

Watching the Watchers: Crowd-sourcing government oversight and civic engagement

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Over the last few years a community of technologists has been coming together around what I call “civic hacking,” which is finding creative technological solutions to civic problems. There have always been civic hackers in society, but I think this is a new movement, one that I’m proud to be a part of. Civic hackers do things like building websites to help people track bills in the U.S. Congress --- that’s what I do --- or help get the public’s questions onto Obama’s desk, or help track government spending, and civic hackers make policy suggestions to government about how to use technology to improve transparency. I’m going to talk a little about crowd-sourcing civics.

But before that I’ll tell you about myself. I run the website GovTrack.us, which is basically a free congress-tracking service. You can find the status of all legislation in Congress, information on Members of Congress including videos and statistics, congressional district maps, and roll call votes. You can read the text of legislation and see how bills are revised through the legislative process, with basically inline diffs. The site is independent, nonpartisan, and noncommercial, it’s entirely automated by gathering data from official government websites, and it is open source. I launched it in 2004 and now has around 20 thousand visitors per day.

When I started GovTrack I really felt deeply that data about government should be open, free. So the database that I assemble to run GovTrack, I make it freely available for reuse, and a growing number of websites are making use of it. Through GovTrack directly and the downstream data users indirectly, the number of end-users that have seen this data is probably in the millions.

Now back to what I really intended to talk about. Crowd-sourcing is one of the tools civic hackers have at their arsenal. As you probably know, crowd sourcing is giving a lot of small tasks to a bunch of anonymous helpers in order to accomplish a bigger task. In the off-line world, I think the Garage Sale is a nice crowd-sourcing task. The big task: getting rid of my unwanted junk. I solicit helpers by putting up lots of signs around the neighborhood; they come and take my stuff. Nominal amounts of money are exchanged. Maybe that’s for tax purposes. Who knows. The poster child of crowd sourcing government is the Peer to Patent project, if you know it. That’s the government being too cheap to run its own Patent Office and volunteers from the public doing the work instead. Good *implementation* of crowd-sourcing, yes. It makes the world *better*, yes. But rather than using crowd-sourcing to patch government problems, what about using it to promote civic education, civic engagement, and government oversight.

So this is being tried.

I’m going to tell you about four examples, two that didn’t work and two that seem to be working.

I’ll start with an example that was pretty cool but fizzled out before it even started. This is what was named the Congressional Committees Project. The goal of the Congressional Committees Project was to assign one person, a regular citizen, to each committee and subcommittee in Congress. That person would follow the committee closely and report back what the committee was doing to the group in a non-partisan way. Committees are where the legislative process *actually* happens; they vet bills and

revise them before they go to general debate. It's a complex and almost entirely hidden process. Anyway, this project was in late 2006, right before the Democratic majority took over. A regular guy, a manager at a telemarketing company named John Wonderlich posted a note on DailyKos like you would a garage sale, that he was starting up this project. And 144 other Kos readers saw the note and joined it. They built a wiki around the project, and started a mail list. They were all set to begin, just waiting for Congress to come back from winter recess, when a horrible thing happened. A staffer for the new Speaker Nancy Pelosi contacted Wonderlich and... asked John to have the group collect some feedback about how Congress could be more transparent in the coming years. Sorry, !! Pelosi's office asked this group for advice! Well, it was horrible for the committees project because John went off to lead what became the Open House Project, which has been hugely successful in its own right and a cornerstone of the work of Sunlight Foundation. But that was the end of the committees project. These days John can be seen being interviewed on foreign news shows about government transparency.

This idea, though, really captured why crowd-sourcing is important in the civic hacking field. Our government is just far too complex to leave it to our existing institutions of oversight, education, and engagement to manage it all. The mainstream media, already suffering as it is, can't cover what's going on in every congressional committee. And it's not like the committees aren't worth covering. The committees are where it's *at* in Congress. Crowd-sourcing is maybe the *only* way to keep an eye on all of them.

A little bit later a software developer named Matthew Burton built ReadableLaws.org. The site asked its wonky users to help out the less-wonky sector of the public by translating the text of legislation into plain English, to explain what a bill not only said but what it meant. This project also went defunct: the task might have been too difficult and too few people knew about the project.

Last summer I got an email from one of my GovTrack users asking a procedural question about how Congress works. The question was: Can congressmen change their votes? It made me realize that there are a lot of simple questions that people would like to ask about Congress but have no one to turn to. Anyway, I wasn't going to research everyone's questions, but maybe there were questions that other visitors to GovTrack could answer --- maybe because they are knowledgeable, maybe because they'll go and do some leg work to find out, like reading the text of a bill. And that was all true. I added Q&A boxes on pages for bills. A visitor reading about a bill has the chance right there to post a question. If questions have already been posted, it lists a few and gives the user the chance to answer the questions right on that page. No sooner did I add this box did users start asking questions and answering other user's questions. 4,700 substantive questions and answers have been posted since last summer --- that's about one question or answer for every thousand visits to the site. Here are the questions with the most number of answers. "How will this bill impact day traders who may trade dozens to hundreds of trades per day?" "Will this bill regulate private gardens?" "If passed, will previous firearms purchases grandfather the registration requirement, or will registration information need to be provided?"

The approach I took here was to lower the barrier to entry as much as possible. No log-in was necessary, and the task could be very small. Just type a question or answer and hit submit.

Besides those 4,500 submissions, another 5,000 submissions are just nonsense: really, people making up facts in a kind of Freudian wish-fulfillment way. Answering a question about regulating food production, one visitor wrote: "I believe this bill would make everyone criminals if they planted flowers or trees in their backyard." That obviously wouldn't be true. It's not hard to see how someone might read that from the text of the bill, which was very complex of course. But it's still clearly false. The second answer I have here is about a gun control bill, and the poster says the real purpose of the bill is

being a first step to gun confiscation. Even if it were true, the poster surely didn't have special access to the thoughts of the sponsor of the bill. So I moderate the submissions to keep them focused. But this is an actual problem. I don't know how much of the posts I let through are actually true, and I feel responsible if I'm helping to promote facts made up out of thin air. I really don't know what to do about this.

Crowd-sourcing civic education brings out a kind of market failure. Lots of people are interested in what's happening in Congress, at least on some subject or another, but they're not in a position to make heads or tails of bills. Even if one can piece together how a bill actually changes the law, which sometimes is a real feat, it's often impossible to understand the ramifications without being an expert. There's been a bill in Congress about unionization. One side says it takes secret ballots away from unions while the other side says it merely adds an additional option. While it might be true that the bill only adds a new option, based on the letter of the proposed law, reality is complex and the practical significance of a new option is something only those familiar with union practices can tell us. There's just no way to know the meaning of this bill merely from reading it, and it's hard to find real answers out there already.

The next example is an experiment that I just finished running this week: a collaborative letter to Congress. If you don't know, Congress is under siege --- they're being barraged by messages from constituents increasing at a rate that far out-paces increases in staff sizes in congressional offices. Congressional offices want to hear from their constituents --- they use letters like a poll --- but they also receive too many to really read them all, not to mention reply in any meaningful way. // The crowd-sourcing approach is to send a group letter to congress. But, this "group letter" is not to be confused with a petition. Congressmen don't take petitions too seriously --- it's too easy to sign your name on a petition, so congressmen put less value on a name on a petition than, say, a personalized letter. Aggregating voices should ease the burden on congressmen. It makes constituent communication more efficient. But the letter also has to carry weight. The people that sign on to the letter should have a part to play in its wording. The goal with a group letter is to have a best of both worlds between a personal letter and a petition.

A new startup website MixedInk.org built a tool to do this recently, and so I am putting their tool to the test for this first of its kind experiment. MixedInk lets people write letters, remix content from other letters, and then rate the writings of others. The barrier to entry is much higher than my bill Q&A. You have to create an account on MixedInk, you have to figure out what to do and how to use their site, and then, at least in the beginning, you have to write a letter. Still, the motivated citizens will do it. Visitors to GovTrack's page for a gun control bill now see a note from me at the top of the page to follow a link and start writing and rating letters opposing this bill, and some do. I chose to do a letter opposing this bill --- certainly not because *I* oppose it --- but because from the Q&A tool I could tell that a *lot* of people were coming to this page with an opinion they wanted to vent. It was the perfect bill to test the idea out on.

450 people contributed to this project, either by writing, editing, or rating. That's about four in every thousand people who came to look at the bill on GovTrack. The top-rated letter has changed a few times, improving each time. At the end it was a remix of four people's writing. It's too long for me to read, and it starts off a little pompous so I don't want you to get the wrong idea. But the letter is NOT bad! I plan to take a trip down to DC and deliver it to appropriate Members of Congress in person --- maybe I can make a splash out of it.

There really are a bunch of other important, successful projects out there that *I'm not* running,

and so this slide is mostly a shout-out to my civic hacking bros working on StimulusWatch.org, the Fifty States Project, and Honda 2.0.

Anyway, this all I hope is just the beginning of crowd-sourcing civics. Thanks.