Think tanks and third sector intermediaries of pro-am power

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Abstract

The paper traces the formation of "pro-am power" as a policy discourse through an analysis of key texts produced by the think tank Demos, the social enterprise Innovation Unit and the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA). They have made public service reform thinkable and intelligible through ideas and concepts that are intended to change ways of thinking about the public sector. The paper aims to conceptualise the organisational character and "intellectual style" of these institutions. These, I argue, are "innovation intermediaries" and ideational institutions staffed by intellectual workers with careers in ideas. They are structurally located in a blurry, interstitial space between think tanks, social enterprises, and technology R&D labs, as well as between public, private and third sector styles of service provision. Such organisations are preoccupied with the promises and problems of new software analytics, big data and social media applications and services, and with the promotion of a new kind of interactive citizen subject.

Keywords: *amateurs, big data, personalisation, public services, policy networks, third sector*

Introduction

Ideas about the involvement of amateurs in the reform of public services in the UK have been partly shaped in recent years by the increased political visibility of a number of cross-sectoral intermediary organisations. These include the think tank Demos, the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA),

and the not-for-profit Innovation Unit. In this paper I argue that these organisations are significant actors in contemporary public service reform debates. I focus on their production of a policy discourse of "pro-am power." Through their ideas about pro-am power these organisations promote reformatory aspirations for a future public sector in which:

— boundaries between professional and amateur roles become blurred;
— production and consumption merge as co-production; and
— public, private and voluntary (or third sector) provision are combined.

I examine pro-am power not merely as a model for emerging forms of participation in public services, then, but as an interrelated family of concepts, ideas, terms that have been combined, linked and juxtaposed in the products of Demos, NESTA and the Innovation Unit. In the symposium our emphasis is on how professional expertise, knowledge and services are delivered by a wider range of actors than is usually acknowledged. The specific contribution of this paper is to begin to identify some of the key organisations, ideas and discourses being generated to unsettle the boundaries between professionals and amateurs in the production and provision of public services.

The paper traces the formation of "pro-am power" as a policy discourse through an analysis of key texts produced by these organisations. The analysis treats these texts as material transmitters of ideas, not just secondary containers of information that are somehow subordinate to the primary human actors who populate political thought and action. These texts are significant material relays and mediators of contemporary political ideas. Specifically, then, I focus on how Demos, the Innovation Unit and NESTA have made public service reform thinkable and intelligible through a discursive "family" of ideas and concepts, including "pro-am power" as well as "personalisation," "co-production," and "radical efficiencies," that are intended to change ways of thinking about the public sector.

The article makes three main points. The first is to conceptualise the organisational character and "intellectual style" of these institutions. These, I argue, are "innovation intermediaries" and ideational institutions staffed by intellectual workers with careers in ideas. They are structurally located in a blurry, interstitial space between think tanks, social enterprises, and technology R&D labs, as well as between public, private and third sector styles of service provision. The second point is that such

organisations are preoccupied with the promises and problems of new software and social media applications and services. They take "technical change to be the model for political invention": they are preoccupied with "the problems technology poses, with the potential benefits it promises, and with the models of social and political order it seems to make available" (Barry 2001: 2).

According to Barry (2001: 14), we live in an era in which "interactivity" and the form of the "network" are increasingly viewed as important features of public service, "criss-crossing the distinction between the technical and the social." Yet "networks do not so much reflect social, political and technological reality; they provide a diagram on the basis of which reality might be refashioned and reimagined: they are models of the political future" (Barry 2001: 87). Likewise, interactivity has become a special political concern, with interactive technologies expected to produce active citizens, revitalise democracy and reinvent the ideal of active political citizenship itself. Interactivity is important because it was "invented" in information and communication theory as a way of explaining how humans and machines function symmetrically through feedback loops as part of interacting systems (Barry 2001). Its additional importance, as Barry (2001: 135) explains, is political, for in contemporary advanced liberalism the task of public authorities is not to direct or provide for the citizen but to establish conditions in which the citizen might become a more active, autonomous and responsible agent. More than just a technological form, interactivity has come to be a dominant model for the production of new kinds of citizens. In the paper, then, I will examine how pro-am power is paralleled with ideas about the construction of a "hopeful web" of networked and interactive technologies, in texts produced by Demos, NESTA and the Innovation Unit.

And the third point is that such texts, and the aspirations they embody, promote a new image of the citizen whose hybrid forms of pro-am participation in the production of personalised public services blurs the distinction between professional and amateur, and user and producer, and is modelled on the interactivity of software systems. It is important to note, however, that the discourse of pro-am power, and its components of co-production, personalisation and so on, remain to a large extent aspirational forms rather than empirically observable policy processes. In the paper I am interested in what the organisations generating this discourse want to happen, what objectives they seek to pursue, and what vision of the social and political order they are seeking to catalyse.

The research

The paper is based on ongoing research which aims to document, interpret, and try to explain the participation of cross-sectoral organisations, think tanks and social enterprises in public services in the UK. Elsewhere I have focused on the "third sector" as a space of thought and action in public sector reform, particularly in the field of education (Williamson 2013). The third sector constitutes both structurally and in political thought a seemingly "ideologically innocent" intermediary between the public and private sectors whose visibility and volubility in public sector reform has become increasingly pronounced in recent years, particularly under "Third Way" and "Big Society" policy banners (Alcock & Kendall 2011; MacMillan 2013). In particular, my emphasis is on what the third sector makes into the objects of its thought—the problems it specifies and the solutions it proposes—and how it solicits citizens into its style of thinking. Here, I am tracing a particular style of participation within the third sector that is both embedded in and embodied by the relationships, products and practices of Demos, NESTA and the Innovation Unit. This research examines how cross-sectoral intermediary organisations make particular ideas thinkable, credible and practicable in public service reform.

Innovation intermediaries

What are Demos, NESTA and the Innovation Unit? This section seeks to conceptualise these organisations as particular kinds of actors with a unique organisational, intellectual and political approach to public services.

Reflecting on the role of Demos, Mulgan (2006: 151-52) suggests it has been engaging in a form of "guerilla warfare" to expand the political space: it adopts an intellectually promiscuous approach to ideas, a practical "do tank" mentality, and self-consciously iconoclastic, irreverent and insurgent "shock tactics" which aim to "change the way people think." Practically, Demos carries out its own research and produces a huge number of reports ("pamphlets") and edited collections which it self-publishes and makes available for free under a Creative Commons open access license. In this sense, Demos falls somewhere between the traditional "independent" think tank, a political campaign group, and a media producer.

The Innovation Unit describes itself as a "social enterprise" that is "committed to using the power of innovation to solve social challenges." Originating within the New Labour government's department for education and skills in 2002, the

Innovation Unit was made into an independent social enterprise in 2006 to focus on innovative public services. Amongst its key ideas is that public services can best be reformed through the participation of "innovation intermediaries" who act as catalysts and brokers of ideas and relationships (Horne 2008). The Innovation Unit has self-published reports focusing on high-tech "innovation ecosystems," "D&R" processes of open innovation, on interactive and networked technologies for education, and on co-production in the design and delivery of services, often in collaboration with Demos and NESTA.

NESTA was established as a public body in 1998, to promote talent, creativity and innovation in science, technology and the arts, with an £80m endowment from the National Lottery. In 2012 NESTA formally became a charity rather than a public body. NESTA defies simple categorisation. Among its various roles, NESTA supports "innovation systems" in all sectors, and acts as a source of both original research and policy work in the field of innovation. It runs panel discussions, seminars, lectures and networking events bringing together academics, financiers, inventors, public service providers and corporates. Its priorities include supporting innovation in the voluntary and public sectors and "digital R&D". Indicatively, its "public services innovation lab" focuses on "investigating how public services could meet the major social challenges in a time of falling budgets, looking at how techniques such as co-production and digital platforms could help generate new approaches" (NESTA 2012).

I collectively term these think tanks and cross-sectoral organisations "innovation intermediaries," to adopt Innovation Unit terminology, but their organisational format, style of work, and position in the social structure requires unpacking. Relatively little relevant research has been done on such organisations in the UK, with the notable exception of political science studies of think tanks as political influences (Pautz 2012), recent research on the contingent nature of third sector and social enterprise organisations (Alcock & Kendall 2011; Teasdale 2012). My particular emphasis is on innovation intermediaries as ideas organisations and intellectual institutions rather than on their direct political influence or their sectoral position.

In the United States, Medvetz (2012: 213-14) has analysed political think tanks sociologically as a hybrid and semi-structured organisational network "situated at

the nexus of the political, academic, economic and media fields." By combining and balancing elements and institutional resources from each of these fields, including political know-how, the language of social science, media access, journalistic writing, and the techniques of activism, public relations and marketing, think tanks have occupied a flexible, structurally blurry, and interstitial space that is unconstrained by the clearly defined roles of its parent fields. The structural and organisational hybridity and blurriness of the think tank enables its "policy experts" to gather and pull together "various institutionalised resources and assemble those resources into unique packages" (Medvetz 2012: 137). The power of think tanks in general "lies in their ability to claim for themselves a kind of mediating role" and "to establish a mixture of resources captured from other fields" (Medvetz 2012: 178).

Likewise, in the UK, prominent think tanks such as Demos, it has been argued, work in a state of constant political innovation and through new "modes of intellectual work" (McLennan 2004: 494). Acting as catalysts, brokers, and fixers of new ideas, think tanks like Demos deploy a "certain kind of intellectual attitude," that of the "mediator," who is always "in the middle of things," acting as a propellant of new "vehicular ideas" and brokering alignments of interest between different constituencies (Osborne 2004: 431). The mediator seizes or appropriates big abstract ideas generated in one place and moves them on through new combinations and interactions in order to make them practical, usable, "buzzy," and marketable; "mediatizing" them for the mass media and making them capable of arousing attention and "making a difference" in a "constantly mobile, creative culture where ideas matter but not dogmatically or ideologically so" (Osborne 2004: 441).

Arnoldi (2007) further describes the ideas associated with the mediator as discrete "informational ideas," rather than grand prescriptive ideology. Mediators must be able to produce, brand and market these informational ideas in order to appear innovative and to mobilise political, public and media support simultaneously. What matters is being a "link tank" as well as a think tank, with sufficient connections to create interactive synergies and capacities to access the media (Arnoldi 2007: 62). These think and link tanks act as "enunciative agents" whose ideas do not *represent* political reality but constantly *produce* and mobilise new political possibilities through the message-intensive informational culture of contemporary media networks (Arnoldi, 2007: 69).

Mobilizing these studies as an interpretive framework, the "innovation intermediaries" of Demos, NESTA and the Innovation Unit can be understood as occupying a new institutional niche in British political life, although their actual influence is debatable, like that of think tanks in general (Pautz 2012). Rather than trying to define, classify or typologise them, or to locate them in a definite political or sectoral position or field, it is preferable to view them as a flexible and hybrid network and as cohabitees of a new kind of interstitial space that is in-between the think tank, the social enterprise, the digital R&D lab, the public body and the not-for-profit sector. The interstitial organisations and mediators who embody these activities constantly interact among intellectual, bureaucratic, economic and media networks, resources, products and practices, re-assembling them into unique packages that can be branded, marketed, promoted and reinserted anew into public sector debate. In what follows, I focus on reports, pamphlets and web products produced by these organisations as material techniques of such practices, and a rich source of evidence of the generation of a new kind of policy discourse of "pro-am power."

Case studies

Pro-Am power
In order to trace the formation of the discursive family of "pro-am power," it is necessary to identify some genealogical moments at which key ideas and modes of thinking about public sector reform have been discursively produced and materially relayed in texts produced by Demos, NESTA and the Innovation Unit. In 2004, Charles Leadbeater and Paul Miller published the Demos pamphlet *The Pro-Am Revolution: How enthusiasts are changing our economy and society*. The simple argument was that the dominant social trend in the twentieth century was for things to be done by expert professionals and by large hierarchical organisations. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, they argued that "a new breed of amateur has emerged: the Pro-Am, amateurs who work to professional standards":

> The Pro-Ams are knowledgeable, educated, committed and networked, by new technology. … Pro-Ams are creating new, distributed organisational models that will be innovative, adaptive and low-cost. (Leadbeater & Miller 2004: 12).

Pro-Ams are an emerging social hybrid whose activities cannot be divided up into binary opposites of work and leisure, consumption and production, or professional

and amateur. Networked and interactive technologies play a significant role in this account. Drawing specifically on ideas about "group forming network technologies" from the internet theorist Howard Rheingold, Leadbeater and Miller (2004: 45) argue that Pro-Ams use networks to coordinate their activities:

> They are creatures of digital technologies, niche media and specialist branding. They use their mobile telephones and the internet to organise physical, face-to-face activities. The organisational burden … is now often borne by networked digital technologies.

Pro-Ams use specialist websites on the internet to locate information, advice, knowledge and contacts to feed their enthusiasms. They thrive on messaging systems to remain in contact with other likeminded enthusiasts, and they are beneficiaries of an explosion of specialist media and the marketing of branded consumer products that claim to meet professional standards. They also claim that Pro-Ams are important originators of "disruptive" and "radical" technological innovations, and specific parallels are drawn between Pro-Ams and the model of "open, mass innovation" as a source of revenue generation in the interactive technologies industry. "Pro-Am communities," Leadbeater and Miller (2004: 67) argue, "are the new R&D labs of the digital economy."

It is especially significant that they see Pro-Ams as "vital to service innovation," and argue that "harnessing Pro-Am service innovators will be vital to the future of public services, especially in health, social care and education" (53). They envisage "a kind of guerrilla army" of Pro-Am "advisers, helpers and innovators" in all public institutions, "from public libraries to the BBC, schools and hospitals" (59), all interacting in service innovation through the social networks and collaboration technologies of the internet.

In conclusion, Leadbeater and Miller (2004: 71) state that the "Pro-Ams will bring new forms of organisation into life, which are collaborative, networked, light on structure and largely self-regulating." This vision is re-articulated in the NESTA model of "public services inside out," where users are repositioned as service co-producers and public service agencies become "catalysts and facilitators of change rather than central providers of services" (Boyle, Slay & Stephens 2010: 19), thus "blurring the distinction between professionals and recipients, and between producers and consumers of services" (Boyle, Slay & Stephens 2010: 15). Although "Pro-Am power" and debates about consumers and producers as co-producers are

not entirely symmetrical, they combine genealogically in the production of the pro-am discourse in which citizens are positioned as amateurs, consumers and users with new powers to participate as everyday experts in public service design.

Personalisation

The self-regulating, networked and interactive "Pro-Am revolution" is part of a wide and ambitious Demos project to "personalise" public services in the UK. What I want to argue here is that personalisation represents an attempt to deploy the discourse of pro-am power out into the mainstream. Needham (2011) argues that personalisation has been constructed as part of the problematisation of public services in the UK: "personalisation was a term that helped to summarise all that was wrong with existing public services and what could be done to improve them" (Needham 2011: 4). Personalisation is pro-am power imagined at mass scale. Leadbeater, again, has advocated personalisation in a series of pamphlets variously focusing on public services including education, health, and social care. In *Personalisation through participation: A new script for public services*, Leadbeater (2004: 16) emphasises "bottom-up, mass social innovation, enabled by the state," with public service users positioned as "co-producers," "active participants" and "self-managers" who contribute to "self-organizing" solutions. Personalisation implies "the public good emerging from within society, in part, through the way that public policy shapes millions of individual decisions" (Leadbeater 2004: 23).

Elsewhere, Demos researchers define a personalised approach to public services as mobilizing the person involved as a participant in its production. The ideal of self-directed and personalised public services is at the centre of a new "politics of participation":

> Government's role is to shape freedom: getting people to exercise choice in a collectively responsible way and so participate in creating public goods. Self-directed services provide a working model for just that: how to shape people's choices to promote socially beneficial, collective outcomes. (Leadbeater, Bartlett & Gallagher 2008: 79)

These authors claim that the personalisation and co-production of public services changes the role of professionals and users. In co-produced services, professionals such as teachers, social workers and doctors retain a critical overview of service quality and outcomes, but they are repositioned as "advisers, counsellors and brokers, guiding people to make better choices for themselves" (Leadbeater, Bartlett

& Gallagher 2008: 11). Moreover, the shift to co-produced services brings in new sources of information, knowledge and expertise. Instead of relying on the skills and knowledge of managers and professionals as gatekeepers and administrators of services, participative approaches bring in "more detailed knowledge from users, their families, peers and friends, about what is important and how it could be done" (Leadbeater, Bartlett & Gallagher 2008: 12). This shift from a mass, centralised form of provision to more networked and personalised provision is dependent on moving power away from professionals and towards amateurs to set goals and outcomes and to assess and manage risks.

The personalisation concept mobilised by the Demos researchers mediates ideas about interactivity, networks, professional-amateur hybridities, and particular ideas about freedom, autonomy and democracy, as diagrams of the potential social and political order. The feedback loops of personalisation promote and solicit into thought and action a citizen subject who is active, responsible, and autonomous enough to function as part of an interacting system, where service providers and service users are enclosed in perpetual cycles of interactivity.

Radical Efficiency
Radical efficiency is a model for "different, better, lower cost public services" promoted by the Innovation Unit that again extends the discourse of pro-am power into models for public service reform. Described as a "system change for central government," radical efficiency is based on principles of leadership by amateurs; partnership with users; citizen engagement in public policymaking; local autonomy and empathy with local communities; the "liberation of local innovators"; and the management of "local risk capital" (Gillinson, Horne & Baeck 2010: 2-3). The four main elements of radical efficiency are new insights, new customers, new suppliers, and new resources.

"New insights" refers to the engagement of new thinkers or other sources of knowledge and new data offering new perspectives on existing challenges. This includes involving other sectors from outside public services, as well as existing service users, as "knowledge generators," and it might involve techniques of collecting new data and data mining. "New customers" is about "reconceptualising who you are truly serving," and includes non-consumers of existing provision, new consumer units, community as consumer, and techniques of "user segmentation."

"New Suppliers" include "users as co-producers," as well as other new entrants to the market and community providers. And finally, the "new resources" of radical efficiency consist of "the assets and tools deployed to make things happen—from buildings, to people and technology." These tools and assets might include fresh assets such as digital technologies and software, or the reuse of existing assets in new ways. The model repositions public service users as reformatory actors and local experts who put their experiential assets to work to catalyse system change. The report advocates a range of both state and non-state organisations being "truly connected to citizens and a shared aspiration for UK society" (Gillinson, Horne & Baeck 2010: 57).

Yet who or what are the organisations that will shape radical efficiencies? An answer is provided in another Innovation Unit publication, *Honest Brokers: brokering innovation in public services*. Horne (2008: 20) describes the emergence of "innovation intermediaries" that can help "innovative organisations develop and spread their innovations," or to "identify problems they have, search for solutions elsewhere and then absorb and acquire these innovations." As Horne acknowledges, the model of innovation intermediaries is imported into public services from the science parks, business incubators and technology transfer companies associated with R&D in the high technology sector. The blurb on the pamphlet asks "Where is the Silicon valley for public services in Britain?" Innovation intermediaries can disrupt the monopoly hold of existing institutions by brokering new types of specialist knowledge, and brokering relationships between organisations "to create the right partnerships for innovative ideas to grow" (Horne 2008: 28). Honest brokers mediate between public service providers and innovative companies to construct "innovation-rich sectors" that are "highly networked," and that work by "collaborating and recombining old ideas from diverse sources to create new ideas" (Horne 2008: 30). The innovation intermediary is the ideal organisational form for the methods of radical efficiency advocated by the Innovation Unit. It represents a hybrid organisational form that draws its power from a combination of high tech R&D, political campaigning, media production, and community activism.

Algorithmic reform
In the examples of the Pro-Ams, personalisation, and radical efficiency, public sector reform is being fashioned according to diagrams of networks, interactivity, and feedback. In more recent documents, however, Demos, Innovation Unit and NESTA

researchers have begun to mediate ideas about the problems and promises of databases, web 2.0 analytics, adaptive software, and other emerging forms of human-computer interaction and transaction facilitated by new algorithmic processes. Such technologies offer the potential for the automatic production of personalised public services. These technologies are now being interwoven with pro-am power discourses. Continuous with arguments about the interactive potential of pro-am power, personalisation and radical efficiency, recent texts produced by Demos, NESTA and the Innovation Unit construct algorithmic processes as two-way relays between amateurs and professionals, service providers and service users, and between governing authority and the governed.

In the Demos pamphlet *The Civic Long Tail*, Leadbeater (2011) argues that social media and web 2.0 are remaking the relationship between government and citizens. According to the interpretation offered in the pamphlet, the widespread use of social media is creating huge amounts of information and data sources that could provide new sources of economic and social innovation, with particular potential benefits for public services. He states that as a massive number of miniscule interactions and transactions are amassed into enormous databases, a potentially rich mine of information becomes available for governments who want to connect, or to control, what citizens do, and to shift their sentiments, interests and demands:

> Even if social media does not become a platform for overtly political activity, it is already changing how citizens expect to be treated and so what they expect of government. As people are being inducted into a more open, participative and expressive culture in their everyday lives, they are bound to carry those expectations into their interactions with government. (Leadbeater 2011: 9)

If government can act effectively to harness the tools of social media and the data it produces, Leadbeater predicts the possibility of new forms of "emergent democracy," "collaborative and conversational forms of governance," and "democratic systems that can operate at scale and yet be fluid, adaptive and engaging when needed." In *The Civic Long Tail* new technological forms are paralleled by the potential for new political forms. Technological diagrams of data mining, algorithms, cloud computing, the social web, intelligent systems, and the "hopeful web" are interwoven with the political imaginary of a smarter, more open, and more intelligent form of "Government 2.0" that interacts with "Community 2.0":

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> Government 2.0 is about improving people's relationships with government, either as citizens through the political process, as funders through taxation or as service users. Community 2.0 is about enlarging and empowering citizens' relationships with one another … about communities looking after themselves more effectively and the web providing a platform for unfolding communitarian creativity. (Leadbeater 2011: 18)

This new relationship between governing authority and the governed crucially depends on digital data—or "big data." In a follow-up pamphlet, *The Data Dialogue*, Demos researcher Bartlett (2012) argues that there are two main types of big data that are relevant to public service debates:

> As we shop and subscribe on and offline, we provide 'personal information', which directly identifies us: bank details, telephone number, home address and so on.

> As we spend more time connected to the internet, we create more 'behavioural data': information that may be generated by individuals but which is anonymised and aggregated when stored and analysed. This information includes location and browsing or purchasing history.

Bartlett recommends a series of new approaches to data. These include giving people more "informed choice" by providing them with knowledge and information about how data is collected, by whom, how it is stored and shared, and how it is used. This means designing "information policies" around the principles of "consumer control" by "creating a spectrum of meaningful options about how much, when, and to whom consumers share information" (Bartlett 2012: 17). Moreover, informed decision-making and consumer control depends on making the public aware of the "mutual benefits" that can come from sharing personal and behavioural data online. Bartlett (2012: 20) frames these mutual benefits primarily in terms of creating new "services and applications that are more tailored to users' needs."

In the subsequent report *The Data Dividend*, Demos researchers Wind-Cowie and Lekhi (2012: 63) likewise argue that big data "should be viewed as a transformative agent that has the potential to revitalise, reinvigorate and renew public services." Thus, they suggest, the public sector needs to get to grips with the big data chain. The platforms that citizens already use to access public services, they argue, should be equipped with the most up to date analytics software in order to generate the kind of everyday data about citizens that companies such as Aamazon, Google and Facebook produce about customers and users. Wind-Cowie and Lekhi (2012: 10) argue:

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> The dynamics of service improvement through data use draw equally from technological and democratic sources. From the technological perspective, identifying problems in service delivery can be seen as a similar process to debugging software.

The open source software approach to finessing computer code is paralleled by "the democratisation of public services" as it "provides an opportunity for heightened and positive engagement and co-production." These Demos publications demonstrate how a political concern with the interactivity of software, algorithmic code and big data in everyday life is now being used as the template for a thoroughgoing reimagining of public participation in the reform of public services.

The future possibilities of Government 2.0 and the algorithmic public services imagined by NESTA, Demos and the Innovation Unit embody a new form of what Ruppert and Savage (2012) term "transactional politics." Transactional politics emerges from the juxtaposition of "data that is generated routinely as a by-product of our everyday experiences" with the "pervasive mobilisation of transactional data to know and evaluate the performance of populations" (Ruppert & Savage 2012: 74). These developments in the collection and analysis of big data suggest the emergence of new forms of political activity and new relationships between government and citizens:

> Web 2.0 devices are being deployed and are more generally being used for democratic political mobilisation and engage the media and amateurs in data collection, digitisation and analyses through mashups and data linkages in publicly visible and effective ways. (Ruppert & Savage 2012: 74)

Transactional politics describes an emerging political reality in which amateurs are increasingly enrolled as interactive participants in the action of government and the organisation of public services. Service users are being actively solicited as experiential agents whose lay expertise is to be aggregated into new reformatory techniques and practices. This is pro-am power mashed up with big data in the production of personalised public services

Discussion: The "public policy lab" and the future of pro-am power?

Early in 2013, NESTA produced a set of 13 predictions for 2013 that give some sense of possible future trajectories for "pro-am power." The list includes:

— the growth of "digital public services" as "user-centred design" methods, social media and access to "open research databases" are combined and brought into public services;

— a new trend in "civic apps"—citizen-oriented digital services based on open data which add value to public services;

— the institutionalisation of "crowdsourcing" as a "democratic" method for solving social problems accelerated by "computation power" and "big data";

— the growth of a "sharing economy" based on "collaborative consumption" using peer-to-peer technology services;

— the creation of "social science parks" and the "public policy lab": "not so much a think tank but an experimental workshop that prototypes new forms of public service delivery" by working across "the public, private and social enterprise sectors socially useful and usable ideas" (NESTA 2013)

Within NESTA's imaginative new future possibilities, public services are represented and addressed as potentially and ideally becoming more interactive and networked, catalysed and mediated by new kinds of "public policy labs" that work across sectoral divides. The predictions depict a near-future scenario of "digital public services" embedded in new kinds of algorithmically-powered tools, apps and devices, analytics software that are capable of sorting through big data sets and producing adaptive personalised solutions autonomously of human intervention. The products of these techniques are to be "software sorted" (Graham 2005) public services in which provision is directly and automatically allocated without significant human involvement. The service user constructed by software-sorted public services interacts distantly with algorithmic processes and web analytics by constantly supplying personal and behavioural data that can be analysed to generate personalised provision.

Moreover, these software-intensive and interactive public service reforms are imagined to be driven not by centralised bureaucracies, but by innovative and experimental social science and "public policy labs" and "public services research parks" modelled on the template of the high-tech science parks at the centre of innovation policy. These predictions demonstrate how the future of public services is being made problematic, and turned into a set of issues for which new and innovative solutions are to be sought. The source of such solutions, according to these texts, is unlikely to be central public sector bureaucracy. Instead, really useful public service reforms will emerge from a new wave of organisations which will hybridise the role of the think tank with more experimental, participatory and practical methods which actively involve service users in the coproduction of new services. Not coincidentally, of course, NESTA has its own existing public services

innovation lab, the Innovation Unit badges itself as an innovations intermediary in public service reform, and Demos has promoted itself as a "do tank" rather than merely a think tank. The problematisation of public services, then, finds its solution in these intermediary organisations, whose flexibility, capacity for mediation between intellectual, political, R&D and media fields, and criss-crossing of public, private and third sectors situates them ideally to do the reformatory work that a bureaucratic government cannot.

In sum, in this article I have traced the participation in public sector reform of the cross-sectoral "innovation intermediaries" Demos, NESTA, and the Innovation Unit, focusing particularly on their formation of a discourse of "pro-am power." I have made three main points. First, I have developed an understanding of how these organisations act as mediators of new political ideas that are intended to change the way people think. These mediated, informational ideas are embodied in the production of reports, pamphlets and websites that act as relays and material transmitters of new ways of thinking about public service provision and organisation. The texts and materials produced by Demos, the Innovation Unit and NESTA embody a combination and mixture of resources and practices from academic research, high tech R&D labs, political campaigning, and media production.

My second key point is that the resources produced by Demos, NESTA and the Innovation Unit create parallels between contemporary technological forms and a vision of a smarter kind of public service provision. These texts have introduced into public sector thinking a particular preoccupation with networks and interactivity, and, more recently, big data and software analytics. The public sector of the future imagined by these organisations is adaptive, interactive, and personalised; it is powered by computational algorithms, analytics software, feedback systems, and by the aggregation of big data and information through open source methods and crowdsourcing techniques.

Finally, my third key point is that the discursive mediation of algorithmic forms into aspirations for public sector reform is producing a contemporary form of transactional politics within the public sector, or a politics of interactivity which positions citizens as functioning parts of an interacting political system. These ideas shape a new kind of interactive citizen, a subject who participates interactively in the

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production of personalised services through political feedback loops. In such a model, the professional authority of public sector agencies is diminished as a crowd of interacting pro-ams and participative co-producers surges forth to replace formal expertise with their experiential assets, a process facilitated by the algorithmic powers of software systems and big data. The Pro-Am revolution, personalised public services, radical efficiency, and the transactional politics of Government 2.0 are key concepts in the contemporary transactional politics of interactivity. This shifts the pole of power and influence away from the central bureaucratic authority of professional and politicians, and positions users and amateurs as pro-ams and coproducers of public services, supported and facilitated by new intermediary organisations that are more flexible, hybrid, and high-tech than the organs of government.

In making these claims, I have been developing the argument that organisations such as Demos, the Innovation Unit and NESTA are shaping the discourse that makes certain objectives and aspirations for the public sector possible. Through the discourse of pro-am power I have traced, they have positioned themselves as intermediary actors with the necessary combination of intellectual, political, technological, and media know-how to find the solutions to the contemporary problem of public service reform.

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Appendix: Key websites

Demos: www.demos.co.uk
NESTA: www.nesta.org.uk
Innovation Unit: www.innovationunit.org

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