm bummed to say I don't think they are going to make it.

The question of data privacy and ownership comes up over and over in our Yammer discussions. The last time it came up the thread ran for nearly 100 responses. Even though the typical post is something like "Who is using Grails?" or "Is the X application slow for everyone today or just for me?" data privacy is simply one of the biggest concerns going for a lot of companies these days. The mere suggestion that our data isn't under our control is a big deal.

This point was demonstrated to me in a personal and compelling way during my first week on Yammer. I mentioned a client meeting so that I could share a few tidbits with colleagues. Hours later I was surprised and dismayed when a Google search revealed that my comments had been re-posted to the friendfeed of someone I didn't even know. Someone on our network had written a quick and dirty app to follow his Yammer RSS feed and re-post everything to friendfeed. Then for good measure he followed everyone in our network. When I "politely

suggested" he take it down he equally politely explained to me that I just didn't get Web 2.0.

Despite that kind of hiccup, I don't think data privacy is the death knell. After all, no one has told us to stop using it yet. The real problem is that Yammer thinks viral works the same way in the enterprise that it works on the web. It doesn't.

Yammer, by being free and viral, is demonstrating in that soft benefit kind of way to lots of enterprises like ours that networks of weak connections and "ambient collaboration" are useful. Usage is creating a pool of users and even executives that "get it." But they are playing their cards too early and are probably going end up as little more than a contribution to someone else's cost of sales.

Recently a thread started with "does anyone know how to remove people from Yammer that left the company?" Well, it turns out that's an admin function and only available to paying customers.

While we have grown rapidly and virally, the "admin issue" is coming to a head with only about 1% of the company holding an account and probably more like .1% actively posting. There is no way this is going to be a level of usage that an enterprise like ours sees as lock-in. And it won't for anyone else's either.

If the average company has an attrition rate of 10% it means that EVERY company that adopts Yammer virally is going to start to have this conversation well before adoption has locked them in. Every company will face the problem of removing ex-employees by the time they reach relatively low penetration rates. If it's a 25 person shop it may be easier to just pay the \$3/employee per month than worry about it, but for any reasonably sized enterprise this is going to force an off-budget-cycle decision that involves real dollars before adoption has locked them in.

The other problem with viral adoption as a strategy is this: I may love using Yammer, but I'm not Yammer's customer, our IT department is. And they already have SharePoint. What Yammer doesn't understand, and what Microsoft has known for years, is that IT makes these decisions, not the users.

While Yammer is going viral with users out at the edge, Microsoft perfected its S1P1 virus to attack the very core of the IT enterprise. So, when it comes to enterprise microblogging, The Microsoft Office SharePoint Server (MOSS) and its various add ons may be mediocrity in code form, but it's already there. And being there counts.



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