

A Political Dialogue about Government Service Design Politics

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CAMERON

We are going to discuss service designing in the context of government. You and I have been mostly university-based researchers but also practitioners of service design, mostly in non-commercial setting for a couple of decades now. We are located in and mostly speak about Anglophone contexts, unfortunately. Service designing for government departments and agencies is clearly different from service designing in commercial contexts and is clearly different in a mid-size city in Colombia, in rural Scotland or urban Taipei. It is not just that the commissioning, delivering and evaluating of service design projects is different, but the kinds of services that are being designed, the constraints and expectations around those services, the ways the resources are institutionalised, and the quality of the resulting interactions, are also quite different. The designing of governments services could and perhaps should be a fundamentally different practice to designing commercial services for corporations. Designing government services often feels closer to designing community-based services – what is often called ‘Design for Social Innovation’; but I suspect there are significant differences there too.

The distinctiveness of service designing for governments is recognized by practitioners who experience these differences, but it seems not to have been sufficiently conceptualized in ways that can help practitioners navigate those differences. So this gap motivates our discussion.

We have been asked specifically to discuss the politics of service design; less the power dynamics involved in service designing, more the role of service design in politics – to quote our chapter brief, “where designing services become or can facilitate particular forms of politics, participation and governance.” So perhaps the brief is “the political that government service designing designs”?

LUCY

There is a distinction here we should be clear about from the outset, the academic distinction between politics and the political. At one level, this is the difference between: a) the formal field of society that we call *politics*, i.e., systems of government, politicians and people working as representatives of the state (bureaucrats); and b) the wider idea that there are *political* aspects to all interactions even those outside of formal politics. An example of the latter is the slogan, ‘the personal is political.’ This was an important argument that moved an earlier generation of feminism from the politics of

voting rights and even non-discrimination laws to the political treatment of women in all situations, even 'private' relationships.

At another level, there is more of a continuum from 'the political' to 'politics.' A recent conference paper on which I was a co-author (Durose et al 2023) made use of Eric Swyngedouw's version of the distinction (2014, 2018; also Valentine 2018) which notes the 'the political' is any contestation about values and power, whereas 'politics' are the routines and rituals that different societies establish for doing that contesting. As systems of decision-making, politics try to contain and control the unwieldy nature of 'the political.' For example, when activists like Extinction Rebellion block a street or stick themselves to an artwork, they are accused of 'breaking the rules,' and not doing politics in the right way; people try to separate the political from politics by saying things like, 'they should only protest with a permit, otherwise they might start to get "political" about tennis tournaments, etc.'

Our conference paper – specifically looking at relations between design and policy-making – was pointing to another side of that continuum, noting that the political is always happening even within politics, and that this is a good thing. To get policies materialised and implemented, public servants and government service designers must work within established processes of politics. But to ensure those policies respond equitably to a changing and diverse society, often requires that service designers, for example, be creatively 'political,' within and even beyond those bureaucratic procedures. We wondered if service design could be a force for a more political, thus contingent and contestable, policy process that revisits the core of what and who policymaking is for?

CAMERON

So, this chapter might be concerned with 'the political aspects of service designing (in) politics'?

We are already into the core arguments of this chapter, but too quickly. We need to set things up a bit more before returning to questions like that one. And we should make clear why we have chosen to make this a dialogue. While both of us have written around this topic, I do not think that either of us feels confident to make meta-analysis categorisations, nor do we intend in this chapter to share some recent, specific research examples from which to share definitive findings. Presenting this chapter as a dialogue hopefully ensures that what we are saying is read as instructive at best, heuristic at worst. We want to give service design practitioners (more than researchers) some language and distinctions, and a few questions, to bring to their practice of service designing in government contexts.

LUCY

You and I are not always on the same page about some of the things that will be discussed in this chapter. We are not opposed, but this is not a unified, established set of claims. A dialogue will make space for ongoing talk about these issues, allowing this to be a more political discussion about service design politics, leaving things open for contestation, rather than fixing them into frameworks, rules and methods.

The Historical Ontology of Service Design

CAMERON

Given that this chapter is about politics, or rather the political, we should make clear we do not see ourselves as 'above politics' or 'without politics.' As often noted, attempts to avoid politics are themselves highly political, the sort of thing only privileged people are able to do. Robin Kinross made this point many years ago in relation to design in "The Rhetoric of Neutrality" (1985) about the role of visual information design in making certain (statistical) pictures of the world seem like facts under the guise of making them more legible.

LUCY

This reminds us that 'the political' is not static; values and counter-values change. When service design was established with the founding of the Service Design Network in 2004, identity politics was not yet vilified as 'woke,' and decolonisation was not yet a widespread imperative. The political has changed around service design as this field has matured, and now we, as academics, must take these changes into account.

CAMERON

And these are not merely academic issues or even issues restricted to politics; they have to do with core aspects of service designing. Consider 'Hello, I am Cameron and I will be your server.' In some cultures, the idea that as a service worker you would introduce yourself as a person separate to your service role is something that would be considered inappropriate. In other cultures, the idea that some anonymous person would commence a service without establishing their relation to you is inappropriate. Service designing is always political because the service designer will make a recommendation about how those involved in the service present themselves to each other.

Government puts an added twist on this. Public service in many countries has on the one hand a tradition of anonymity. Often in a parliamentary system, the only named person associated with a government department is the elected official appointed to head up that department. If a public servant does something wrong, it remains, ideally, the responsibility of the minister. Service designers who bring a 'customer-centred' lens to government service agencies might start encouraging public servants to identify themselves, to give a personal face to the bureaucracy.

LUCY

As I understood and experienced it, via a research fellow job I had in the UK in the mid-2000s, service design was of North Atlantic provenance, dominated by practitioners, researchers and educators from northern Europe (including the UK), Scandinavia and to a lesser extent the USA. As the field grew, with entrepreneurial small agencies gradually combining or being swallowed by bigger firms, commercial service design for a while seemed primarily sponsored by transnational corporations, exporting 'service standards' and customer journey mapping around the world. And by the UK Civil Service, too, whose institutionalisation of (digital) service design has been widely adopted.

The last two academic Service Design Research conferences, in Australia with a focus on service design across Asia, and in Brazil given well-established practices and degree

programs across Latin America, signal a shift in the cultural politics of service design. Researchers and practitioners around the world must now be more attuned to locally distinct understandings of 'service', and how service design for government is distinct from the traditions North Atlantic countries claim to share.

The Roles of the State: Rules, Services and Policies

CAMERON

We should ask some 'first principles' questions, like 'What is a government and (why) do we need governments?' And behind this are questions like, 'What is a (nation) state and (why) do we need states?' These sound like abstract questions from political philosophy, but they in fact go to the heart of why governments offer services at all, and someone's political philosophy about the state will determine what they expect of such services. The same argument can be put the other way around: whenever you design a service for this or that kind of experience, you are reinforcing this or that version of the state, of the politics that get routinised as a state-based service.

I understand the state as a way of creating a system that holds in place certain ways of being together; a state makes society more static. Rather than continuously renegotiating the basis of each social interaction, governments can be thought of as designed systems that give certain social interactions regularity; key social activities are governed by being made to follow certain rules. States can be imposed on people or established by people when they agree to abide by the rulings of the state, although, as movements such as Black Lives Matter demonstrate, states privilege some groups over others in ways that are racialised and enduring.

This is a pretty crude account of how the world gets to be organised around nation states, one that has completely left out economics, which is to say resourcing, trade, and so conquest and colonization. These other dimensions indicate that to keep people in a particular state, living in a particular way, the state must also 'protect' those people from other ways of living, from the rules of other states, that is, being ruled by other states.

Providing *rules* is a first 'service' that a government provides to (some of the) people who reside in it. Governments govern, communicating rules and enforcing them, 'protecting' citizens from other social states, whether imposed upon people or taken up by people of their own accord – with outward facing armies or inward facing police (though that is only a modern and partial distinction that has also led to the subjugating some groups with a nation state).

Ruling is an activity that is designed, and rule enforcement is only one aspect: the modern state collects information on its citizenry to communicate with them and ensure rule compliance – for example, licensing them to do this or that – as well as extracting resources from them to cover the cost of governing them. Because this first service of government is about exercising power, it does not need to be designed in a human-centred way: the whole point is people are compelled to do their part of this kind of government service. This would

seem to explain why dealing with government bureaucracy has been considered an unavoidably painful experience for so long.

The modern state, especially when espousing liberal capitalism, has realised that the more effective way to govern is to make compliance as simple as possible, fitting as much as possible with people's existing habits and expectations. And so in countries with stable public administrations, service designers, or more often, digital designers, are called upon to make renewing a driver's license, getting a permit to chop down a tree, or registering to vote, less painful processes.

If the *Rules* side of government focuses on what a nation's population are not allowed to do, proscribing what is illegal, there is a second part of government that goes to what happens within the bounds of what is legal. *Government Services* aims to support and enable ways of living for particular sections of the population. Thinking that this is something governments should do – the 'welfare' state – is a relatively recent thing. These services might be direct – healthcare – or indirect – education about healthy life choices. There is often a debate about whether a government should be directly involved in delivering these services, or whether they can be achieved through enabling a market, for example, or by assembling an ecosystem of social actors already present in a policy area. These arguments might be ideological – 'it should not be the role of government to tell people how to live if those lifestyles are not constraining the lifestyles of others' or 'governments should not take money from the wealthy to pay for services for the poor' – or pragmatic – 'governments are not incentivized to deliver these services in as efficient ways as businesses are,' or 'governments in this nation do not have enough money to deliver such services.' The becoming-designable of government services is part of a response to these debates. Governments govern not only by make rules about what is illegal or servicing certain communities, but also by 'nudging' communities, by having policies that make some activities easier or more supported than others.

Finally, there are the articulations by which governments develop new rules and services and determine how best to implement them – i.e., *policies*. Designers, mostly service designers, seem to me to have only recently become enlisted into policy development to bring creative systems thinking to governments.

LUCY

These distinctions between rules, services and policies are somewhat artificial as 'design for policy' or designer engagement in 'policy design' reveal. Designers' attentiveness to lived experience brings into view how people experience 'rules' and 'policies' as materialized into service infrastructures and the practices of public administrations. Advocacy groups and non-governmental organisations make the same move – 'this is how people experience your policies'. But the distinctive agency of service design is not just to reveal these situated experiences, but then (at least try to) redesign infrastructures and services so people experience things differently.

Such a focus on experience is not limited to the citizens, residents or targets of policy. For example, the experimental unit MindLab demonstrated in the early 2010s across Danish government ministries and local government (Christiansen & Bunt 2016) that a 'design'

orientation helped the civil servants involved in policy making reconnect with their motivation for working in public administrations in the first place.

Design-orientated practice in policy making is spreading. There are design teams in cities and state departments around the world. For example, in the UK, by October 2023, the Policy Design Community now counted about 750 people from many levels of government across the four 'nations' of the UK in about 40 organisations, including several policy labs in central government departments (Kimbell et al 2023). But while the practices are spreading, the research base is still underdeveloped. Policy design is arguably on the fringe of the leading public administration research venues, and public policy based studies that do mention design tend to miss what is distinctive about design-based approaches (see van Burren et al 2023). I have sat in policy studies conferences where participants bemoan their inability to influence policy making, while in the room next door there are design researchers presenting novel policy proposals and negotiating politics by politically materialising issues into new forms, new configurations.

CAMERON

Certainly the rules, services and policies aspects of government overlap, but I do think there is a distinct worldview or mindset involved in each, and that some of the poor experiences associated with government agencies – both not succeeding in their objectives and in the way their operations disparage citizens, and public servants themselves, as you pointed out – result from confusing them. Governments try to service communities, but in very rule-bound ways; or they develop policies that are insufficiently regulated and so are quickly undermined. However, what you have described as the power of, hopefully research-based, design approaches to policy, are the positive impact that can come from bringing a service mindset to policy formulation and rule implementation.

Let me give another example of service designing across those different functions of government. I was involved in the last years of the decade long Designing out Crime Project in Australia. This was applied research work in the rule-enforcing area of government. However, the focus of the project was crime prevention rather than policing. There is a practice known as 'Crime Prevention through Environmental Design' which mostly involves delegating policing to products – defensive architecture, surveillance, etc. The Designing out Crime project began when Kees Dorst convinced a state-level government in Australia to switch from the design of products for rule enforcement to the service design of prosocial interventions in communities and organisations. These service designs were less about disaffording crime and more about designing with communities to reframe how organisations, systems or places functioned. A neighbourhood with significant nightlife that was leading to violence was recast as a music festival that just happened to occur two or three nights a week (see Dorst et al 2016). This reframe meant approaching the area with an attention to crowd logistics: lots of signage, people in booths who could help as issues arose, increased transport services at key times of entry and exit. These policy innovations, in the form of services rather than rules, allow the co-design of lively but safe socialities. A project in which I participated concerned elder people in non-English speaking communities falling prey to investment scams. The Designing out Crime 'frame innovation' approach meant fostering small groups with those communities in which people would feel comfortable asking about possible investments they might make, to break with the habit of

their making financial transactions without ever speaking to anybody about the risks. In these cases, the designers are not helping rule-policing, but nor are they designing a government service that directly deals with the problem – a financial advice phone line for example. Instead, the designers are helping governments do a kind of meta-service design – designing the service of teaching communities how to establish the routine of talking to each other about money.

LUCY

Your categorisation of the functions of government started with the idea of the state. But another important variable of government for service design is scale. Most states have tiered systems of government comprising a series of smaller jurisdictions within larger ones. Different rules and services, and so policies, are possible or suited to different levels of government. Obviously larger jurisdictions, like ‘federal’ or ‘national’ governments, have particular problems associated with trying to operate (efficiently and consistently) at large scales, serving large numbers of people, often across large geographies, even time zones. We should avoid generalising about service design in government, and instead note that design capabilities are operationalised at different scales with different resources, agendas, and forms of legitimacy. Local government officers might have a better understanding of and relationships to a place or issue than those working in a large department in federal or national government. In different countries, too, levels of participation in democratic processes can vary greatly, and civil society organisations and businesses are also part of the ecology in which government services are developed.

Scale is not just a question of numbers, in the sense of designing a service for millions of users within a nation state. The question of scale pushes designers to reconceive the human-object-context relation as unavoidably relational, plural, contingent and unfinished. There is something to learn from researchers who focus on transition studies, such as the ‘multi-level perspective’ (e.g. Geels 2010) now being taken up in design for sustainability (Irwin 2019; Ceschin & Gaziulusoy 2019). These ‘theories of change’ attend to socio-technical arrangements and work with the power of ‘niches’ to prefigure change over time. Relatedly, we can learn from institutional change researchers (Duraose & Lowndes 2021) who have analysed the ways in which (urban) design and policies that are incomplete can be a way of ‘holding space’ emergent community developments, though that incompleteness can also allow incumbents to persist.

The question of scope is also interesting given the enormous variety of things governments do for people. If you are designing government healthcare services, to what extent are your processes and your methods translatable to primary education, cybersecurity, industrial policy or care for people with dementia? I have always appreciated Hargadon and Sutton’s (1997) argument that the processes carried out by professional designers benefit from the fact that they grab one idea from one domain and apply it to another, just because it might work. This is much like Buchanan’s (1992) argument that design does not have a subject matter of its own; designers deal with situations. But a government is not (just) a situation; it is an unfolding infrastructure and narrative riddled with ideology.

Democracies and the Democratic: Ideals, Practices and Hypocrisies

CAMERON

So we now have a kind of matrix for what we mean by the government in which service designers might try to be political: *rules, services and policy*; and *nation-wide, regional and local*; and perhaps a third temporal dimension with *transitions and emergences*.

We should talk about how we understand different kinds of government. There are a variety of governmental systems. Let's say, to speak crudely about just one spectrum, that governments range from autocratic to democratic. I am not sure if an autocracy in the strictest sense would ever have need of service designers, but if it did, presumably the brief would be very unlike that from an avowedly democratic government. The specified outcome might be different, but would the service design process? To put this thought experiment the other way around, when service designing for democratic government, to what extent is the resulting service supposed to be manifestly democratic, and to what extent should the process of service designing also be democratic? Is it possible to autocratically design a democratic service?

LUCY

The problem here is that rather than systems of government being either autocratic or democratic, they are almost always a combination of both.

CAMERON

Yes, and these overlaps can be by necessity. I have written previously (Tonkinwise 2015) in the context of calls (by Ezio Manzini and Victor Margolin, for example) for designers to 'stand up for democracy' about the aspects of democratic government which may need to be undemocratic. I live in one of only a handful of countries that has compulsory voting at all governmental levels: federal, state and local government. That compulsion, backed by state-enforced punishments, is considered in some places to be undemocratic even though it does appear to make for a more functional democracy. Compulsory voting is just one aspect of enfranchisement, meaning determinations about who is not allowed to vote – non-citizens, children, criminals, people suffering cognitive deficits, etc – which can also feel undemocratically exclusionary.

I should also note that there are other consequences, in particular, for service designing. A society with compulsory voting has an infrastructure for up-to-date information about citizens that is used for other aspects of governance. This might be, for instance, an explanation for Australia's rapidly achieved high level of COVID vaccination during the pandemic (97.5% of the over 16 years of age population). I have always wondered how different it might be to design a government service in a nation that has 'national service,' where you can expect that almost all the users of the service will have had training in 'following orders,' for example, while recognising there are important traditions of resistance to such compulsory participation.

By the way, I do not mean to extol Australia as some exemplar. Australia has just had a Royal Commission (the most powerful kind of investigation) into a semi-automated system of issuing debt notices to recipients of government welfare payments (dubbed 'robodebt') that was subsequently found to be illegal because it was inaccurate and difficult to dispute.

No service designers were involved – the system aimed to be deliberately service-less – but the debt-issuing and collection process was a service that someone designed.

LUCY

The other overlap is when citizens vote democratically for politicians and parties with anti-democratic policies. This is worrying at a time of a lack of trust in democratic institutions, illegal manipulation of electoral processes and the racist, anti-trans and misogynist hate speech associated with populist politicians, especially those relying on the politics of grievance. And this goes to the key point I think we want to try to get to in this discussion: what are the accountabilities and responsibilities of a designer (or those doing designing) in these situations? It is the job of the public administration to implement elected government policy while maintaining some continuity in society through changes in governments. And there are strict limits on what most service designers (and academics working with them) are normally allowed to say about the behind-the-scenes of public services, especially if they are employed in public administrations or in agencies under contract to them. But it is notable that research publications about government service design over the last few years make almost no reference to those dramatic shifts in populist politics that have been occurring. To what extent can, or should, a designer get political in response to the shifting politics in which they are designing?

In this context, Michael Saward (2021) makes the case that democratic processes and institutions can be re-designed. Saward, as with scholars who rely on philosopher John Dewey, are, in a way, invoking a similar distinction as that of politics and the political. If democracies are formal systems for occasional public scrutiny of agenda-setting, policy formation and policy delivery across societies, then ‘the democratic’ would be bringing the spirit of engaged public decision-making to aspects of society outside of formal democracies – and sometimes, as Saward suggests, to democracies themselves. This ‘agonising’ (I’m alluding here to Chantal Mouffe’s ideas) for more democracy even within democratic government and its bureaucracies, especially when the latter tend toward becoming less democratic (or at least more chaotic), seems like it could be in the remit of service designers, a kind political designing of government services. To what extent are service designers equipped to generate and revise new democratic forms? Yoko Akama, Anne Light, Shana Agid (2023) or, from a different perspective, Guy Julier (2017) and others attentive to the fact that practices such as service design have mostly arisen within the global north and neo-liberalism, might say, ‘not very’.

But let’s dwell for a moment on what might be distinctive about the materialising and visualising associated with design practices. The early twentieth century North American pragmatist philosopher, John Dewey, pointed out that the ‘public’ that is expected to engage in democracy does not ‘naturally’ exist. People have to be assembled as a ‘public,’ constituted as ‘citizens.’ There are lots of ways of ‘designing’ different kinds of ‘publics’ into existence. Knocking on a door to enrol someone to vote is one way. But you can also block a street so that people come out of their homes to ask what is going on. Publics can be assembled by interventions into their otherwise daily routines. This framing from Noortje Marres (2016) helps explain the power of speculative critical design. Unexpected things provoke people to begin to discuss those things, forming those people into a small

constituency. Carl di Salvo (2022) and Brian Dixon (2023) use this Deweyan account of 'publics' to explain what can be political about design.

Part of a government service designer's job is to engage the people who might be in need of government service design, who may well be active and organised and even filling the gap. This dialogue can be a profoundly creative and political act. But governments can only handle certain groups of people acting in a particular way. As we noted, a public administration exists to maintain some kind of stability, or at least only ever slow transitions, in the operations of government. This means that services need to be designed to be delivered by a fairly inertial bureaucracy, which means in turn that citizens need to have expectations of, and play roles in, those government services, that are fairly predictable and often reproduce social inequalities. This is precisely how 'the political' or the fundamentally creative act of 'assembling a public' gets turned into more or less consistent versions of 'politics.'

Here is the dilemma for the service designer working in a public administration in a democratic government: on the one hand, their design practices have the potential to fundamentally (i.e., politically) re-constitute the nature of government (i.e., of politics, of democracies); but on the other hand, the touchpoints and interactions they (partially) design (typically implemented or (co-)delivered by others, and possibly redesigned on the fly through automated digital technologies and artificial general intelligence) will constitute particular social relations between subjects (the citizen, voter, user, beneficiary, resident, etc) and other parts of the government assemblage or bundle of things they are part of. Someone might be drawn to become a designer because they like the transformative potential of the former, but their designing consolidates social practices, which can lock people into particular relations with government, as they achieve the latter.

Co-Design: Equality of Participation in Service Design

CAMERON

While that way of phrasing the dilemma makes it sound like a clamping down on political creativity, I think those arguments about the value of a more agonistic version of assembling publics anywhere and everywhere need to be recognized as quite idealistic. Or rather, it would be exhausting to live in agonistic society or a society subject to constant redesign.

If we take the democratic to mean equality of participation in decisions about the nature of the society we live in, there are examples of intentional communities, even businesses (e.g., cooperatives) that try to practice this kind of 'direct democracy.' However, I remember Evgeny Morozov in his *To Save Everything, Click Here* (2013) paraphrasing Michael Schudson's idea of 'political backpacking;' which suggests that whilst it is pleasurable to go hiking and have to build, dismantle and then rebuild your own settlement and society each evening, that is only the case for a while. It is tiring to be involved in every decision an organisation needs to make, let alone a whole society. So delegation, to people, who provide the service of organising aspects of society for you, is a core compromise between democracies and the ideal of the democratic.

LUCY

As I understand it, the primary way in which the discourse of (north Atlantic) service design practice approaches these issues has been 'co-design.' There has been a decade or more of practical thinking about 'co-design' that has recovered a particular history of Scandinavian participatory design, for example, the 'Computer Supported Cooperative Work' approach to Human-Computer Interaction evident in Pelle Ehn's early trade union based work. Some of this work has become quite political, insisting on the designer's responsibility to proactively involve marginalised peoples in any and all co-designing (e.g., Costanza Chock 2020).

CAMERON

And it is important to note that those 'global north' versions of co-design are not the only ones. Lara Penin's assembling of the translated writings of Gui Bonsiepe (2021) draw attention to his work with Fernando Flores' team within the radical socialist government of Salvador Allende in Chile, an attempt to constitute new technologies for distributed decision-making systems, one that was unfortunately undermined by North American CIA operatives. Alongside Euro-centric co-design are orientations to co-existence rooted in Latin American critical thinking and practice (e.g., Schultz et al 2020; Serpa et al 2020).

LUCY

What I see (based on observations of Anglophone and western European design, therefore a limited view) is that the wide dissemination of co-design associated with public design and government services does not harness this critical thinking or indeed broader developments in the political sciences and humanities.

Worse, co-design associated with government services in Europe sometimes appears to be a simplistic stand-in for democratic processes which are not working well. Get some designers in to run a couple of workshops with stakeholders, and public servants can tell themselves they are enacting democracy to deliver what politicians have tasked them to deliver. This may be supplementing, or possibly replacing, *representative* democracy (where people vote for politicians, who make policy) with *direct* democracy (where people in the workshops make or evaluate policy proposals, a tiny sample of the public). A more useful framing (which I learned from Charlie Mealings [2023]) is *deliberative* democracy, the idea here being that democracy is negotiated and achieved through public deliberation.

CAMERON

This is a bit like the argument in the book by Otto von Busch and Karl Palmås (2023), *The Corruption of Co-Design*. Democracies involve argumentation but then, necessarily, compromise – though ideally what is ultimately decided on is a creative compromise and not just some messy fusion, unsatisfactory to both sides. For von Busch and Palmås, getting to creative compromise is the *realpolitik* of collaboration. Co-design, to some extent fearful of the political that that involves, has a tendency toward 'safe' spaces that in the end only have the appearance of collaboration. That critique could be quickly becoming out-of-date as researchers, but even practitioners, pressed by changing political movements outside of service design, begin to pay more attention to power – and not only power in any particular service designing practice, but also structural power relations that form the background for different projects. There are different takes on this, from political science (e.g. Lewis et al,

2020) to books in design like *Racism Untaught* (Mercer and Moses, 2023) and *Decolonizing Design* (Tunstall, 2023).

LUCY

These contributions exist alongside traditions in the arts which share with design the performative, the material and the aesthetic aspects of doing politics, or rather, the political.

Customerization of Government Services: The Logics of Convenience and Choice

CAMERON

With this, we perhaps get to the heart of the matter. While democracies are about equality of participation in decisions about how society functions, service implies an unequal relation. At its worst – and this is the etymology of service – the service provider is considered a slave. The dominant contemporary understanding of service is that of customer-centredness. The overlap between the two comes when organisations insist on being ‘relentlessly customer-focused:’ ‘the customer is always right’ (though the full quote is ‘in matters of taste,’ not in all matters), and so the ideal service involves the service provider customising service provision for the customer. For the duration of the experience, this version of service is far from equally democratic for both parties.

Governments, at least in the Anglosphere, have begun to make use of service design often as part of an overall commitment to bringing customer-centredness to government services. The government of the state in which I live has a Department of Customer Service, with the website byline, ‘Making it easier to deal with government by driving improvements in customer service.’ When this happens, the public of these services is being assembled as customers rather than as something else, for example, citizens. The politics of government uses the creative moment of calling up a public to do so within the existing (market) conventions of being an apolitical customer.

Now, on the one hand, this could be a good thing. If a community’s experiences of government rules and services have been disrespectful if not dehumanizing – which has certainly been the case, even in non-autocratic states, and especially for people of colour or people living with disabilities or any kind of difference from some colonial norm – redesigning public servants to be more attentive to the community as customers would be an appropriate response. Shouldn’t getting a license, or receiving unemployment welfare or even paying tax, aim to be as delightful an experience as that accorded paying customers in a well-designed hospitality service? One of the merits of the market is that businesses are incentivised to offer their services to as many people as possible (if the costs of those variations in service do not erode profit margins). Karl Polanyi’s famous account of the history of the emergence of capitalism identifies that it enabled exchange between people who did not know each other, making possible more cosmopolitan urban life. So, there is certain democratic equality that is the basis of the ‘free market,’ and it makes sense for democracies to make use of those more diversity-oriented aspects of customer service.

However, what some service designers (whether in agencies or government teams) do not seem to take sufficiently into account, is that if you design a government service in a customer-centred way, you are ontologically redesigning people from being citizens to being customers when interacting with their governments. The way of being that is reinforced by such service designs is that of *being a customer* – someone who is bargain-hunting for a transaction, who demands convenience if not automation, even if the service is provided by a person rather than website, who expects to not have to go through many social niceties because this interaction is something they are buying in the same way they shop for anything else. This ontological designing tends to have a ratchet effect. ‘Why can’t getting a building permit be as easy as one-click Amazon shopping?’ And then, ‘Why can’t getting an appointment with a doctor be as easy as getting a building permit?’

So we now have at least further dimensions to service design in government. Rules, services and policy; the scales of nation, region and local; the time period of change; and the mode of politics – autocratic, democratic, or ‘customerised’ (if you will forgive the neologism). And we are asking about how to negotiate these dimensions in a way that might bolster ‘the democratic’ in service designs.

One way to draw attention to this ‘democratic’ element is to make sure that we are asking about not only the experience of the service recipient but also that of the service provider. Public servants are citizens too. Doing the job of providing government services should not mean subordinating the political within politics, especially for just one of the parties of the service. Customerization of government services represses the political creativity that is possible within those service experiences. Designing a government service in terms of customer-centredness recasts services as apolitical transactions and makes pervasive market relations. In Annemarie Mol’s terms (2008), the Logic of Care is concealed by the Logic of [consumer] Choice.

To deal with this dimension of political government service design, we need, I think, to consider more carefully the nature of service. We have used a very ‘retail’, global north version of service to critically introduce the way government service design has been ‘customer-centred.’ But there are in fact many kinds of services, and only in some is the service provider subordinate. In professional services, whether knowledge or care work, the service recipient is dependent on the service provider. These can be commercial interactions, and customer-centred, but not ones in which the customer is right, because the customer has a problem and is looking for help. As a result, the danger of inequality is now the reverse; not the making-servile of the government agent providing customer service, but the risk of service recipient being cast into a dependent relation on the service provider.

A democratic service is a balanced relation, support without subordination, or mutual support. This seems both more possible for government services than commercial services, whether professional or menial, and more necessary given the democratically political values that service designers should always be trying make manifest in the rules and services of governmental politics. To put it another way, how to design government services in ways that make explicit that such services involve the co-creation of value? How to design services in which it is clearer that both the service provider and the service recipient

participate equally even if the nature of the service has unavoidable power asymmetries? It seems to me that the answer lies in government service designs drawing on examples of social interactions that are more mutual than those that have come to typify commercial services.

Democratic Services: Precedents of Mutuality in Social Relations for Government Contexts

Behind these questions are big assumptions about 'social ontologies,' that is, the why and how of people collaborating beyond formally designed services. If anthropology and sociology exist in the minds of practitioners in service design, it tends to be only as research methods rather than as fields with insights into sociality that can inform how to make services more equitably participatory.

LUCY

You are criticising practitioners for being practitioners.

CAMERON

Or am I criticising the educators or researchers (including myself) who write nice papers but are not so attentive to how practice might change? Practice needs to shift to be cognizant of the conceptualisations of service that are underpinning the design of government services.

In the middle of his large book that attempts to explain why people in many cultures, for the most part, feel an obligation to repay debts, and what this means for how societies hold themselves together, David Graeber (2014) proposes an abstract schema of the different ways in which one person might get another to help them. The first situation is when the helper and helped are in some kind of relationship. To be in a relationship with someone means that you help them whenever they need it; or, to put it the other way around, by offering to help someone whenever needed, you are indicating that you are prepared to form a relationship with them.

A second situation is that of authority. When one person has power over another, they can compel that person to provide assistance whenever they demand it. Graeber suggests that if there is not an explicit threat of violence behind this authority, it is often a matter of tradition or custom; those kinds of people have always been considered powerful, which means, 'we do, as we always have done, what they ask of us, without any expectation of mutual benefit'.

A final situation is when two people are strangers to each other, who are not in a relationship and have no tradition between them suggesting authority. These strangers must establish a temporary relation to exchange help – 'you do this for me and I will give you that, and then we can go our separate ways'.

LUCY

This 'ideal type' of thinking reminds of something I've been reading offering historical explanations of today's politics in the US. Jefferson Cowie's book (2022) on white resistance to federal power shows how 'freedom' in the US has been racialized for a long time. As I

understand it, at least as far back as the revolution (against the British), a substantial number of White people felt threatened by the federal government, especially in relation to their freedom to own enslaved people and occupy indigenous people's land. For these White people, their autonomy was paramount, even though reliant on the enslavement of Black people. Your summary of Graeber opens up questions relating to reciprocity – yes – but for who, and when? It is hard to have discussions about 'social ties' in the abstract without locating these within historical and geographical specificities.

CAMERON

That is a good point. I am not doing justice to Graeber who is drawing on extensive anthropological research – his own and that of others. As with all the concepts we have been using in this chapter, there is overlap and they manifest differently in different places and times. These categories of social interaction should only be treated as heuristics that need contextualisation. I think the value of this way of understanding the fundamentals of service interactions is that it helps point to how designers might ensure that government services are more democratic – in their design, in the experience of the service, and the politics such designed services reinforce.

Government does not at first seem to fit well with any of Graeber's categories. People should just help each other as needed because they are part of the same nation state, but this is not really the case, even in a democracy. In some places, governments command traditional authority, so if the government asks or tells people to do something, they will; but again, this is contrary to a more egalitarian and changing democratic society. And government services might be organized on a 'user-pays' basis, especially under neoliberalism, but democratic governments are supposed to be non-commercial domains, doing exactly what the market cannot or will not.

Nevertheless, I think that government service design can learn something from the details of how each of these social relations tend to play out. Take the first one.

We discussed earlier the potential awkwardness of designing services in which public servants identify themselves to service recipients and make themselves available for an ongoing service experience – 'feel free to ask for me by name next time' – but this is precisely the way to begin to establish a relationship, one that contains expectations of mutuality.

I should say that I think 'relationship' is not quite the right term here. It does suggest personal familiarity. Perhaps 'relation' is sufficient – in the sense of 'they are a distant relation of mine'. Ia and Manzini (2009) differentiate 'relational services' from more transactional situations by way of Martin Buber's existential ethics, which is about being fully present to each other as persons. However, in his *Design when Everybody Designs* (2015), Manzini offers some two-by-two continua to suggest that service relations might involve more or less 'relation intensity' or 'strong ties' between those involved. These point to the possibilities of connections, relations that break with the tradition of public servants being anonymous delegates of the government, that can be the basis of ongoing mutuality without becoming exhausting relationships.

LUCY

There is another side to this 'relations without relationships' that is tricky, even dangerous, to negotiate. Bureaucratic anonymity can be the cover for corruption. Relational service might foster mutuality because the people involved are somewhat known to each other. But then again, personalising a service interaction creates a vector for bias, marginalisation and micro-aggressions. It is a pretty fine balance between enough identity to prevent corruption and not so much as to allow interpersonal oppression.

CAMERON

If we move onto the second mode of social interaction – authority – this seems to be the opposite of democratic mutuality. But Graeber offers another way to view this by emphasising the situations in which the service contribution it elicits comes from an observed tradition rather than a threat of force. Authority can be granted through acts of respect rather than merely compelled compliance. The issue here would be how to design a service that a government entity offers that provides, for example, customised care, but that maintains in the minds of the citizens it serves some qualities that are deserving of active respect, leading citizens to help the service happen more equally.

This could be done through the style of the service, the aesthetics of the touchpoints which steer between appearing approachable and friendly but still formal and official. This makes it sound like a matter of branding the servicescape with emblems of tradition like coats of arms. The whole point here is that, as discussed before, we are in an era of distrust of many existing institutions, including governments and other institutions, even key democratic principles. Customerization can exacerbate this, as citizens are permitted to have as much allegiance to government as they might have to consumer item brands that they shift between depending on who has the best deal at the time. Customer-centredness pays respect to the customer, but perhaps at the cost of the authority of the government.

LUCY

Graeber's version of hierarchy via tradition is one that tries to make it acceptable only through consent: no hierarchy without the possibility of it being resisted at any time. You can always choose to break with tradition and challenge authority. Which is a bit the same as the consenting compromise we talked about earlier that is central to democracy: 'I abide by these democratic rules now only because we can always elect to change them in the future.'

This goes further than getting the customer to play a part in the government services they make use of, so that they are more democratically mutual, and in ways revalorise the democratic, despite the bureaucratic politics of this or that democratic nation or scale of government within those nations. It goes to people feeling that their involvement in the service is meaningful, for them and for service providers.

CAMERON

Graeber's final category of social relations is the dominant one these days, and as a result of globalising capitalism, almost everywhere – buying help. Again, Graeber has a nice way, I think, of drawing attention to the social practices involved in even seemingly straightforward economic exchanges. When there is no historical power relation between

those involved, no community expectations of mutual aid, strangers must work out how to constitute a temporary version of a relation, an exchange that creates the condition in which one stranger will help another. This requires a negotiation between equals as to how to establish a short-lived sociality, sufficient to cooperate on accomplishing the service. The value of the help that is being requested is compared to what is being promised in return. Such a calculation signifies what has to happen to allow the relation between those 'co-creating the valuable service' to begin, but also conclude: 'having done this for you, your giving me that means that all obligations between us are ended.'

Governments exist in many ways to do what cannot be accomplished through the market. By definition, they should not involve this kind of negotiated exchange. But being constitutional entities, governments and their agencies are often required to be explicit about what is expected of a service interaction; what are their limits and liabilities, and what the service recipient is responsible for doing as part of the service. These governmental 'terms and conditions' are not the price haggling of the market, but they are moments at which the service can draw attention to what is being exchanged. For this reason, they can and should be designed moments of genuine agreement, not deceptively patterned versions of 'click ok to accept' that bury the legal fine print of a service relation.

Unfortunately, these kinds of agreements about government services have been subject to another pattern. As neoliberalism began to wind back the welfare state, agreements specifying 'what the government expects you to do to access this' were weaponized against disparaged recipients of government services. The language of 'mutual obligation' made government assistance highly contractual and so conditional, even punitive. This is frustrating because 'mutual obligation' is exactly what we have been suggesting a democratic service should involve.

Conclusion: The Many and Urgent Dimensions of Government Service Design Politics

So, integrating Graeber's typology, we can now add a fifth set of concepts to the dimensions previously summarised:

- Activity: Rules, Services, Policy
- Scale: Nation, Region, Local
- Time: Transition, Emergence
- Politics: Autocratic, Democratic, Customerised
- Relations: Personalisation, Traditions, Agreements

These heuristics highlight the reasons why service design in government is not simply a special case of service design. Rather, it poses conceptual challenges to ideas current in service design thinking, such as 'customer experience' and 'value co-creation'. To put this negatively, government service designs that structure themselves around customer-centredness risk, ironically, being less democratic because the commercial exchange model is organized around a momentary sociality. But by refusing simplistic customer-centredness, government services could transition to relationships between service providers and recipients based on values such as autonomy, dignity or care. These could constitute socialities that encourage service recipients to participate more meaningfully, not just in this

or that service, but in the politics that constitute society. In this way, service designers are helping to make experiences with government more democratic.

LUCY

We have aimed to converse about concepts associated with political service design toward democratic government. It's likely that service design research will increasingly refer to the kinds of anthropology, political science and public policy discourses that we and others draw on.

This is where designers working in government – many of them involved in (re)designing (digital) services – play a crucial role. They are already in or close to government, employed or contracted, or working in civil society organisations that are part of the policy ecosystem and involved in agenda setting, policy development or service delivery. They may have an expertise that is granted increasing legitimacy in public administrations. Senior buy-in of this kind is always an opportunity to bring critical thinking to the service context.

Attentiveness to *collective learning* around service design can bring political change to the politics of government. Instead of service designers producing designs that blackbox the social practices with which people experience policies and interact with government interfaces, service designers could re-orient the design process to critical inquiries into new forms of government-public relations. If design practices embody a superpower in reassembling the political (to mash-up and paraphrase Marres, di Salvo, Dixon and others), then service designers in government are an important resource for social transformation.

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