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Five Pieces of Advice For New Civic Hackers

BY [NICK JUDD](#) | Tuesday, February 12 2013

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation is getting ready to invest a lot of money in the idea that technology can help scrape the rust from the corroded gears of American democracy.

This being our jam at techPresident, I'm going to put on my editor's hat and editorialize: If you become involved and decide to enter the field of civic hacking, here are five things you ought to know.

The Knight Foundation is expected Tuesday [to launch its latest News Challenge](#), an iterative competition that will end with Knight spreading \$5 million in funding across some combination of projects. This year, Knight is focused on "open government" — tech-savvy projects that enable a more transparent, accountable, or participatory government.

Knight has called for an "inspiration" phase of the challenge beginning Tuesday, where people share problems for hackers to think about and success stories they might want to emulate.

After three years covering civic hackers and the tools they build, I've got some advice to share. By the way — and as a disclosure — this isn't all from my time on the sidelines; in 2010 I managed candidate and media partnerships for [10 Questions](#), Personal Democracy Media's engagement project around the midterm elections, funded by Knight.

1. Every story has already been told.

Someone has already had your idea. For instance, [Change.org went through a great many phases](#) before it became what it is now — at least one of which might be exactly what you are interested in doing.

There are three ways you can respond. You can compete with a product that demonstrates an understanding of projects that came before your own, their weaknesses and lessons learned. You can collaborate by building on old code or partnering with the creators of past projects. Or you can do neither of those things, embark upon a redundant enterprise launched in ignorance, and either waste some of your time through inefficiency or all of your time through an avoidable failure. Up to you.

2. If you're building a new "social network," just go home.

People talk about politics and civic life across networks they've already formed, and pick what social network to use based on how well they know the person they're reaching out to contact. (For a take on this with more depth, check out Lee Rainie's new book with Barry Wellman, [Networked: The New Social Operating System](#).) Creating a new social network adds the problem of needing to draw users onto that platform from other platforms to the already difficult business of improving government and civic life.

We recently [profiled an effort funded by Knight](#), called Change By Us, that is struggling to keep people engaged for exactly this reason. The project's maintainers are having a hard time finding a bridge between people with something to say about improvements to their communities and this online platform, and an even harder time getting people to walk across it. This is the latest example among many. [A new social network is not on the hierarchy of needs](#). But morality and achievement are, which is probably why people looking for grant money to invest in neighborhood improvement projects slogged through the drudgery of creating a Change By Us profile — they were asked to do so as a condition of an external grant program.

Another platform, Votizen, tried to become a social network for people who want to help other people get elected. There's an issue with this approach that, like Change By Us, highlights why social networks are a difficult approach for civic technologists: One of the main problems with American civic life is that so few people are yearning to get involved. There aren't a lot of people just burning to go knock on doors for a candidate, especially a local one. Votizen [learned this the hard way](#) when it

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CLIMATE CHANGE ACTIVIST LANDS WHITE HOUSE MEETING AFTER HIS ONE-MAN PROTEST

Remember Brad Johnson, the climate change activist who interrupted White House Senior Advisor Valerie Jarrett's speech during RootsCamp last November? [GO](#)

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IN TINY ARCHIPELAGO, TENSIONS OVER THE FUTURE OF TELECOM

Tiny, disputed Pacific archipelagos have been in the news recently, [with Japan bolstering online security](#) against Chinese hacks related to the Japanese claim on the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Now another island chain is caught in a tug-of-war between several East Asian countries — and this time, the weapons of choice are [mobile networks](#).

[GO](#)

CHECK OUT THIS COOL THING THE WHITE HOUSE IS TESTING FOR #SOTU

The director of the White House Office of Digital Strategy, Macon Phillips, is [asking folks on Twitter](#) to kick the tires on [this tool](#) that looks like it will allow people to offer feedback on any sentence from President Barack Obama's speech tonight with a click of the mouse. [GO](#)

BING PULSE AIMS TO GIVE REAL-TIME PUBLIC REACTION TO SOTU

Tonight during President Obama's State of the Union speech, Microsoft's Bing search platform will be offering users a potentially intriguing way to register their response to the President's words: a real-time sentiment tracker that will produce an aggregated trend line of people's reactions, called [Bing Pulse](#). "It's

attracted a very small user base this election year. It announced in January an acquisition by Causes.com.

3. Bring people to government and to politics.

Compare platforms like ChangeByUs to something like [Front Porch Forum](#), the neighbors-only social network. Front Porch Forum wants to help people connect with, and stay in touch with, their neighbors, something they might conceivably want to do. They don't have to be in a fervor of public-mindedness to get on their local forum. They might just want to complain about someone who doesn't pick up after their dog.

This type of platform offers promise for civic hackers. If you know that people in a given place will be affected by something going on in city government, Front Porch Forum is a great opportunity to reach a network of people who care about that place. Some number of people in that network might organize to get involved.

This is an example of a broader idea I hope Knight News Challenge entrants take to heart. It's safe to assume there is no army of civic-minded altruists just itching for a website that will let them interact with government. But there are people organized by place and by interest — like the public school all of their children attend, the dog park they all use, the property taxes they all pay or the municipal water they all drink — who might not have a lot of information, or time, or both. These people all have a very clear self-interest in a very narrow aspect of what government is doing.

One of the most successful [Code for America projects to come from its first year](#) highlights exactly this. In 2011, the Boston Code for America team was in a rough spot. They wanted to build a whiz-bang suite of tools tied to Boston's student ID cards. The only problem was that government officials couldn't be fast enough or flexible enough — especially with potentially identifiable information about students — to do any of that. CfA and their Boston partners tabled the student ID card project.

What they did instead was create [DiscoverBPS](#), a web application that allows public-school parents to figure out exactly where they want to send their kid to school by showing the schools they're eligible for and even measuring if they are within walking distance. DiscoverBPS took an arcane and frustrating aspect of every parent's school experience and made it more accessible. It solved a problem everyone had and allowed people a way in to an aspect of their government. It will not change government. It was not even a particularly sweeping idea. But it was an instant hit.

Besides building tools that solve obvious problems, there are so many opportunities to reach out and find people who may not even know that government is causing — or can fix — a problem they have. Tools like the Foursquare API, Facebook, Twitter search and even Disqus comments might surface networks of people with thoughts on how cabs work (paging Uber) or how late a city park is open or why bus service in their city sucks more than is reasonable.

These folks probably don't have a constructive outlet for their frustration. They don't know there are other people who feel the same way they do and they don't know that if they organized themselves they could do something about it, but they are there, en masse on this or that platform, already offering evidence of their existence. Use technology to connect them, to help them find out what they can do for themselves, and to make it more obvious why they should take the time to do so.

[Loudsauce does this](#). Rather than create new hoops to jump through for people who are trying to take an action, Loudsauce solves a problem they have by translating their interest and their dollars into media buys for things like TV spots, billboards, or bus-shelter signs.

Does your idea create an extra step for someone wants to take a civic action? Stop. Go home. Think of something else. [Does your idea make easy things easy and hard things possible?](#) Proceed!

4. If you need government approval, just go home.

Even champions within government have a hard time navigating bureaucracy. There are exceptions to this rule. For example, the New York City Comptroller [is pushing at the edges of what has already been done](#) when it comes to municipal transparency. But this can only happen because of how New York City works; the comptroller is an independently elected official with broad authority over municipal finances and, by design, a political interest in doing things that signal the office is a watchdog keeping tabs on the mayor.

So the municipal system of checks and balances might be a way in. But if your project needs someone inside Agency X to grant access to information that would expose Agency X to any kind of political risk — and that could even mean pissing off their usual technology vendors — then stop now, go to the bar and get drunk instead, because you'll get about as much done.

You will get more done more quickly if you assume that government actors will get onboard late in the game, if at all, and not necessarily because of any misbehavior or incompetence. Bureaucracy is slow and risk-averse, laws are outdated and cities are struggling to cope with 21st-century living. This, in part, is the problem you are trying to solve. Code for America learned that in its first year.

5. Doing anything meaningful will also be picking a fight.

Get comfortable with the fact that anything that would be transformative to government will create enemies for you. Internally, there's already a whole industry feasting on government IT needs that is wholly unapologetic about using personal connections and political savvy to edge out any new competition. Externally, any project that frees up more information or allows people to organize will create political risk. No one who makes a living by getting elected every two or four years wants more political risk. No bureaucrat in a culture habituated to bring swift punishment for failure wants more political risk. But people who accept that government could be working better believe that government must change, and change requires risk. This is why, unless you're Hank Scheinkopf or something and have a lot of strings to pull, you should just go home if you need any kind of government clearance to get your idea done.

almost like an online dial group," says Adam Sohn, Bing's general manager. "You'll be able to vote every couple of seconds, positive, neutral or negative. And we'll be showing that on a live ticker at [bing.com/politics](#), alongside the speech." [GO](#)

monday >

OBAMA TO DO A 'HANGOUT' AFTER STATE OF THE UNION

President Barack Obama will participate in a Google Hangout this Thursday to discuss the State of the Union. His appearance follows recent discussions with [Vice President Joe Biden, who spoke recently on gun policy](#) and [Cecilia Muñoz, director of the White House Domestic Policy Council, who discussed immigration reform](#). [GO](#)

friday >

ON SOCIAL MEDIA, THE AFRICAN DIASPORA REDIRECTS THE CONVERSATION ON INTERNATIONAL AID

When the much-hyped [Kony 2012 campaign](#) crashed and burned last year, it became a symbol of the misguided approach taken by many glamour causes in international development. The story quickly became a laughingstock in the international media. Yet even before one of the campaign's directors was [found running naked on the streets of San Diego](#), Ugandans and other Africans living in diaspora were engaged in a social media takedown of Kony 2012. [GO](#)

NEW YORKERS CAN TRACK SNOWPLOWS' MOVEMENTS AS 'NEMO' FLIES OVERHEAD

There is some disagreement on what to call the storm — some Twitter users favor [#snowpacabra](#) — but whether it's named after Captain Nemo or a mythical blood-sucking beast, New Yorkers will be able to track how city officials are doing cleaning up in its wake using an app from the city. [GO](#)

thursday >

EVERYBLOCK SHUTS DOWN

The early hyperlocal news and information portal [EveryBlock](#) announced its closing today. The site was founded by Adrian Holovaty in 2007 with a \$1.1 million grant from the Knight Foundation. It was bought by [msnbc.com](#) in 2009, which was in turn acquired by NBC News last year. "As we refined our larger strategy for NBC News Digital and dug more into the financials, we came to the conclusion it was not a fit," wrote Vivian Schiller, Senior Vice President and Chief Digital Officer for NBC Universal, in an email

Some projects have done a great job of changing the terms of the game and transforming adversaries to allies, or have recognized a political opportunity and seized it.

Tea Party Republicans in New Hampshire complained for years about how backwards their state legislature's online portal was. IT staff working for the legislature didn't want to change anything and there was no political incentive for their bosses to force them to, so the New Hampshire Liberty Alliance built their own portal and started scraping the data. In 2011, then-first-term state lawmaker George Lambert [told me](#) that the scraper was pulling down 6,000-8,000 pages a day, which was enough to create problems for the statehouse's IT staff.

After the 2010 Tea Party wave pushed a number of transparency-minded lawmakers into office, especially in New Hampshire's unique legislature, they had a unique combination of opportunity and motive to make a change. The IT staff wanted the load on their servers to go away and the new leadership in the statehouse was receptive to fresh ideas. So the legislature changed how it did things to offer data on bills in bulk format, which developers could download once a day instead of scraping 8,000 pages every night.

Similarly, New York State Democrats took over the State Senate in 2008 after years in the minority. They immediately called shenanigans over a long list of what they called outrageous spending by Republicans under the leadership of their majority leader, Joe Bruno. Bruno [was convicted of corruption](#) and Democrats, new to the majority and eager to distinguish themselves, adopted a platform of transparency (advocated, in part, by techPresident publisher Andrew Rasiej and editor Micah Sifry, and carried forward by then-Senate Chief Information Officer Andrew Hoppin. Another disclosure: Hoppin is connected to the firm we now use for our own web development). The State Senate started publishing payroll, improved the way it released the text of bills, relaunched its website and modernized its IT infrastructure. But state Dems were not immune to scandal either. Three Democrats in the senate got together to become power brokers during their party's brief time in office. [All three have either pleaded guilty or been found guilty of felonies](#), two related to public corruption and the other for lifting money from a network of Bronx health care clinics that he founded. Perhaps partly because of that, and thanks to some delicate political maneuvering behind the scenes, Republicans took on the transparency technology work the Democrats began and have not rolled back any of the progress they made.

But, in private conversations with people involved in civic technology, I often hear of a project that promised to save money for a city or involve more people in decision-making that came up against opposition from an entrenched incumbent of either the vendor or political variety. So, [as Joe Biden says](#): Gird your loins.

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to techPresident. "Hyperlocal is not part of our focus for the future," she added. [GO](#)

ICYMI: NATIONBUILDER'S CO-FOUNDER JOE GREEN LEAVES TO JOIN ANDREESSEN HOROWITZ

NationBuilder's Co-Founder Joe Green announced Wednesday that he's stepping down from day-to-day operations at the company and joining the venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz as an entrepreneur-in-residence. Green had been the company's president. He didn't provide any specifics in his Facebook posting about his departure, but some ... [GO](#)

'PEERBLOG,' GERMAN HOMAGE TO AMERICAN-STYLE POLITICS, SHUTTERED AFTER DDOS ATTACKS

The man behind a blog funded by anonymous business donors supporting German Social Democratic chancellor candidate Peer Steinbrück has permanently closed his site after several denial of service attacks. [Der Spiegel reported today](#). [GO](#)

SOCIAL FUNDRAISING PLATFORM RALLY PLANTS ITS FLAG IN EUROPE, OPENS UP IN BERLIN

Rally, the San Francisco-based social fundraising platform, whose users range from Mitt Romney's 2012 presidential campaign to thousands of more esoteric personal charitable causes, threw open its doors for business Thursday in Berlin. [GO](#)

FOR THE FIRST TIME, JAPAN'S GOVERNMENT HOSTS A HACKATHON

Japan's [recent strides in open data](#) have displayed a growing interest in transparency from both citizens and public officials. A hackathon held this past weekend shows that the government is already letting developers in on one high-level project: maintaining national security. [GO](#)

AUSTRALIAN POLICE TURN TO TWITTER #MYTHBUSTING DURING FLOODS

During natural disasters, social media can be an invaluable source of information – and misinformation. The days leading up to Hurricane Sandy brought [a digital flood of faked and misattributed photos](#) of the storm to social networks. In times of crisis, false reports are easily circulated throughout a panicked population. Yet the rapid proliferation of these rumors can be countered just as quickly on social networks. During Australia's flood-prone summer, law enforcement officials have been using a simple Twitter solution to curb the spread of disaster rumors. [GO](#)

wednesday >

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**Luigi Montanez** • 2 hours ago

These are some sober observations made from years of collective experience. And I mostly agree with them, particularly the bit about picking a fight.

But there's one key thing I want to point out: Civic hacking can be really fun and rewarding! Don't be discouraged by the pitfalls listed above! There's the general feeling of accomplishment that comes with building and shipping any app, but there's a force multiplier effect when you know that the app is being used to help real people out there, and make government work a little bit better. It's a wonderful feeling.

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WHAT CAN THE TRUTHTELLER APP DO FOR JOURNALISM?

The Washington Post has launched TruthTeller, a prototype tool that fact-checks online videos by lining up spoken words against verified information sources. The implications are big for catching politicians and other public figures in real-time lies, but what other uses could TruthTeller – which was [born out of a Knight Foundation grant](#) – be put to for journalistic practice?

[GO](#)**IN GERMANY, AMERICAN-STYLE DARK MONEY POLITICS MEANS A BLOG WITH ANONYMOUS BACKERS**

When Americans today think of Citizens United, Super PACs and controversial outside spending, they might think of the [Colbert Super PAC](#) or TV ads that are financed by shady donors. But in Germany, things work a little different. A group of supporters of Peer Steinbrück, the Social Democratic candidate for chancellor, says they're bringing modern American "political communications" to the German elections — anonymous donors, independent expenditures ... and a blog. [GO](#)

ARE THE DEMOCRATS GOING TO SELL YOUR POLITICAL OPINIONS? IF THEY WERE, NOW THEY'RE NOT

The head of a company that markets information about Democratic voters told ProPublica's Lois Beckett that the private sector might be a "growth area" for his business — and now he tells techPresident the data indicates he should roll back that comment. [GO](#)

*tuesday >***AT HOUSE HEARING, FEW ANSWERS ABOUT THE FUTURE OF INTERNET GOVERNANCE**

An international conference on telecommunications held in Dubai in December has set the stage for a running political fight over control of the Internet, witnesses told members of the House of Representatives in a joint committee hearing on Tuesday.

[GO](#)**YOUTUBE LAUNCHES DEDICATED CHANNEL FOR KENYA ELECTIONS COVERAGE**

Kenya's most wired election season ever is in high gear, with one month to go until polls open. Now Google, a leader in the burgeoning Kenyan tech sector, has expanded its [Kenya Elections Hub](#) site with a [dedicated YouTube channel](#) for election coverage.

[GO](#)**WHITE HOUSE POSTS 'HELP WANTED' SIGN ONLINE FOR CIVIC-MINDED HACKERS**

The White House on Monday said that it's ready to receive applications for the next round of presidential innovation fellows -- civic minded programmers and entrepreneurs interested in working on and implementing new ideas within federal agencies on a short-term basis. [GO](#)

WHITE HOUSE ANNOUNCES A MAJOR UPGRADE TO 'WE THE PEOPLE' PETITION SITE

A just-announced upgrade to the White House's online petitioning site means that developers will soon be able to build applications that display information about petitions, signatures, and responses. When the White House releases its write API, organizations like [SignOn.org](#) or [Change.org](#) will likely be able to collect and submit signatures to a White House petition from their own websites — potentially keeping copies of the email addresses for themselves. [GO](#)