LIFE
AFTER
THE
STATE

by Charles Ikem

Government as a digital ideology

Imagine a prosperous digital future without the government as we know it

There was a feeling, as we approached the 2020s, that government, politics, and politicians had lost their way. There was widespread distrust in political and public institutions, populism was on the rise, and many countries were divided socially, culturally and economically. How could we rebuild trust in government and make it work better for ordinary people?

Since then, contemporary society has changed rapidly, with social and technological trends giving more people a louder voice to call for change, and a sense that radically alternative forms of government are possible.

It is 2030, and new digital developments have created a very different set of power relations in government, society and the wider economy, leading to new forms of participation and interaction between government and citizens. Citizen participation has been reinvigorated, typical red tape and bureaucracy removed, and government imagined as a digital ideology.

Welcome to the new world of DIYs. DIY democracy, DIY services, DIY government. Technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), distributed ledgers and advanced cryptography have allowed people to put themselves at the heart of government. And a new form of government, much smaller and less visible than before, is based on three key principles.

1. Technology is the preferred method for any service or interaction requiring a trusted intermediary, removing the need for government from a range of areas and activities

2. The role of digital technology in a government context is to facilitate civic participation and put people at the heart of governance

3. Technology is the primary route to overcoming barriers facing public services related to complexity, finance, geography and timing.

A life beyond the state

Jason is born in

Name: Jason
Born: Redditch, UK
Date: 20/03/2030

On a normal day, in a normal town, a child with a normal name is born. But Jason's life will look anything but normal compared even with those born a decade earlier.

Jason's birth is an uncomplicated process, overseen by a local doctor and midwife and supported by an AI assistant selected by Jason's parents from a range of commercial, public and not-for-profit options. Within minutes of his birth, Jason's life is registered, via a personal e-ID, onto a decentralised data infrastructure designed to facilitate ownership, security and privacy. Wherever Jason goes in life, he will be accompanied by this randomly generated 10-digit number. This unique identifier links to all of his core personal and biometric data, enabling him simple and secure access to key public services and civic duties.

Birth Registration
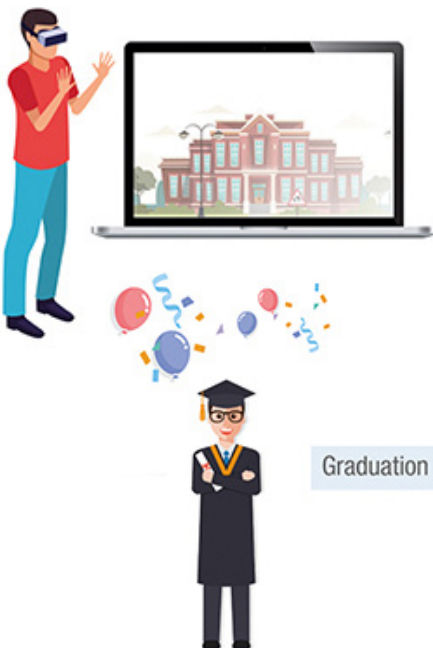
University of Helsinki, Finland

Graduation

As Jason approaches school age, his parents begin the search for the education best tailored to his preferences, abilities and ways of learning. But Jason's parents are not restricted to the four or five schools closest to where they live: e-residency initiatives and improved technology have allowed virtual enrolment and learning across borders. His parents compare schools in cities as disperse as Lima, Tallinn, Nairobi and Seoul, each rated by how well they meet Jason's needs. They eventually select a school in Helsinki, where Jason also completes his university education – all without needing to physically leave Redditch.

As an adult, Jason lives in an urban community which over time has been able to greater gain control over local decisions. These decisions can be debated and decided upon locally using participation technology, before being formalised by smart contracts.

When Jason parks his car in a restricted area without the correct permit – as decided locally by Jason's community – a sensor detects the infringement. This violates one of the conditions of a social smart contract Jason signed with his community when they collectively agreed local parking restrictions. In the past, a fine would have been issued by the local authority, but these days the process is automated.

As the smart contract is triggered, Jason automatically makes a payment directly to others in his community – the ones personally inconvenienced by Jason's actions and with whom he broke a form of social contract.

The local community also has a shared agreement about what should happen to proceeds from parking fines. In Jason's case, the money is directed towards a project which provides non-car based modes of transport, an initiative the community felt was important to support ongoing obligations to reduce carbon emissions.

Smart Contract

Illegal parking

Fine is charged

Fine payment

Fine is paid to citizens

Payment Successful

Jason Votes on a participatory community project

Authentication

Jason's life involves a lot of voting, but on a far wider range of purposes than just electing representatives, with communities now making many more decisions collectively: setting local rules, deciding how local budgets will be spent, and other key decisions affecting the area. Occasionally, local referendums are held, though communities have a strong preference for deliberative processes, and there are strict criteria on which issues can be put to referendums.

To vote, Jason verifies his identify through a decentralised system built to require the minimum amount of data needed to prove he is who he says he is. This can either be done through the use of digital attributes, or through a secure biometric scan: so simple and fitting so seamlessly into Jason's online civic participation that he barely notices he's doing it.

Voting occurs

Much of Jason's civic participation happens at a local level, but some issues sit at a level beyond geographic states. One such issue is tax evasion, which citizens agree must be tackled internationally.

All tax records, filing and payments are done online, with automated calculations for bills and rebates: the same process for companies and individuals. An AI tool is used to detect where tax evasion may be happening, and where the tool's various checks and criteria are satisfied, charges are brought. A jury of citizens is selected to preside over the trial remotely, while information and footage can be viewed by other citizens online in real time. The jury's role hasn't changed much, except they all participate remotely now.

Jury selection

Online Tax Payment

Citizens also informed the tax evasion laws and how they should be interpreted, collectively deciding that not only would companies need to comply with the letter of the law, but would also be judged by jurors on whether they had complied with the spirit of the law, too. When a verdict is passed, any fines are paid automatically, and are distributed according to where and who suffered the most as a result of the evasion.

Corporate tax defaulters

Online verdict

This work was part of Nesta's Radical Visions
for Future Government collection, 2019

https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/radical-visions-future-government/