

Crowd-sourcing corruption some challenges, some possible futures

what petrified forests, street music, bath towels and the taxman can tell us about the prospects for its future

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Overview

This article seeks to map out the prospects of crowd-sourcing technologies in the area of corruption-reporting. A flurry of initiative and concomitant media hype in this area has led to exuberant hopes that the end of impunity is not such a distant possibility any more – at least not for the most blatant, ubiquitous and visible forms of administrative corruption, such as bribes and extortion payments that on average almost a quarter of citizens reported to face year in, year out in their daily lives in so many countries around the world (Transparency International 2013).

Only with hindsight will we be able to tell, if these hopes were justified. However, a closer look at an interdisciplinary body of literature on corruption and social mobilisation can help shed some interesting light on these questions and offer a fresh perspective on the potential of social media based crowd-sourcing for better governance and less corruption. So far the potential of crowd-sourcing is mainly approached from a technology-centred perspective. Where challenges are identified, pondered, and worked upon they are primarily technical and managerial in nature, ranging from issues of privacy protection and fighting off hacker attacks to challenges of data management, information validation or fundraising.

In contrast, short shrift is being paid to insights from a substantive, multi-disciplinary and growing body of literature on how corruption works, how it can be fought and more generally how observed logics of collective action and social mobilisation interact with technological affordances and condition the success of these efforts.

This imbalanced debate is not really surprising as it seems to follow the trajectory of the hype-and-bust cycle that we have seen in the public debate for a variety of other technology applications. From electronic health cards to smart government, to intelligent transport systems, all these and many other highly ambitious initiatives start with technology-centric visions of transformational impact. However, over time - with some hard lessons learnt and large sums spent - they all arrive at a more pragmatic and nuanced view on how social and economic forces shape the implementation of such technologies and require a more shrewd design approach, in order to make it more likely that potential actually translates into impact.

At a minimum, a trawl through this literature makes it possible to move beyond some of the most common-sense conjectures and develop a few more granular guesses on the future of crowd-sourcing corruption. At best, this approach may help identify some not so obvious challenges that may arise along the way and ensure that they are considered in the design process of future corruption crowd-sourcing interventions, raising their likelihood of impact and sustainable success.

The remainder of this essay is structured as follows:

Section 1 introduces the concept of crowd-sourcing for good governance. It provides a very brief overview of some related initiatives in this area, alongside some of the challenges and reservations that are commonly raised in the debate.

Section 2 casts the net a bit wider. It looks for interesting insight and cues in the broader social science literature on social mobilisation and corruption. Based on this, it seeks to gain a better understanding of what other more fundamental challenges may lay ahead for crowd-reporting corruption.

Section 3 picks up on these anticipated challenges and presents some ideas on how to address them, both in the design, as well as in the implementation of future crowd-reporting systems, drawing both on emerging insights from impact assessments of conventional social accountability mechanisms as well as lessons learnt within Transparency International's own global network of anti-corruption NGOs, some of which already run crowd-reporting platforms.

1. Crowd-sourcing corruption complaints: a death nail to impunity? Times of huge hopes – and some nagging despair

Ushahidi, See-Click-Fix and Fix My Street may not have been the very first, but so far have certainly been the most impressive and visible demonstration: how dots and sprinkles of individual experiences and observations can be captured and amalgamated into powerful collective accounts of anything from dysfunctional local services and flawed elections to ethnic violence or humanitarian crisis and – rather recently – corruption.

From Armenia to Zimbabwe a new crop of tools promises to put the power of social media at the service of making the scale, scope, geographic spread and human experience of corruption - mostly in the form of bribe payments - salient.

The idea is very straightforward. Easy access to such reporting mechanisms will empower citizens to complain loudly, visibly, safely and nearly instantaneously when corrupt officials and public service providers abuse their positions of entrusted power to extort bribes from citizens. In the pre-crowdsourcing-corruption era the covert and rather confidential nature of dyadic social exchanges that typically characterise corrupt transactions (Granovetter 2007) provided a fertile ground and cover for this type of extortionary practices. Now, the spectre of being dragged into the court of public opinion and being shamed for corrupt overtures serves as a strong deterrent of corruption. The power of visibility and public shaming and the strength in numbers of victimised citizens is assumed to effectively redress the power balance between bribe-requester and bribe payer. The power-in-numbers argument is particularly striking and promising, when considering how ubiquitous bribes are in many countries. Surveys confirm that on average one in four citizens in contact with key public services has been asked for a bribe in any given year, a number that reaches 50 or more percent of the citizenry interacting with public institutions in high-corruption countries (Transparency International 2013).

In essence, crowd-reporting breaks the silence about the daily victimisation and humiliation through corruption is broken. The realisation that so many other fellow citizens are facing and are concerned and outraged about the very same challenges as oneself has long been identified as a tremendously empowering effect. It helps to overcome what social movement scholars such as McAdam, McCarthy et al. (1996) call the general error of attribution, the tendency to see problems not in their systemic nature, but in rather self-centred fashion as related to individual experience. And the potential to empower through making disapproval of corruption more salient also gains plausibility from the vantage point of social psychology, since it may help overcome a situation of pluralistic ignorance where a silent majority of community members disapproves of a specific practice, but no one takes any action in the misguided belief that the practice is actually supported or at least tolerated by the majority of one's fellow citizens (Darley, 2004; Bicchieri and Fukui 1999).

With the cover of secrecy gone, a groundswell of public outrage in the spotlight and potential victims empowered stealthy acts of extortion are made all but impossible. Or so the thinking goes.

This powerful storyline has inspired or at least been closely shadowed by a surge in related crowd-sourcing initiatives. Some of these provide an open reporting window for any complaints about public services¹. Others are focused on particular types of corruption, such as bribes, or on particular sectors, institutions or public works projects. Some try to appeal to the general public others directly target specific geographic or professional communities.

¹ For example the various SeeClickFix applications in the US (Mergel 2012). (<http://gov.seeclickfix.com/customers.html>) or the FixMyStreet implementation in the UK (<https://www.fixmystreet.com/>) or variants thereof in Australia (<http://www.fixmystreet.org.au/>) and Georgia (<http://www.chemikucha.ge/en>).

Some fashion themselves as a complaints mechanism, other more as monitoring tools. Some are pure-play web applications, other fuse web with mobile and/or offline reporting mechanisms.² But they all have in common that they invite the public to share experienced or witnessed problems and incidences of wrong-doing, in order to ultimately hold administrations and service providers to account for their (mis)performance.

Exciting times for corruption fighters. Never ever before have the floods of bribe payments and extortions that plague people's day-to-day lives been made so visible in so many countries. Unfiltered and almost in real time. And given that these new tools evolve and spread in leaps and bounds, this just seems to be the beginning.

Some initial challenges – and progress in tackling them

So will this people power 2.0 finally put an end to impunity for corruption?

The opportunities are certainly huge and only somewhat tempered by a number of concomitant challenges that have been flagged more or less from the outset. Digital divide issue are perhaps the most prominent concerns. How can we ensure that web-focussed reporting platforms are not only sufficiently accessible but can also be effectively used by large segments of people around the world for whom ICT access, affordability, literacy and general civic engagement skills pose significant challenges and who exactly because of this relative disempowerment might become particularly attractive targets for corrupt extortions? Other frequently raised concerns pertain to the question of how to protect open reporting streams from noise, nuisance, malice and manipulation. And a closely related discussion revolves around issues of cyber-security and risk-management: how to protect such platforms that potentially feature sensitive issues and the privacy of trusting users from hacking attacks, government censorship, potentially ruinous private legal challenges etc. (Gigler and Young, 2014)

These three issues clusters around inclusion, accuracy and technical as well as legal risk-management are already high on the agenda. They are being thought about and worked on by activist, technologists and scholars in many different ways. Pure-play online platforms are complemented by multi-modal channels. Walk-in, write-in, phone-in or text-in reporting lines reach beyond the digital natives, while rising mobile phone penetration and literacy eases inclusion issues further. Accuracy and verification issues benefit from ever more sophisticated approaches borrowed from crowd-report management in other fields, including triangulating data, curating sensitive issues, mixing reports with expert judgement or attaching greater weight to trusted, verified power contributors.³ Finally, a very active band of specialised NGOs, often supported by hack-tivists and other experts helps reporting platform operators to up their game on cyber-security and risk-management issues.⁴

So, in a nutshell, none of these three primary challenges have been completely solved and they in some way represent continuously moving, morphing targets. Yet, the crowd-sourcing corruption community seems very aware of them. Many think and work on solutions and progress is being made in many respects.

² For a bribe-reporting focus see for example Macedonia (<http://www.transparency-watch.org/>), India (<http://www.ipaidabribe.com/>) or as a global application Bribespot (<http://bribespot.com/>); for an initiative specialised on reporting procurement irregularities see Kosovo's My Tender (<http://www.tenderi-im.org/>), for a university corruption focussed initiative see NotInMyCountry (<https://www.notinmycountry.org/>) in Kenya and Uganda, for an initiative focussed on French bilateral aid projects in Mali see <http://transparence.ambafrance-ml.org/>.

³ See for example Ushahidi's Swift River Project <http://www.ushahidi.com/blog/product/swiftriver/>

⁴ E.g. Tactical Tech (<https://www.tacticaltech.org/>).

2. Taking a broader view

In the remainder of this article I will instead rather focus on a few other challenges that are somewhat different in nature and do not seem to enjoy quite the same level of attention yet. These are challenges that do not quite so evident from a socio-technical or information management perspective, but that come into spotlight when taking a step back and looking at crowd-sourcing corruption in the context of the broader experience with reporting corruption and more general insights into collective action dynamics and social accountability initiatives.

Competing for attention and critical mass - approaching a fallacy of composition?

First up is the question of how this growing landscape of reporting tools actually looks from a civic participation and mobilisation perspective.

The starting point looks pretty promising: close to two-third of people indicate that they would be willing to report corruption. This is a finding from the largest representative survey on corruption in more than 100 countries, the TI Global Corruption Barometer that periodically surveys more than 100,000 households on their detailed experience with corruption in different sectors (Transparency International 2013, Peiffer and Alvarez, no date).

At closer inspection however, several caveats come into sight.

Engagement for accountability viewed in the context of an individual project or asked about in a survey as an imaginable, yet somewhat abstract action option, seems an entirely reasonable investment by citizens to ensure that their hospital is working properly or that their kids get a good education. However, things become more difficult, when I am not only expected to run for the school committee and sit in on the social auditing team of the waterworks, but also to help monitor the building of that new road, report on corrupt practices in the local hospital, police and tax office and periodically check in on the communal budget disbursement process.

Adding up all these demands on citizen's time, expertise and commitment quickly raises concerns about how feasible and exciting it is even for a very committed policy wonk, not to mention an average citizen, to turn herself into a super-watchdog? And, even, if the commitment was there, how realistic is it to slot all these activities into a busy life? The latter seems particularly tricky, given that the most impactful social accountability mechanisms seem to a) require rather advanced and time-consuming levels of engagement to achieve community ownership and b) reaching out beyond a small band of local elites and attracting marginalised community members to these initiatives is essential for inclusive impact and protection against elite capture (Olken and Pande 2013).

More jargonistically: assessing the potential of social accountability mechanisms may fall prey to the fallacy of composition. What makes sense (but already puts big and hard-to-fulfil demands on people's time and altruistic spirit for an individual case - a school, a hospital a road project) looks even less achievable for the whole, a community or citizen that is embedded in and meant to engage with not only one but several of these individual services and projects.⁵

Where are we going to find all these citizens with so much time, tenacity and skills to undertake all this reporting, monitoring and tracking from procurement processes to health services, from elections to electricity grids?

⁵ Mayer 2003 provides a good introduction to the fallacy of composition and some examples from trade policy. It is worthwhile noting that all rigorous assessments of social accountability mechanisms that the author is aware of (such as the large set summarised in Olken and Pande 2013) only assess individual projects and do not even begin to take into account a broader spectrum of engagement demands that might arise in a specific setting.

This is a concern that pertains to social accountability mechanisms more generally and is increasingly being flagged in that community of practice (Institute for Development Studies, 2011).

Online crowd-reporting does not seem to offer a panacea for this quagmire either. Already now with crowd-reporting still in its early days and more tools being developed every day, there is already a growing sense that gaining critical mass in usage is perhaps the central problem, even for such low threshold applications.

After having made headline news and experienced an initial spike in activities that typically accompanies the launch and its surrounding media buzz longer-term uptake is a serious issue. Many crowd-reporting platforms have seen reporting streams slow down to a mere trickle (e.g. Ipaidabribe Pakistan <http://www.ipaidbribe.pk/>), some have gone largely dormant or folded altogether (e.g. Corruptiontracker.org; Colombia: Monitor de Corrupcion <http://monitordecorrupcion.org/>). A mapping exercise by Ushahidi and Transparency International, for example shows a large number of low-volume and dormant anti-corruption reporting platforms (<http://blog.transparency.org/2013/05/02/ushahidi-an-introduction-to-anti-corruption-mapping/>), while a broader stock-take of crowdsourcing initiatives in the corruption area finds a distinctive long-tail distribution with a small band of very popular initiatives accounting for the large bulk of reports while 90% of more than 12,000 scanned crowdmaps boasted less than 10 reports and almost two-third no activity beyond installation (Crowdlobe 2012).

This poor take-up is even more problematic when considering that these are some of the least-effort crowd-sourcing exercises. They do not require any particular specialised expertise or a trip to a specific building site to check up on progress. All they do is invite citizens to comment on the annoyances they are facing in their daily lives as city dwellers or voters.

To be fair, many of these initiatives are in their infancy. Once technical teething problems are ironed out, outreach is stepped up and citizens grow more comfortable with using these systems, numbers may surge. At the same time it must also be conceded that the headline hype and air of viral success that surrounds these initiatives in the media is far from being reflected in the current usage numbers.

Reporting corruption – more delicate and difficult than we think?

Even talk about a long-tail, some highly visible star performers vs. a long list of crowd-reporting initiatives with rather negligible usage numbers might still underestimate the challenge of sustaining high usage rates. Even more popular and established crowd-reporting platforms tend to experience large swings and a rather significant drop-off in use after an initial surge in popularity and high growth (Ramanna 2012, exhibit 1).

Perhaps what technically looks like a low-threshold engagement, or more polemically, slacktivism (Morozov 2011) may actually constitute for most contributors still quite a big deal for several reasons.

First, it is worthwhile remembering that people are asked to report about something that is in most cases illegal and possibly implicates them in a criminal offence. Even the (fragile) promise of anonymity and ease of reporting might not completely offset this understandable reluctance to admit to something morally and legally objectionable. A closer look at the aforementioned Global Corruption Barometer, confirms this general reluctance: while close to 70% of all respondents indicate that they would hypothetically be willing to report corruption respondents that have actually experienced (i.e. participated in) bribery are significantly less likely to express a willingness to report (Peiffer and Alvarez, no date). Translated into crowd-reporting environments this would suggest the emergence of a rather skewed account: the

ones that experience corruption the most might actually be the ones that are least likely to participate and post reports about their plight.

Second, even if people are willing to report, they might still want to opt for reporting channels other than online platforms or they might not know where to report and/or have no way to assess on short notice which of the growing list of similar online reporting initiatives would be the best and most trusted for what is a very sensitive use.

A proliferation of available reporting platforms and other reporting mechanisms such as whistle-blower hotlines might on the one hand mean more overall visibility for and choice in corruption reporting. On the other hand, the related fragmentation and bewildering diversity of mechanisms without a clear and trusted champion in sight can also make things more confusing and increase search and selection costs and again increase thresholds for use.

And even when the choices are limited and clear, NGO run crowd-reporting platforms might not fare all too well. Again, the Global Corruption Barometer provides some interesting insights for novel crowd-reporting initiative. Reporting to an independent organisation is unfortunately the least preferred choice, only selected by around 11% of respondents. The large majority of surveyed citizens would prefer reporting to a governmental anti-corruption hotline, while a sizeable portions of respondents could imagine reporting to the media or even directly to the institution involved (own analysis, Transparency International 2013). Such sentiments do not bode well at all for the prospects of independently run crowd-reporting initiatives. And this picture is to a large extent consistent with findings from focus group research. In Uganda, for example, Hellstroem 2013 examined the reluctance of students to use a university-focussed corruption crowd-reporting platform. He found that an online platform was not the best fit. Students actually seemed to prefer other modes of communication to complain and take a stance against incidences of corruption that they experience. What's more, establishing a foothold for crowd-reporting corruption has also been found extremely difficult in contexts where civil society groups are not particularly strong and professional. A study about related initiatives in China with its fragmented landscape of crowd-reporting platforms often just run by individuals shows how public trust in NGO-led reporting platforms is not only difficult to establish but often even undermined by opportunistic behaviour: it turns out that some entrepreneurial operators sought to abuse their gatekeeping positions to blackmail officials accused of corruption into paying for having such complaints removed or blocked (Ang, 2013).

The ambivalence of success - Succumbing to the gravity of norms and collective reasoning?

Let's assume all these problems are being solved and an online reporting platform gains community traction. It sees its usage numbers grow to a steady stream of reports that attracts attention by the media and the broader public. As a result this buzz entices even more people to use the platform, ushering in a virtuous circle of visibility and use and leading to a sizeable flow of corruption reports that are brought to public attention. Yet, even if, or precisely when a trickle of reports grows into a tidal wave the actual impact of such a successful platform might still be less desirable than we wish for.

Now at first sight this may sound like a very strange concern. Isn't this collective experience, the discovery that one is not alone with one's grievances the most empowering and motivating aspects of crowd-sourcing corruption information as mentioned earlier (McAdam, McCarthy et al. 1996)?

Then again, the very same dynamics might actually take a different turn as other strands of research particularly on the logic of corruption and collective action suggest. Making incidences of bribe payments and a sense of its full scale and scope more visible may indeed be more ambivalent for at least four reasons:

1. it makes the price for bribe payments more transparent and easier to figure out and thus corrupt transactions more efficient and easier to carry out;
2. it highlights the collective action nature of the situation and – along the lines of a prisoner's dilemma, may actually even increase incentives to fall in line and also grease the palms of public officials;
3. it adversely alters the calculus of likely risks and sanctions, as well as the prospects of successful resistance, making bribery appear less risky and action against it less likely to succeed;
4. it influences on what is regarded as common practice and normal behaviour and could potentially reduce not only direct material incentives, but also moral inhibitions to come on board.

Here some more details on these four potentially very problematic dynamics.

ad 1: getting the price right for corruption

Economist have long argued that transactions involving bribes, analogous to transactions in formal markets can be made more efficient, i.e. help match buyers and sellers more effectively, when transactions costs are low and price-setting is transparent. In plain language: if I know the 'price', what amount to pay in order to illicitly obtain a specific benefit, I will find it easier to engage in such a corrupt transaction. This is not just a theoretical premise as prominently conceptualised by Husted 1994 or Della Porta and Vanucci 1999, but borne out in reality. Empirical investigations confirm that price-setting for bribes by corrupt officials follows price-setting behaviour in regular markets (Olken and Barron, 2009). And corroboration also comes from anthropological studies that find that swapping stories about corruption in communities in India, for example, serves at least partly the purpose to compare notes on the amount of bribes paid and to discover the actual market rate for corruption (Torsello 2011). It is against this backdrop that detailed information on corrupt transactions and the going rates of bribes in specific areas and situations can be rather problematic. This is particularly the case, when crowd-sourcers set themselves the aim to discover and compare the price of bribes across different cities in a country, as *lpaidabribe* is for example trying to do in India.. What is a laudable ambition to raise awareness about and put pressure on the most corrupt, i.e. most extortionary bribe-takers can thus turn into a price discovery mechanism that could easily fuel more bribe-paying and bribe-taking.

ad 2: keeping up with the corrupt Joneses

Certain corruption situations are best understood as collective action problems: I am paying a bribe because everyone else around me does as well. Should I refuse, I am the fool who is loosing out. Again, this is by no means just a theoretical concern. Think about paying bribes for jumping the queue in some office or greasing palms when participating as a business in a tender process. If no one bribes it makes it easier for you to stick to the rules. If everyone around you bribes and seem to be able to get away with it you will be a lot harder pressed to act honestly. The incentive to fall in line in a corrupt context is strong for services or goods that are scarce and competed over. But the pressures to conform are even stronger when it comes to what economists call positional goods (Hirsch 1977, Frank, 1985), i.e. things whose very value depends on others not getting them or getting them only later, thus setting up a race for the coveted good or service. Think education in a meritocratic context (Adnett and Davies, 2002): only students that score in the top 1% of their class will qualify for some scholarship or secure entry to a specific elite college or workplace. Now, once I realise, for example via a clear trend on a corruption reporting platform that many other parents are "forced" into paying bribes to secure extra tuition or to directly pay for better, manipulated grades for their kids I will be under a lot of pressure to at least keep up or even outcompete the Joneses, in order to not disadvantage my own kids.

ad 3: altering the risks and rewards expectation matrix

But even when bribes help gain access to benefits that are neither positional nor competed over can a sense of widespread corruption further incentivise individual corrupt behaviour. The reason here is related to a more favourable assessment of the risks to be found out and punished. Perceived high levels of bribe paying also communicate that large numbers of

complicit, corruptible officials are out there. This in turn lowers the bribe-payers risk to encounter an official that acts with integrity and would denounce the person that offers a bribe, a phenomenon that scholars of corruption in economics call the frequency-dependent equilibrium property of corruption (Mishra 2006, Andvig and Moene 1990, Rothstein 2011).

This type of corrupt behaviour is further encouraged and locked-in, when large volumes of bribe reports seem to have no obvious follow-up or consequences, conveying a strong message that impunity is the most likely outcome for the bribe payer. The latter also engenders a sense of despair and frustration that trying to do something about the problem is doomed to fail anyway and thus sets up another collective action dilemma: if I know that others are also exposed to the same rather paralysing message that impunity is the norm, I do not expect anyone else to take action either and will thus not be the one to stick my head out and embark on a lonely crusade.

To summarise, a sense that bribe paying is pervasive and without much negative consequence can fuel three types of adverse collective action logics: it prods the individual to engage in corruption in order to not fall behind, makes such behaviour look less risky, since the chance of encountering an honest counterpart and being reported seems limited and discourages collective anti-corruption action by engendering a perception that no one else is likely to do so either, since critical mass and success look very unlikely. Such a perception of widespread impunity for ubiquitous corruption can potentially be reinforced or even generated when thousands of bribe reports are all of a sudden out in the open on a highly visible platform.

ad 4: the normative power of common practice

Many different research streams in social and political psychology, social movement studies and –no to underestimate – marketing provide compelling evidence of how descriptive social norms, the things that are perceived as common practice, exert a gravitational pull on human action that can weaken moral reservations and reconfigure rationalisation of individual decisions.

Specific transmission mechanisms vary and are encapsulated in concept such as ethical fading, moral contagion, broken windows theory, moral licensing etc. that Moore 2009 summarises for organisational corruption dynamics. But the implications are the same: making what is regarded as common practice salient provides powerful inducement at individual and collective level –often subconsciously - to converge to the norm. When told or shown that their peers do the same or more of the same, people re-use more hotel towels, give more to street musicians or conserve more energy. But likewise, when the norm (inadvertently) communicated is a negative one and an admonishment to adopt a specific good practice comes with information that others are also currently failing to live up to that standard, individuals are often actually induced to fall in line and dodge more taxes, take more protected items from national parks, save less energy or engage more in bribery (Griskevicius, Cialdini and Goldstein 2008; Cialdini, 2003; Frey and Meier 2004; for an overview and experiment related to internet platforms see Margetts, John, Escher et al. 2011).

So with regards to popular online reporting tools one could plausibly argue that making corruption payments salient online can create a – correct or incorrect - impression of common practice with a self-fulfilling tinge.

3. Where to go from here? Some promising avenues

There is no reason for despair, even if concerns about low and decreasing usage rates, the downsides of salient corruption and the risk of pent-up frustrations are real and significant.

A better understanding of the dynamics at play also opens opportunities for creative policy and advocacy interventions that help tackle and overcome these shortcoming and tip the balance towards the upside potential of crowd-sourcing.

Here some ideas for where this could be going and what is already being tried out at the cutting-edge of crowd-reporting corruption.

Design for empowerment not corruption encouragement

When does the mobilisation and empowerment effect of crowd-reporting outweigh the countervailing dynamics of price transparency, collective action dilemmas or negative norm salience? What can be done to tip the balance even further towards taking action against corruption? These questions give rise to an interesting experimental and research agenda around crowd-sourcing corruption. A plausible premise to explore could be to look at the degree of perceived victimisation and agency that characterises a specific bribe context. Where the corrupt transaction contains elements of threat and extortion (a teacher threatening to fail a child) and where coordination costs for victims are very high) the downside risks of entrenching corrupt payments may be relatively stronger.

At the same time the positive mobilisation effect may be stronger in settings where speaking out against and denouncing corruption is considered something of a taboo and/or has been actively repressed. The empowering effect of finding one's voice, sending a strong message to public officials that impunity cannot be taken for granted and particularly the social discovery that others are equally frustrated and bold enough to speak out now might in such a setting outweigh the risk of resignation associated with exposing the ubiquity and deeply entrenched nature of the practice.

A number of strategies could help and are increasingly being deployed by some of the leading crowd-reporting platforms.

They include:⁶

- highlighting action options on what to do to help tackle corruption
- profiling success stories on how reporting had a specific impact, how people effectively resisted corruption or made a difference in fighting it;
- moving beyond negative reporting and adding a more symmetric positive rating system to showcase also the *prevalence* of integrity⁷

As a TI chapter that is operating a crowd-reporting platform in an Eastern European country put it: "*Advertising the follow-up - what did we do with the reported issues – was crucial and we could have done more to promote this issue. This would encourage the same reporters of corruption or others to report more on this issue*" (TI, 2014).

A particularly promising strategy can also be to develop the platform from a simple reporting mechanism into an accountability and citizen-government conversation tool that encourages public officials to provide feed-back on complaints, highlight remedial action that have been taken, cases that have been resolved etc. *Fix-My-Street* in the UK and *See-Click-Fix* in the US are applications that put a strong emphasis on this type of two-way communication facility. It is after all a prerequisite for translating reports into impact that the stakeholders that can make a difference start paying attention, which in turn will make reporting more attractive and useful.

⁶ Ipaidabribe, for example, one of the most innovative and popular platforms for corruption reporting offers a range of action and impact-oriented features to complement the bribe reports on display. These features include: two positive reporting channels (I did not pay a bribe; I met an honest officer): Practical How-to cheat sheets that explain specific administrative procedures and how to navigate them; and a *Champions of Change* section that highlights remedial and reform actions., a helpline to advise people with corruption issues.

⁷ Aybolit, a crowd-reporting initiative in the Ukraine, for example, invites positive reporting on professionals in the health sector that acted with integrity.

Evidence shows that engaging in this type of conversation should be a compelling proposition for well-meaning governments, since it can help them showcase efforts and achievements that often go unnoticed. In the words of Mettler 2011 it would help make visible the “submerged state” – government services and achievements that when brought to the attention of the public can significantly boost trust in and recognition of public service performance. Buell and Norton (2013) for example document this effect of what they call *operational transparency* in an online experiment that exposes viewers to information about potholes filled and other public works performance achievements, which results in significantly higher levels of trust in and appreciation of government. Good design can help to encourage these uses. It can make feedback and interactivity easy and provide functionalities to compile report cards that summarise completion rates, turnaround times etc. and that can also be used to spur some positive competition between different local authorities.

Several other strategies can be envisioned to encourage civil servants to pay attention and make the active engagement with crowd-reporting platforms part of their work routines. An analogy from the reporting of potholes helps to illustrate this point. The city of New York can only be held liable for damages from potholes, if such deficiencies had been brought to its attention. Pre-Internet this prompted some entrepreneurial lawyers to actually pay people to map and report potholes so that the city could be sued more easily when damages occurred. In the age of online crowd-reporting this might now be much easier. One option for NGOs could be to push city governments or public service providers to write into their rule-books that reports on corruption as disclosed on a top independent reporting site should be regarded as “brought to the attention of the respective authorities” and thus should trigger specific duties of follow-up or specific liabilities in the case of ignorance. In the context of less cooperative authorities another option could be to seek a court-ruling through strategic litigation that establishes that complaints published on a highly visible website counts as brought to the attention of officials.

All these strategies that embed the actual stream of corruption reports into a broader information platform that guides towards action options, showcases real impact, flags positive examples and stimulates responsive follow-up can help tip the overall impact of the crowd-reporting platform from entrenching a paralysing sense of corruption as inevitable evil to a mobilising message of change as achievable and actual. Such platforms can then be plausibly be expected to trigger a virtuous circle of attracting more reports and more anti-corruption action, very much in line with how a social mobilisation expert describes one of the key drivers of movement success: "Hopeful anticipation of an impact is perhaps the greatest spur to action" (Jasper, 2011 paraphrasing Gupta 2009).

Partner and bundle – the options and tactics are many

Stand-alone corruption-centric reporting platforms run by a specialised anti-corruption NGO might have a special niche to fill, such as TI’s Advocacy and Legal Advice Centers that help people with corruption-related grievances make their way through the institutions to seek redress on a case by case basis. Yet, when considering the standard approach of a stand-alone crowd-reporting platform, it might be more suitable to move away from a rather insular model and rope in partners with complementary skills and expertise and perhaps even more importantly, deep roots in and capabilities for reaching out to particular professional, geographic or socio-economical communities.

“Working with local partners works best” is one of the main messages from a first crop of comprehensive reviews of conventional social accountability initiatives that seek to engage citizens in reporting and monitoring functions (IDS 2011). And the importance of building alliances and partnerships with local or tailored-audience traction is also a central insight from a first batch of stocktakes and more comprehensive reviews of tech-based civic action tools (Avila, Feigenblatt et al.; Fung, Russon et al. 2010; Knight Foundation 2014).

There are many civic and public collaboration opportunities that can be explored for crowd-reporting corruption.

One option is to team up with and build a distinctive corruption-reporting component into established civic helplines or hotlines that are already dispensing legal aid, offer consumer protection advice, help in the case of witnessed or experienced crimes, provide leads for investigative journalists etc. The actual division of labour could vary depending on organisational context and particular skillsets.

In some case the focus could be on jointly operating and co-branding platforms with other NGOs, news outlets, consumer associations etc. Teaming up with media outlets, for example, also offers vital benefits of free advertising and cross-media promotion, which is deemed essential for attracting a critical mass of corruption reports (TI 2014). In other contexts it might be more appropriate to agree on a different division of labour with the anti-corruption partner focusing upstream on building anti-corruption capacity for other helpline providers so that they can handle and actively solicit corruption complaints or agree on a referral system where corruption-related complaints are passed on for further follow-up to the anti-corruption partner without however co-branding or rebranding the established complaints platform.

In yet another context an established anti-corruption hotline could be the anchor initiative and bring on board other civic partners as more professionalised monitors of specific projects. Think the systematic monitoring of big infrastructure projects or the building of new schools and health centers by collaborating with investigative journalists or an NGO that engages with engineers that wish to do pro-bono work in order to train and deploy expert monitors to visit some project sites and file their assessments as base content for the crowd-reporting site.

New reporting partnerships are not confined to NGO and media allies however, but could also involve cooperation with local governments or segments of the public sector beyond the dialogue and feedback approach mentioned earlier.

For example, one could explore how to work with interested governments to make the sprawling use of government-run citizen information and reporting hotlines, such as the famous 311 systems in the US more effective for corruption reporting. This could include NGO-led efforts to assess, monitor, periodically probe and compare the institutional integrity, organisational effectiveness and performance of public reporting hotlines, all in view of enhancing public trust in the usefulness of reporting and incentivising better helplines. Another collaborative approach would be to open existing 311 reporting streams to further filtering, visualisation, syndication and analysis by civil society and anti-corruption groups. The city of Rio de Janeiro, for example, is already providing an open API for its citizen reporting that provides great opportunities to re-use the data in close to real-time, but so far has not been used much by civil society (Matheus 2014).

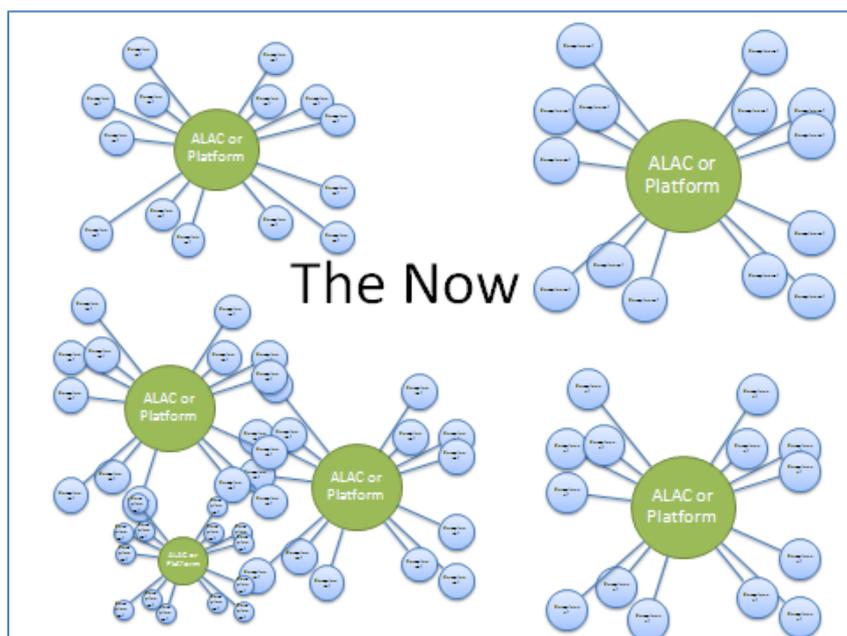
In essence such approaches would mean that civil society groups engage in a division of labour with local governments and focus on advocating for, strengthening and leveraging the impact of existing reporting channels, rather than building out their own reporting platforms. Again, such ideas are not germane to tech-based reporting but are very much in line with the lessons learnt from conventional social accountability impact assessments that find the great successes where receptive governments play ball with with or politically-savvy local coalitions are built to support citizen-centric accountability efforts (Fox ,2014; Guertzovich and Poli, 2014).

Finally, it might be worthwhile exploring partnerships with a growing band of new internet based citizen feedback initiatives. In the US alone a scan found 18 new technology-based resident feedback systems that had been developed during the last decade (Knight Foundation 2013). Perhaps even more leverage could come through teaming up with one of the large online consumer rating platforms such as *Yelp*, *Google Plus* or *Jameda*. These platforms are perhaps the most popular and advanced architects of user-friendly rating systems. Many of them are continuously expanding into new countries and in some places also gradually into rating public and government services, thus offering interesting opportunities for integrating a corruption-reporting component.⁸

⁸ Yelp, for example, provides some opportunities to rate government services in the US.

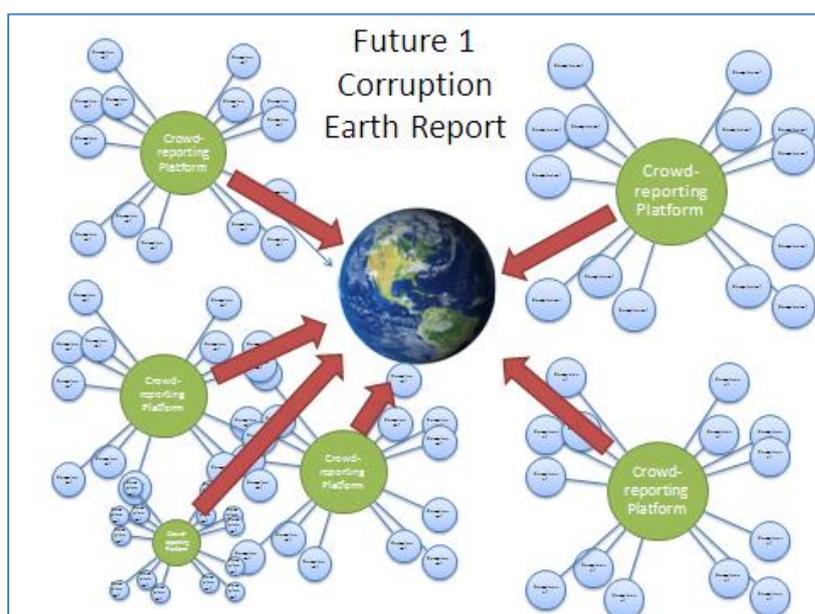
Four bold ideas for the future: mash, mesh, chatter and go ambient

The current ecology of crowd-reporting corruption looks a bit like this



Many unconnected platforms, big and small serve as corruption reporting hubs. Here four ideas / avenues for exploration on how the current landscape of crowd-reporting corruption could be transformed in the future.

From fragmentation to mash-up



The symbolic and practical power of larger numbers of reports that could potentially populate a reporting platform is diluted when too many competing platforms vie for attention, confuse potential users and fragment and dissipate reporting momentum. At the same time crowd-reporting corruption is still in its early experimental stages and probably benefits from the let-

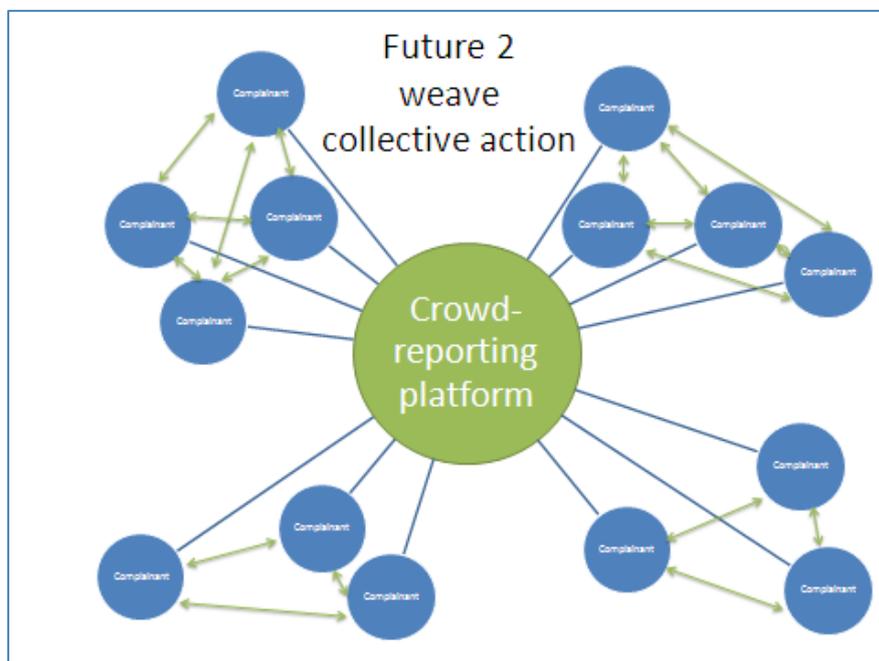
1000-flowers-bloom landscape, while different operators can reach different audiences with tailored platforms and thus raise the overall number of corruption reports submitted. This is the basic trade-off between diversity and fragmentation in corruption reporting. One approach that would help respect the need for diversity and different, tailored initiatives, but also keep in check the negative fall-out from fragmentation could focus on:

- a) establishing an agreed upon open micro-standard for corruption reports that captures basic attributes of a corruption incident; and,
- b) commit some major crowd-sourcing platforms and corruption-reporting platform operators to integrate appropriate interfaces with APIs and RSS, in order to make it easy to filter and syndicate individual reports

Taken together this would make it possible to filter, merge, compare, re-combine and re-publish key information from reports received by a large number of reporting platforms. One could, for example imagine to gather all education related corruption reports from Africa or investigate and display close to real-time the corruption burden reported by women. Given the many taxonomic challenges that come with classifying incidences of corruption, not to mention the diversity of vernacular expressions of the phenomenon, no perfect, comprehensive standard would be feasible. But even just agreeing on some core attributes and ensuring consistent integration into submission masks would already make a huge difference. This is a model that follows closely the developments of an open incidence reporting standard (*Open311*) in the US that has already gained considerable momentum (Offenhuber, 2014).

Bringing on board some of the major crowd-sourcing platform developers and reporting initiatives might already generate the critical mass of stakeholder to get the micro-standard off the ground and such an effort could possibly also be facilitated by some of the emerging umbrella initiatives in the area of technology for accountability, such as *Datashift* led by *Civicus* or the *Transparency and Accountability Initiative* convened by a donor collective in this area.⁹

From hub and spoke - to mesh and social discovery



Crowd-reporting as currently architected typically conforms to a classic hub and spoke model: a dispersed crowd of citizens report to a central hub, a website that compiles and processes all received information. Such a system however foregoes one of the potentially most transformative mobilising functions of a reporting system: finding like-minded people that have

⁹ See <http://civicus.org/thedatashift/> and www.transparency-initiative.org/

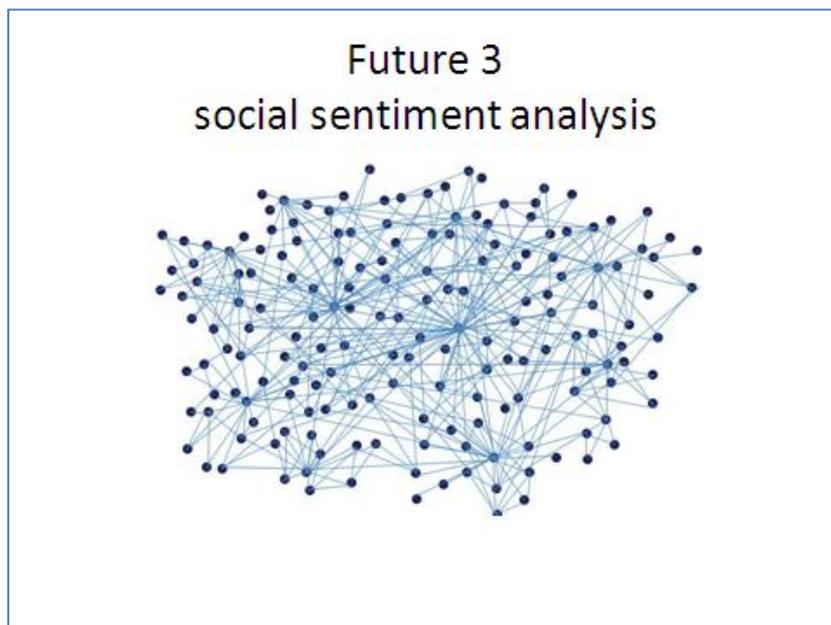
or care about similar issues and perhaps even live around the corner. Crowd-reporting has a great potential to support this type of social discovery and could thus be a very important initiative to help seed self-help groups, catalyse lateral link-ups between people with similar issues and thus foment collective action with or without any directional authority exerted by the hub.

Technology scholars may note the ironic analogy when tracing the architectural evolution from the plain old telephone system (POTS) to the modern internet network topology. While POTS was a classic hub and spoke system where a central switchboard and control hub routed all traffic and dictated further technological and organisational directions, the internet with its decentralised, mesh-like structure offers significant advantages in terms of reliability, traffic routing efficiency, upgradability, lateral collaboration, adoption to innovations etc. So moving crowd-reporting corruption more towards a mesh-like model where the reporting hub serves as catalyst to help concerned citizens build relations to like-minded individuals might be a very interesting change in perspective and direction. The redefined function of the hub to support such social discovery and lateral connections could comprise of both on- and offline efforts, including:

- offering reporting citizens the opportunity to gather anonymously in a chat room or discussion group
- convene meetings on corruption issues that are frequently reported in locales that turn out to be hotspots of such issues and thus make it easy for concerned citizens to participate and start networking

Fusing crowd-reporting with online tools for deliberation and collaboration, which are also developing in leaps and bounds at the moment could thus be a promising strategy to activate the social discovery value of crowd-reporting corruption.¹⁰

From reporting to listening in on chatter

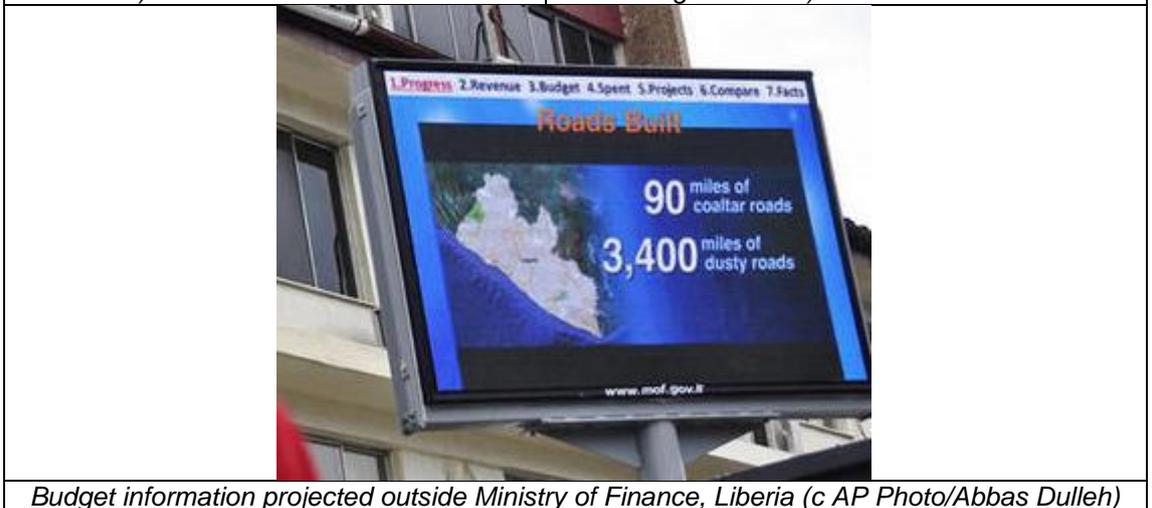


All corruption crowd-reporting models discussed so far are, as the name suggests, premised on information briefs, prepared by citizens for the very purpose of reporting, directed to and

¹⁰ A very interesting field experiment offers some cautious hope about this potential. Experimenting with different intrinsic and extrinsic incentives to encourage crowd-reporting on health service issues in UNICEF's highly successful U-Report initiative in Uganda, Blaschke, Carroll et al. 2014 find that the incentive to become part of a thematic interest network around the reported issue of corruption or sanitation increased reporting participation rates, albeit at a lower rate than extrinsic incentives such as being entered into a lottery.

pre-structured by the submission mask of a specific recipient platform be it an NGO crowd-reporting initiative or public complaints mechanism. Yet, the era of online social chatter might also increasingly offer alternatives or at least complements to such approaches. Citizen are likely to talk about, complain about, discuss annoying incidences of corruption much earlier, more often, more spontaneously and in narratively much richer terms than on complaints platforms in their myriad of micro conversations that flow via twitter, face-book and the many other social networking platforms that are popular in different places. In other words, big data and the ever more refined approaches of sentiment analysis offer some very interesting and as yet to largely unexplored opportunities to spot concerns about and exposure to corruption in a much more granular, immediate and real-time way.¹¹

Get out, go ambient!

	
<p><i>Feedback system: airport security check, Sweden, data directly transmitted wirelessly to service operators (cc: Zinnbauer)</i></p>	<p><i>Findings from a community survey displayed prominently for serendipitous encounter and public discussion on city sidewalk, UK (c: Visualising Mill Road)</i></p>
	
<p><i>Budget information projected outside Ministry of Finance, Liberia (c AP Photo/Abbas Dulleh)</i></p>	

Finally, crowd-reporting platforms currently live primarily online. All the information, energy and creativity that flows onto the platforms is mainly displayed, discussed and responded to online. This makes it very difficult to reach out to and meaningfully involve the disconnected or less digital literates. And it forgoes the possibility that people encounter such information serendipitously, and to bring all this information and accountability back into physical public space to leverage its impact. These are major limitations and it is very worthwhile thinking about strategies to bridge the gap between the virtual and the physical in more systematic

¹¹ For an example of a study that uses a simple form of sentiment analysis in corruption research see Marquis and Yang, 2013.

ways. How can we use public space for targeted interventions that make crowd-reporting visible and annotatable in a public square or other popular location and to confront the culprits in more direct ways with their (mis)performance? I have recently coined the term “ambient accountability” to kick-start a broader brainstorm on how to use the built environment through design, architectural, information and creative interventions in order to empower people and help them assert their rights. Creating a physical presence for crowd-reporting both with low and high tech means is one stream of investigations. The related ideas that could be experimented with are many. They range from real-time reporting feeds projected onto some office buildings that host the very institutions that are most affected by corruption to annotatable data murals that provide statistics and individual reports in visually engaging manner in popular public spaces and invite people to comment and contribute (Zinnbauer 2012, 2014 and ambient-accountability.org). The examples above provide some inspiration for feedback and accountability mechanisms that have moved from a pure-play online presence into public spaces.

These are just some trends of how crowd-reporting corruption is evolving and how it could more futuristically venture next in the coming years. Despite all challenges there are cautious but compelling reasons to believe that a bright future may lie ahead for crowd-reporting corruption, once it starts embracing more closely insights from a multi-disciplinary body of corruption and collective action research and practice. Crowd-reporting corruption in a few years time might not quite look like the early stand-alone reporting hubs that have been fuelled by technological opportunity, more than considerate political analysis. This is not to argue that this early tech-centric impetus has been counterproductive. On the contrary, it spawned some bold, energizing experimentations and opened the anti-corruption field to new allies, fresh new energy and creativity that business as usual might not have afforded. At the same time it is a welcome development that a new generation of crowd-reporting platforms is becoming increasingly savvy in taking on board insights from corruption research and practice. Crowd-reporting corruption is gradually weaving itself into the fabric of citizen-government relationships, helping to shift expectations on both ends in productive ways in relation to what one can get away with and what proper conduct can be expected. And as flagged in the last section, neither the technological nor the tactical governance opportunities have been fully exploited – and continue to evolve apace.

So let's continue experimenting and learning and experimenting and learning.

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