Book Review
Tech for the Public Good
Review by Jim Fruchterman
Tech for the Public Good

In *Power to the Public*, Tara Dawson McGuinness and Hana Schank make the case for renovating government and policymaking with 21st-century digital technology.

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The global COVID-19 pandemic brought into stark relief the differences between the haves and the have-nots. The divide is especially apparent when it comes to technology. Lack of devices and connectivity limited the access of low-income communities to education and health care. Many nonprofits without tech capacity failed to transition to online programming when in-person activities were suspended due to lockdown orders. State and federal governments struggled with policy responses, hobbled by a lack of detailed information about the health, economic, and social consequences of COVID-19 on people in need. Well-off individuals prospered while lower-income individuals became even poorer and suffered a disproportionate number of COVID-related deaths and disabilities. The debacle raises this question: Is it possible to use technology to reverse these trends rather than accelerate them?

In *Power to the Public: The Promise of Public Interest Technology*, New America’s Tara Dawson McGuinness and Hana Schank put forth a vision of government programs and policymaking based in modern digital technology. Their objective is no less than the creation of a new field of practice, public interest technology, which they define as “the application of design, data, and delivery to work on challenges like homelessness, foster care, and suicide prevention.” The second half of the book focuses on how to build the practice of public interest technology and get every level of government to adopt it effectively. The authors successfully argue for a tech revolution inside government where technology solutions are upgraded with a philosophy of working “with, not for,” stakeholders, because, as they claim, “there is no solving the world’s hardest problems without government.”

A central theme of the book is that the work of bringing tech innovation to government processes is both essential and incredibly difficult. The legacy of past decisions has often left us with byzantine processes. Some of the authors’ examples are seemingly outrageous, such as the Michigan State Form DHS-1171, a 42-page document with 1,204 questions required for state residents who need any kind of emergency assistance from the state, such as health care, food assistance, or childcare. Some of the forces at work driving such bad outcomes include old-fashioned procurement methods, misaligned incentives, and underinformed policies from federal or state legislation. The systems involved are often so complex that different elements of the same agency can often be working at cross-purposes.

McGuinness and Schank take early aim at procurement methods that have often led to failed projects and the wasting of millions of dollars. The same kind of procurement processes used to purchase aircraft carriers or office buildings—which assume that detailed outcomes can be completely specified up front—turn out to be extremely ineffective to build software. The book includes the example of ELIS (Electronic Immigration System), which attempted to digitize the forms used in the US Citizenship and Immigration Services agency. The design of the first version was controlled by IBM, which had won the contract, and was “built to generate software licenses and sustain them in perpetuity, first and foremost. Then, secondly to serve the agency’s needs.” When ELIS 1 launched (with massive cost overruns in the hundreds of dollars), it failed to meet even basic requirements. The authors’ next example is the HealthCare.gov fiasco to recruit technologists to find solutions for the country’s most important problems. McGuinness and Schank’s collective experience with technology done both right and wrong inspired this book’s argument for overhauling how government agencies use software and data to better serve citizens.

*Power to the Public* is organized into two parts. The first half explains the distinction between traditional approaches and the more agile tech-informed solutions deployed by a new generation of problem solvers, who are “using each of the three tools [design, data, and delivery] to work on challenges like homelessness, foster care, and suicide prevention.” The second half of the book focuses on how to build the practice of public interest technology and get every level of government to adopt it effectively. The authors successfully argue for a tech revolution inside government where technology solutions are upgraded with a philosophy of working “with, not for,” stakeholders, because, as they claim, “there is no solving the world’s hardest problems without government.”

The authors come to this topic with deep experience in government’s use of technology. McGuinness, the director of New America’s New Practice Lab, was intimately involved in the central tragedy/redemption episode of GovTech: the disastrous launch of HealthCare.gov during the Obama administration and its famed rescue by a team of Silicon Valley technologists. Schank, New America’s strategy director for public interest technology, comes from a long career in consulting and tech; she was an early hire at the US Digital Service—the entity born from the HealthCare.gov fiasco to recruit technologists to find solutions for the country’s most important problems. McGuinness and Schank’s collective experience with technology done both right and wrong inspired this book’s argument for overhauling how government agencies use software and data to better serve citizens.

The Promise of Public Interest Technology

By Tara Dawson McGuinness and Hana Schank

208 pages, Princeton University Press, 2021

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The old model for building software goes beyond software. McGuinness and Schank argue that community feedback and information should also inform policy-making and public problem-solving. They discuss the shortcomings of the US government’s response to the recent pandemic—the CARES Act—which was based, like so many other policy responses, on educated guesswork rather than actual data. As the authors observe, “What wasn’t part of the process [was] a rapid review of what would help the average family suffering from COVID-19.” Legislation was drafted that fail. Far better to engage users every step of the way—a message that government agencies haven’t yet received.

The value of human-centered design is an accessible and quick read aimed primarily at nontechnologists, with a clear-eyed take that technology is not a panacea. The book makes an important contribution to the literature on how government needs to reform its traditional approach to solving problems. My main critique is that the book didn’t go far enough in its advocacy for its ideas. The idea, for example, that all 50 states would adopt the same federal program and each build a unique IT system was presented as a fact, rather than as the recipe for disaster that it really is. I firmly believe that the nonprofit sector also needs to adopt the same kinds of design approaches recommended by McGuinness and Schank. The authors could have gone deeper into challenges, such as that of accessing tech talent, which needs more attention. The US Digital Service successfully recruited skilled technologists to engage in starting to solve national challenges, but the dearth of tech talent in the social sector is far from solved.

McGuinness and Schank conclude with a call to action. They propose building a field of public interest technology modeled after the creation of the public interest law movement in the 1960s. They want to see a surge of excitement from technologists to apply their skills to the needs of society and the planet. This talent pool, combined with their vision of how to apply technology with those in greatest need, might just be able to rise to the world’s current challenges.

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The authors frequently reiterate that software needs to be designed in a more human-centered way. Their pithy formulation “with, not for” means that technology needs to be developed in partnership with the public and agency staff, rather than for them. This motto should resonate with many in the social innovation sector who prefer to collaborate with the individuals and communities they serve, as opposed to traditional charity or classic government programs that are often formulated without regard for the needs of their beneficiaries.

The old model for building software assumed that the leaders of an organization already knew the software’s functionality, or what it should do, and therefore the software simply needed to be designed and built to meet those requirements. This approach is widely known as the “waterfall” method, a linear process without feedback loops from government agency staff or the public. The software industry largely abandoned this approach more than a decade ago, because products made from guesswork alone tend to