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07-04-2017

Enabler or Entrepreneur?

The Political Implications of the United Kingdom's Public Platformisation

Introduction

Digital platforms have increasingly become more prominent in our daily lives. While the term “platform” implies a form of hands-off neutrality, the way a platform is designed is inherently political as it can structure conduct of the users (Bratton 41). Consequently, digital platforms seem to be both a vehicle for laissez-faire policy as well as an opportunity to structure behaviour in a specific way. As various national governments are attempting to “platformise” themselves, it is highly relevant how this impacts the role of the national government. As such, this text will provide a case study of the United Kingdom’s governmental platformisation.

The first section of the text will provide a brief theoretical overview of the institutional role of platforms, after which Tim O’Reilly’s “Government 2.0” proposal is summarised. Subsequently, it is argued that his conceptualisation of Government 2.0 contains both aspects of austere, neoliberal governmentality as well as proactive interventionism, the latter relating to the concept of the “entrepreneurial state” by

Mariana Mazzucato. The second section will provide an overview of the United Kingdom's Government's latest attempt to platformise its own body through the Government Digital Services and the Government as a Platform-approach. A brief overview of its structure and initiatives will be provided after which a presentation by Britain's CTO Liam Maxwell will be summarised. The third and last section will take the attempts of the GDS and Maxwell's presentation as source material to investigate whether the UK's platformisation is leading it to either being a minimalist neoliberal government or a proactive entrepreneurial agent. Being built on neoliberal Thatcherism, does the conceptualisation and structure of the British digitisation echo that "the role of the state in spurring innovation is simply to provide the 'conditions for innovation to flourish'" (Mazzucato 18), or does it take the opportunity to position itself as a proactive entrepreneur?

Government 2.0: Neoliberalist or Entrepreneurial?

"Digital platforms" might be most often associated with the infrastructural products of numerous Silicon Valley-powerhouses such as Facebook or Airbnb, but as the Earth keeps digitising, these digital infrastructures are also becoming increasingly intertwined with governmental politics. A platform can be understood in a computational sense as "an infrastructure that supports the design and use of particular applications", but the term also carries a political connotation as a "'raised, level surface' designed to facilitate some activity that will subsequently take place" (Gillespie 3-4). As the platform etymologically suggests a flat plane (French: *platte form*), it proposes a certain neutrality to the action that will take place (Gillespie 3). However, a platform is rarely neutral, as its design carries political decisions that can incentivise users to certain conduct and keep to the rules (Gillespie 12, Bratton 44). For Benjamin Bratton, it is precisely this political role that makes platforms so effective, because "as organizations, [platforms] can also take on a powerful institutional role, solidifying economies and cultures in their image over time" (Bratton 41). This power is generated through the participation that platforms invite through fixed protocols, from which unplanned results arise (Bratton 44). Though conduct on the platforms might be unplanned, this does not mean a platform cannot be deployed for certain political ends, as "one platform will give structure to its layers and its users in one way, and another in another way, and so their polities are made"

(Bratton 44). Therewith “platforms are not just technical models but institutional models as well” (Bratton 44). In this sense, a platform is an effective and scalable political intermediary, as the core structure only has to be developed once after which it can generate massive participation with minimal costs.

Tim O’Reilly, famous for coining the term “Web 2.0”, is one of the main drafters on how to integrate platform logics with governmental politics. In reconsidering the term “Government 2.0”, he argues how government could use collaborative Web 2.0 technologies “to better solve collective problems at a city, state, national, and international level” (14). This ensures governments can make use of the organic power of citizen participation, and Government 2.0 subsequently allows to “band together, make laws, pay taxes, and build the institutions of government to manage problems that are too large for us individually and whose solution is in our common interest” (14). For O’Reilly, this marks a departure from the model of “vending machine government”: similar to inserting a coin and receiving your granola bar, the citizen provides taxes and receives governmental services (15). Rather, he envisions how governments could operate as “bazaar managers”, where they enable the community to exchange goods and services by themselves (15). He sees the digital platform as the technological equivalent of the busy bazaar. O’Reilly therefore proposes a shift were governments benefit from logics of digital platforms in becoming an open platform itself, that “allows people inside and outside government to innovate” (15). With this,

“government information and services can be provided to citizens where and when they need them. Citizens are empowered to spark the innovation that will result in an improved approach to governance. In this model, government is a convener and an enabler rather than the first mover of civic action.” (O’Reilly 14-15)

As such, the platformised government is a “government stripped down to its core, rediscovered and reimagined as if for the first time” (14). It makes use of the minimal costs and maximal outputs by letting non-governmental parties develop public services themselves.

Considered on a macro-level, a government as a “convener and an enabler rather than the first mover of civic action” arguably reads like a recipe for the ultimate neoliberalist state. Neoliberalism, while being a congested term, commonly refers to

a political philosophy which upholds a withdrawal of the state to promote a “freedom” defined almost exclusively in terms of the liberty to participate in markets without governmental intervention (Kingfisher and Makovksy, 116). O’Reilly’s proposal for a non-interventionist government that decentralises its control (18) and does not compete with the “developer ecosystem” (i.e. the market, 37) closely resembles the neoliberal invisible hand merely setting the conditions for a neoliberal society (Mazzucato 30). The government enables the egalitarian “raised, level surface” for entrepreneurial participation where market forces will ultimately ensure the best and cheapest outcomes. As citizen access to governmental data is a precondition for Government 2.0 (O’Reilly 24), it also enables the neoliberalist process of commodifying every aspect of the people’s datafied lives. However, the platformised government does not only ensure a free digital market, but also the marketisation of its own operations. The bazaar will allow the whole of society to appropriate the data and infrastructures of government, as everyone can innovate and develop on the Government 2.0 platform. Thus, this view sees governmental services as commodities: building blocks developed by a wide range of individuals, organisations and corporations, turning the platformised government into a competitive “marketised” government.

However, this is a one-sided perspective of Government 2.0. An alternative narrative argues that the platformised government justifies interventionism, as it allows the state to act as the core architect of societal and economic conduct. As Bratton notes, a platform is never neutral, and its design determines the outcomes it generates (44). Theorising this point of view, Mariana Mazzucato argues how

“the role of the government, in the most successful economies, has gone way beyond creating the right infrastructure and setting the rules. It is a leading agent in achieving the type of innovative breakthroughs that allow companies, and economies, to grow, not just by creating the ‘conditions’ that enable innovation.” (Mazzucato 18)

Mazzucato argues that governments have played this active role for a long time, for instance in how public research funds led to Google’s PageRank (19). This way, the state is an important entrepreneurial player because it can

“proactively create strategy around a new high growth area before the potential is understood by the business community (from the internet to

nanotechnology), funding the most uncertain phase of the research that the private sector is too risk-averse to engage with, seeking and commissioning further developments, and often even overseeing the commercialisation process.” (Mazzucato 18-19)

As such, Mazzucato suggests the term “entrepreneurial state”: a government that does not rely on the self-regulation of the market, but rather actively intervenes and structures the conditions for innovation and wealth. Margetts and Neumann argue that the platformised government aides in forming such an active, entrepreneurial government. They cite how Estonia’s e-government’s data exchange platform X-Road functions as a core backbone that structures the rest of data-exchange services, how innovative projects are strongly intertwined between public and private sector, and how the state acts as a proactive entrepreneur itself (e.g. by selling the X-Road platform to other countries, Margetts and Neuman 21-22). The Estonian case shows how Mazzucato’s entrepreneurial government matches with O’Reilly’s Government 2.0 on various points. O’Reilly states that the platformised government should “lead by example” (37) because a good platform provider “does things that are ahead of the curve and that take time for the market to catch up to” (37). While the Estonian government has indeed had strong central leadership in creating innovative services, it also greatly stimulated the private sector to contribute (21). Thus, next to the minimized neoliberal invisible hand, the platformised government can alternatively be seen as a highly active institution, structuring, leading and incentivising the private sector rather than simply enabling it.

The United Kingdom’s Platformisation

The national government of the United Kingdom has been developing digital mainframe systems for administrative tasks since the 1950s, making it continuously reliant on large technical infrastructures. During the 1980s Thatcherism, it outsourced most of the maintenance and development of these systems to the private sector. When in 2010 a new austerity-driven parliament injected capital to stimulate the “digitisation” of the government, the specialised Government Digital Service (GDS) was formed that focused on building digital platforms and attempting to “do more for less” under the “Digital by Default” agenda. Part of this task was untangling the complex contracting of private companies by nationalising functions and (re)hiring employees to the Civil Service. While the Tory government wanted to “do

less”, paradoxically a rhetoric about regaining governmental functions emerged (Margetts and Neumann 23). For instance, the UK Chief Technology Officer (CTO) Mike Bracken complimented the GDS for the way quality, innovation and robustness were brought back into government (24) by hiring more tech-savvy employees, with salaries ranging up to 90.000 pounds (Brecknell). Subsequently the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) tweeted: “In 1993 DVLA outsourced its IT. In 2015 it brought it back in-house. :)” (@dafyddbach). In 2015 the GDS’ “Government as a Platform” (GaaP) approach was introduced, which envisioned a government whose services were building blocks to be used by every department, but were also open to be used and appropriated by non-governmental organisations. GDS projects include www.gov.uk, a revitalised and centralised official government website; Govpay, a service to pay the government; Notify, a governmental portal that informs citizens public services and Verify, a digitised identification system (Margetts and Neumann 24). In general, the GDS is seen as a successful initiative as it claims to have saved £1.7 billion up to 2015 (Margetts and Neumann 23). However, struggles with legacy systems, multiple departures at top-level positions, and instable political support drove the GDS to the verge. A recent £450 million investment eased the pain, but the GDS still enters a period of ongoing retractions and small parliamentary support for a central role of the team (Margetts and Neumann 25-28).

In October 2016, the National Technology Adviser and ex-CTO Liam Maxwell gave a keynote on the vision behind the GDS’ GaaP-approach. During the talk, he laments how the UK government was trailing behind technological developments from the private sector, stating that “if you don’t provide the services people want to use, they use shadow IT: you find people using Gmail or Hotmail to go and do their work” (Maxwell). He stresses that the state resolved this by hiring 200 top-level IT-civil servants, and additionally suggesting it should “stop innovating all the times on things that are common” and consider using private services for the public sector (Maxwell). Using private services within the UK government remains culturally problematic due to conservative views, but Maxwell internally promoted its acceptance as “technology was moving faster than the government, so the government had to change”. To further profit from the innovative power of the tech sector, Maxwell argues that the UK government had to restructure itself from closed-off siloes to open platforms. This openness allows the British government to “opened up” so private companies can

develop innovative services for the government. Selling services and products to the government was formerly too expensive and subject to redundant paperwork, which led to the public sector “cutting itself off from the market” (Maxwell). As a solution, the UK government “massively expanded the marketplace for suppliers” (Maxwell). It launched a dedicated platform for outsourcing digital jobs to the private sector called the “Digital Marketplace” (gov.uk/digital-marketplace), which allows the state to “buy from the people that had the best ideas, not the people that were best in filling in forms” (Maxwell). In 2010, only twelve commercial companies provided for 85 per cent of spending on digital services (Maxwell), while currently almost 4.000 companies provided digital services to the state, resulting in £1 billion of sales through the Digital Marketplace (“Digital Outcomes”). Maxwell states openness to such tasks was at the core of this movement because the transparency “drove competition”. Additionally, the openness of digital software increased the inter-departmental sharing of services, as well as the international co-operation between governments (Maxwell). Finally, Maxwell states that the biggest problem of the UK Government was the inability to find “great people to work for government”, which is solved through public-private collaboration via initiatives like the Digital Marketplace. Through competitive, open collaboration in creating innovative digital services, the end goal is to “remove friction” for the user:

“All the successful tech businesses, all the successful new digital businesses are about taking away the broker, removing the friction, helping people do things quicker, smoother simpler, for them. That’s the aim we have in government as well. [...] That’s how we grow fast.” (Maxwell)

As such, Maxwell argues that the British government is now a “profitable market” for the private sector to invest in.

Neoliberal Enabler or Proactive Entrepreneur?

The UK government’s digital reforms through the GDS and the GaaP-approach are still in its infancy, but its undertakings and Maxwell’s conceptualisation provide insights on both its austere and entrepreneurial aspects. On the one hand, the UK’s attempts to platformise the government seems to increase their proactive role, resembling Mazzucato’s entrepreneurial state. Firstly, the (re)hiring of staff and the nationalization of various IT-departments implies an attempt to re-enforce the public sector. The emerging rhetoric of Bracken, the DVLA and Maxwell on “bringing

services back in-house” challenges a neoliberal minimalizing of the state. As Maxwell notes, the hiring of 200 IT professionals was done to actively build new platforms and services. The Digital Marketplace is an example on how the UK government does not merely rely on a laissez faire policy, but rather actively attempts to become a key investor and entrepreneur itself, with the £1 billion in private sector-investments serving as quantitative proof. As Maxwell states, these innovations were conducted so the government could keep up with technological progress and innovation, instead of playing an understated and regressed economic role. As such, it matches Mazzuato’s call for the UK government to adopt a proactive role to foster “radical growth-enhancing innovations” (21). Additionally, the British state fits Mazzucato’s entrepreneurial state because it actively experiments and takes risks with innovative projects. The Behavioural Insights Team, informally referred to as the “nudge unit”, already took on experimenting and testing with randomised control trials. Their methodology was adopted by the GDS and now runs “low-cost internet-based experiments” (Breckon 20), reinforcing the UK government’s role as a state that is “leading by example” (O’Reilly 37) and is “able to take risks” (Mazzucato 19).

On the other hand, the GDS’s undertakings and Maxwell’s rhetoric does imply a neoliberal move to minimise and marketise the government. Firstly, the mantra “doing more for less” echoes the austerity of a right-winged small government. While the UK Government is also developing services internally, the increase in outsourcing contracts indicates how it will rely less on its own development, and more on the private sector, diminishing its internal force. This point is reinforced by the fact that Maxwell indicates governmental services are increasingly built on private sector services such as Gmail and Amazon Web Services, the latter even forming server space of gov.uk. Additionally, “opening up” government so the private sector can compete and co-operate to build the best services implies that market forces will help construct the state itself, leaving the government to be formed through the self-regulating competition of the free market. Maxwell’s conviction that the main task for the government should be to take “away the broker, removing the friction, helping people do things quicker, smoother simpler, for them” can thus be read as a laissez faire proposal, removing the bureaucracy that government causes for market innovations.

However, taken all together, the GDS and the GaaP-approach imply the British platformised state is one that is not necessarily decreased, but rather one that is converging with the private sector. While the UK Government attempts to “do more with less”, its “insourcing” of IT-employees, the active investments in digital services and the experimental and leading role of the GDS show it is not retreating itself from the market, but rather competing or integrating itself with it. Metaphorically speaking, while the state might be the owner of the bazaar, it not sitting back but rather asking, stimulating and paying the shop keepers to sell the best products. The public-private integration is further illustrated with the fact that the UK government, similar to the Estonian case, is both developing new services itself as well as using and financing commercial services for the public sector (e.g. AWS and Gmail). As such, it might be argued the platformised British government shifts increasingly becomes an entrepreneurial “company” itself. Maxwell’s Silicon Valley-esque rhetoric on how government should follow “successful tech businesses” in “removing the friction” through open innovation is a telling example of this. However, it might be important to note that in the long term, the re-governmentalisation of various tech-functions could create a small “core government” that allows the privatisation of other aspects of the public sector. While the GDS hired 200 top-level employees (Maxwell), the total number of civil servants sharply decreased with a drop of 20.3% from 2008 to 2016 (Hedges) and the total amount of public sector employees shows a similar drop (Leaker). “Central government” employees now show a record high at 3 million (Leaker), possibly supporting the view the UK Government attempts to build a small, digital core. Reasons for this are multi-faceted though, and cannot be directly attributed to an increase in the convergence between private and public.

Conclusion

Platforms can be powerful institutional frameworks, allowing generative participation while simultaneously allowing to structure conduct. It is no surprise that national governments such as Estonia and the United Kingdom attempt to “platformise” their governments. O’Reilly drafted how this can be done in his “Government 2.0” proposal that shows how states can move away from being static “vending machines” and towards becoming mediating “bazaar owners”. The structural and ideological implications of this platformisation is varied, because it

supports both a neoliberal shrinking of the state, leaving the “shop owners” to self-regulate on the platform, as well as a role for the government as entrepreneur, proactively shaping economy and innovation through the platform. The British government on neither far ends of this scale, but their effort to digitise do highlight their active entrepreneurial attempts. Firstly, a re-hiring of IT-functions show their increased attempts to enforce their digital agency. Secondly, the UK state actively invests in the private sector to develop digital services *they need*, for instance through their Digital Marketplace portal. Thirdly, it takes on a leadership role through digital nudging and experimental trials, thus engaging in projects that are unsure to succeed at first. However, other parts of government are regressed through platformising it, such as the increase in outsourcing IT jobs or leaving behind public digital services in favour of corporate solutions. Taken together, it can be argued that the shift to a platformised UK government show a convergence between public and private rather than a clear increase in either of the two sides. However, further research might be spearheaded on whether the proactive role of the UK government is to ultimately regress as a small, digital core that enables the privatising of now-public tasks.

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