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Book Review

Noveck, B. S. (2009). Wiki Government. How Technology Can Make Government Better, Democracy Stronger, and Citizens More Powerful. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press. 224 pp. $28.95 USD (hardcover).

Wiki government is an interesting book that proposes the use of information technologies to improve democratic government. Beth Noveck does a very nice job in using the "Peer-to-Patent" project as an example and potential initial step of a broader and much more extensive use of technologies for citizen participation to make government more open and more effective. The author argues that new information technologies, if used creatively, have the potential to "make government better, democracy stronger, and citizens more powerful". The book is organized in three parts divided in eight chapters. Part one provides some fundamental ideas about the "Peer-to-Patent" project and describes some of the implications of a new collaborative and participatory governance model. Part two explains in much more detail the "Peer-to-Patent" project, its motivations, development, and how it works today. Finally, part three reflects on the "Peer-to-Patent" experience and proposes several ways to extend this collaborative democracy model to many other aspects of government and society. For the purposes of this review, I will talk about each chapter first and then I will attempt to provide an overall appraisal of the book.

Chapter 1 briefly describes the beginning of the "Peer-to-Patent" project and how an innovative idea started getting support from large companies and from the United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) itself. The development of the project was indeed a collaborative experience involving not only patent experts, but also academics, journalists, and technologists. Moreover, the chapter talks about other countries, which are implementing the "Peer-to Patent" initiative with some modifications to their own contexts. Noveck suggests that this collaborative model has implications far beyond the patent offices. "The technology and social processes that drive Peer-to-Patent can be used to solicit participation in governance on the basis of professional expertise, or local context and experiences, or willingness to do research and hard work." (p. 14). According to Noveck, there are three main arguments throughout her book: "collaboration as a distinct form of democratic participation, visual deliberation, and egalitarian self selection." (p. 18). Accordingly, she argues that not everybody needs to participate in the same policy arena or in the same way. Therefore, it is necessary to create many diverse spaces for public participation, in such a way that most people have opportunities to engage with government.

Chapter 2, entitled "The Single Point of Failure", proposes that governments are designed with the idea that government officials and public managers have more information and expertise than citizens. However, Noveck argues that government agencies make decisions every day and those decisions are not always made with all the necessary information or with the time to analyze and understand the information available. In addition, the chapter mentions that citizen participation is most of the time conceptualized as deliberation, but with the development of new information technologies, participation could be thought as collaboration instead. In her vision, "the emphasis is not [or should not be, RG] on participation for its own sake but on inviting experts, loosely defined as those with expertise about a problem, to engage in information gathering, information evaluation and measurement, and the development of specific solutions for implementation." (p. 39). Therefore, in this context, collaboration implies that people can meaningfully participate with their knowledge and expertise and help government to make better decisions.

Chapter 3 is entitled “Patents and the Information Deficit” and explains the patent process in some detail, emphasizing the use of information within the process. Noveck reminds us of the purpose of patents. “Patents are intended to advance technological and scientific knowledge by stimulating investment in new products, methods, and concepts. By creating barriers to competitive entry, patents increase the prospective return on investment in innovation.” (p. 49). She also mentions that sometimes the patent office fails to get the necessary information and this affects its decision making process. This is in part, because under current law patent examiners are assumed to be experts or at least good enough to discover the prior art for a specific patent application. In essence, the examiners use their own search tools, which contain information about expired patents, current patents, the literature cited in previous patent applications, as well as a list of the most similar patents to the application being searched. However, this process is not always enough to make a good determination of the novelty or non-obviousness of a patent. In addition, patent applications are increasing in quantity and diversity, maybe because some individuals and organizations are paying more attention to the value of patents in terms of litigation and license fees instead of considering the original purpose of patents.

In Chapter 4, entitled “Designing for Collaborative Democracy”, Noveck describes the process of developing the Peer-to-Patent Web site and uses it to exemplify how technology can be used for innovative solutions, involving collaborative practices. She also presents some of the early results of the Peer-to-Patent project. Noveck uses the term visual deliberation (in contrast to the term deliberation) to emphasize that the type of solution she is proposing is not about talking only, but also about helping people to understand their own collaborative work and make better decisions. “Visual deliberation can communicate the group’s “physics” – the organization and governance rules that structure how participants interact as a group.” (p. 71). However, she explains that this does not refer to any specific technology, but to a design that allows participants to see their own work and roles reflected on the screen and to be able to organize themselves. Hence, the design of the interface and the interactions it allows among the participants is very important, specifically for gathering, managing, and understanding information. In this chapter, Noveck also presents the process of conceptualizing the development of the Peer-to-Patent project. It was a collaborative process with many actors with different expertise involved. It was also a transparent process in which all materials were available to all participants. Overall, Noveck thinks the process was both collaborative and effective. In addition, she says that “the idea of interdisciplinary collaboration among lawyers, technologists, and policymakers might seem like a self-evident good, yet it is rarely practice in government.” (p. 98).

Chapter 5, “Social Life of Information”, argues that government should go beyond transparency understood as making information available to people. Noveck argues that information for collaboration should be accessible, searchable, and usable. She also proposes that information should be collected and distributed in such a way that promotes participation. Visualization is one way to do this. “The science of information visualization focuses precisely on trying to render information more intelligible by making it graphic and visual. Visual strategies for information make it easier to intuit complex information.” (p. 112). In addition, group participation could also help to improve the quality and usefulness of information. According to Noveck “it is not a far leap to imagine the idea of Atlas and Constellations [a best-practices social networking site, RG] applied in government to connect federal, state, and local officials to answer questions and solve problems collaboratively.” (p. 118). This chapter and the following ones suggest that the experience gained in the Peer-to-Patent project could also be valuable to other areas of policymaking.

Chapter 6 is entitled “History of Citizen Participation” and explains why previous efforts to promote citizen participation have failed. It includes a historical account of previous attempts to create greater

openness and transparency as well as to foster greater participation of citizens in government decision making. Noveck argues that "one important consequence of the shortcomings of public consultation is a reduction in the quality of the data used to make government decisions. (p. 133). One way to deal with this situation is the incorporation of peer review in different government processes. However, not all these peer reviews are done with the rigor and neutrality of their counterparts in academia. In addition, many of these reviews are done late in the process to have a good impact on decision making. With the use of Internet technologies, governments could now consult much more people without having face-to-face meetings and taking advantage of the expertise of many interested individuals. Noveck ends this chapter with the following phrase "despite the absence of universal success with citizen participation practices in government either before the Internet, when they were impractical, or since, when they continue to be hamstrung by the limited vision of what citizens can contribute, participation is both possible and desirable." (p. 145).

Chapter 7 entitled "Citizen Participation in a Collaborative Democracy" analyzes how these innovations could happen in the near future. Noveck argues that government is not thought as a place for innovation. However, in her view, political leadership could change this situation and promote important changes in government, including collaborative democracy. Using the examples of policy Wikis and Civic Juries, she demonstrates how governments could go beyond the Peer-to-Patent project in terms of citizen participation and engagement. She also proposes other collaborative democracy related ideas such as crowdsourcing communication, championing collaboration, coordinating collaboration, collaborative brainstorming, networked brain trust, structured notice and comment, and decentralizing participation. Noveck mentions that in the case of the Peer-to-Patent project, the fact that an outside organization was pushing new strategies and new technologies was also helpful. This could be extended with the creation of collaborative governance labs, in which government with the help and advice of academia and the private sector could develop and test innovations using emergent technologies. She also proposes that the new conceptualization of the Office of the Chief Technology Officer should be one of a collaborative and decentralized network of public managers and outside experts, "who would meet online to help plan his agenda , identify new technologies and best practices, design and develop pilot programs, and conduct evaluations." (p. 166).

Finally, Chapter 8 lists and explains the "Lessons Learned" from the Peer-to-Patent initiative and suggests that these lessons could be useful for other technology applications and policy areas. It would be practically impossible for a book review to describe each of the lessons, but here is the complete list: (1) ask the right questions, (2) ask the right people, (3) design the process for the designed end, (4) design for groups, not individuals, (5) use the screen to show the group back to itself, (6) divide work into roles and tasks, (7) harness the power of reputation, (8) make policies, not websites, (9) pilot new ideas, (10) focus on outcomes, not inputs, (11) look at the bigger picture and redesign governance, (12) use technology together with law and policy, (13) empower individuals in collaborative democracy processes. Together, these recommendations seem to be a powerful strategy to implement what the author called 'collaborative democracy initiatives'. In fact, Noveck proposes that these lessons could be considered the foundations of a new design science for government. This design science would promote citizen participation and collaboration among individuals with expertise in certain topics and who want to share their knowledge for a better government and a better society. "The official no longer needs to be the sole decisionmaker. Instead, new technology can help bridge the chasm between public participation and public policy in issues ranging from climate change to patents. Collaborative governance is an idea whose time has come." (p. 190).

Overall, Wiki Government is a useful book with very interesting stories and valuable recommendations. I believe the book is a good reference for public managers, policymakers, academics, and citizens alike.

I would highly recommend reading this book, either as a whole or looking for specific topics, innovative ideas, or lessons. The book is well written, and people with very different backgrounds should be able to grasp the main messages and most of the specific concepts. The recommendations are creative and take advantage of the potential of new information and communication technologies. In addition, the book conveys the very important message that technology does not work without some necessary management, law, and policy changes. The transformation of government into a Wiki government through collaborative democracy is a complex, but feasible and desirable reform. Citizens should be more involved and engage with government, and new technologies have the potential to make this happen extensively and intensively in the near future. This book provides some initial ideas of how to think about this and how to start the long path to a better government, a stronger democracy, and a more powerful citizenry.

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