

Research strategy

mysociety.org/research





Mission

mySociety's overall mission is:

“ To invent and popularise digital tools that enable citizens to exert power over institutions and decision-makers ”

Vision

Citizens will only try to demand better from governments if those citizens have access to a rich mix of often scarce resources: from education, to wealth, to knowledge about government failings. At mySociety we are highly aware that we cannot give people most of these things: we can't help boost business in failing economies or bring teachers into schools that have none. These are the tasks of major development funders, political leaders and well-functioning markets, and we understand that we cannot help make citizens more powerful on our own. We do believe that we can bring something significant to the table, if other groups are doing their bit. What mySociety can definitely do is convert moments of everyday frustration and idle curiosity experienced by citizens into action, using the internet.

In the UK we proved that we could enable people to send demands to governments and companies: messages that got things done and changed. We also showed that we could help citizens to help uncover governance failings that were otherwise unknown in their own lives and communities. And, crucially, we know how to do this amongst people who aren't political junkies, and we know how to do it at scale.

mySociety's vision is for citizens around the world to feel empowered to interact efficiently, effectively and meaningfully with their governments and decision-makers using low cost and user-friendly civic technology. We want to enable citizens to communicate through accessible means, to solve their problems and to get what they are entitled to from institutions.

We believe that strong democratic accountability and a thriving civil society are vital to our common welfare, and that these cannot survive where people do not engage with government and communities. We work online because we believe that the internet can meaningfully lower the barriers to taking the first civic or democratic steps in a citizen's life, and that it can do so at scale.

Our ambition is to increase the impact of each service that we provide, and to increase the breadth of usage of those services through working with our international partners.

Executive summary

mySociety will contribute to the achievement of its ambitions through implementing a substantial increase in the research it conducts into civic technology. In particular, we will:

- Build our understanding of how individuals and institutions use and are impacted by civic tech
- Prioritise research that is novel, comparative and innovative
- Accelerate the dissemination of research findings
- Develop a global network of researchers interested in civic tech

To deliver these priorities, we will:

- Invest in academic research activities exploring pertinent questions
- Pursue high quality collaborative partnerships with academic and NGO organisations interested in civic technology
- Publish all results and appropriate data in an accessible format and in a timely fashion
- Organise and attend research conferences and events to disseminate ideas and results and to build a network of civic tech researchers

Our research is a fundamental facet of our operation, and it is our intention to use our research agenda to demonstrate how civic technology is impactful, meaningful and how it contributes to changes in governmental accountability, transparency and citizen engagement.

Our research approach

mySociety wants to understand where it can and does have meaningful impact upon the individuals and organisations that use its tools. Our technology is deployed by a wide range of groups around the world, and it is vital to understand how those deployments are operating, and whether they are in fact making a meaningful contribution to the local polity. mySociety also wants to understand how it can enhance the quality and take-up of those tools internationally in broadening citizen engagement with institutions and decision-makers.

Our approach will focus on points of impact within the user journey, and will be collaborative and comparative.

mySociety tools are primarily digital and used online. Citizens visit the differing mySociety platforms to either acquire information or to make a request to get something changed. Whilst some uses of mySociety tools are more passive than others (the user does not provide or request information or interact directly with the site, but simply finds and reads the desired information from the main website pages), all of the platforms are considered 'transactional' in that there is a linear progression through the site guided predominantly by an offline personal issue/interest, and that a transaction occurs when the user either acquires, requests or submits information. We do however understand the importance of the interaction of our tools with necessary offline processes, and acknowledge that there are regions where internet penetration is low. In such instances, we work with local partners to ensure the development of a nuanced approach that is compatible with the cultural and technological landscape.

The impact of mySociety tools can therefore manifest at multiple possible points surrounding the transaction, and at an individual and institutional level.

Research framework

The points of impact mySociety is prioritising are categorised as:

- A. Individual factors** – The journey individual users experience using civic technology
- B. Digital factors** – The impact of the digital environment upon the user journey
- C. Environmental factors** – The cultural, social and institutional environment in which the technology and individual user operates

These points of impact can also be assessed chronologically:

- 1. Pre-transaction** – Before the individual accesses the digital tool
- 2. Transaction** – The user experience on the online tool itself
- 3. Post-transaction** – The user behaviour and activity following use of the tool

At each of these points of impact, we want to understand what is happening and whether the impact is meaningful. The matrix demonstrates how we will use these impact points to prioritise our research and interrogate the process of using civic technology:

PHASE	CITIZENS NEED... (A)	CIVIC TECHNOLOGY MUST... (B)	ENVIRONMENTAL PRESSURES WILL... (C)
BEFORE ANYONE VISITS A WEBSITE... (1)	What do individuals need to use civic technology?	What does civic tech need to do to be prepared for citizens and institutions to interact with it?	What socio-political environment will nurture civic tech? What might create cultural barriers?
WHEN CITIZENS ARE USING THE SITE... (2)	How are citizens using the site? Are there barriers? Can we 'nudge' people to feel more comfortable to engage?	What technical details will threaten the transaction?	How will socio-cultural conventions, bureaucracy and legal parameters affect how transactions occur?
AFTER PEOPLE HAVE CLICKED AWAY... (3)	What do citizens do after the transaction? Do they feel empowered?	How can civic technology automatically nurture that engagement?	How do institutions react to the transactions through civic tech?

The boxes within the matrix address differing points in the user journey and the impact factors associated with those points. Cross-referencing impact in this way will build a complete picture of the impact of mySociety tools, and will provide a preliminary framework for measurement. Multiple research questions can be asked within each box, and we envisage conducting a number of studies to analyse each point of impact.

Implementing our approach

We wish to examine our impact by:

- **Developing our understanding** of how digital tools can instigate and support long-term attitudinal change in citizens with regard to their institutional engagement activities
- **Testing** the best ways to present information and facilitate citizen-government digital interactions
- **Analysing** how institutions and decision-makers react and respond to citizens using digital engagement tools
- **Contextualising** how social, environmental and cultural institutions shape civic digital engagement

The scope of mySociety's research agenda is deliberately broad and ambitious. Multiple research activities and studies are planned, using multiple research methods. We will be using quantitative survey methods to assess demographics and public attitudes. We will be running randomized control trials to understand how the presentation of information can make citizens more likely to engage with institutions and decision-makers. We will also be undertaking an extensive qualitative study using in-depth interviews to unpick the motivations, frustrations and operations of both citizens and public bodies.

All of our work will include comparative elements, with studies being conducted in multiple regions around the world, and with civic technology organisations running platforms on different code. Research will be conducted by both mySociety research staff, and in partnership with academic institutions and NGOs around the world.

Disseminating our findings

We aim to produce high quality, academically rigorous research, and to make a contribution to knowledge in this emerging field. Whilst we think that it is important that the data collected through our research should be submitted for publication in leading academic journals, we recognise that this not only takes significant time, but that such publications are largely inaccessible to those outside of academia. Mindful of this, we aim to publish our findings regularly online and in a variety of blogs. Wherever possible, we also intend to publish full data sets so that other interested parties may use them.

We recognise the value of making connections and hearing about research first-hand, and as such plan to disseminate our ideas and our findings through networking and events. mySociety holds regular research evenings and will hold its first annual research conference in 2015. In addition, mySociety research staff attend relevant academic conferences with the aim of raising the profile of civic technology research and developing a global network of similarly interested individuals and organisations