Governments don't have websites – they are websites. Their continued legitimacy will depend on improving online digital services

Tom Steinberg *argues that, since people are increasingly interacting with the state online, governments no longer just 'own' websites, they are websites. Worryingly, as government websites continue to fall behind private sector ones, governments will begin to look less and less legitimate.*

Quick question – don't think too hard about it: what is Amazon?

At one level, Amazon is the world's largest online retailer, a public company listed on the NASDAQ. At another level – the physical – it is a collection of over 50,000 employees, hundreds of warehouses and zillions of servers.

But for most people *Amazon is fundamentally a website*. Sure, it's an extremely impressive website that can send you parcels in the post, and which can relieve you of money with terrifying ease. But to most people the company has very little reality beyond the big white-blue-and-orange website and the brown cardboard packages.

Vanishing Act
The same process is happening to the bits of the government that I interact with – the physical reality of bricks and mortar and people and parks is starting to disappear behind the websites. Government is increasingly a thing I don't have any mental images of. I don't know what my local council looks like, nor am I even clear where it is. I'm sure you all have plenty of interactions with HM Revenue and Customs, but do you know where it is or what it looks like?

Increasingly, when I form a mental image of a branch of government in my head, what I see is the website. What else am I supposed to picture? Governments no longer just *'own'* websites, they *are* websites.

Heartless Bourgeois Pig
Wait! Stop shouting! I know how this sounds. I am not so out of touch that I don't know that there are plenty of people out there who are only too familiar with the physical manifestations of government. They see the government as manifested through prison, or hospital, or the job centre. They have no problem forming a vivid mental image of what government means: a waiting room, a queue, a social worker.

And I also know that most of the poorest people in the UK aren't online yet. It's one of the great challenges for our country in the next decade.

But…
The majority of citizens don't have deep, all encompassing, everyday interactions with the state – at most they drop their kids at school every day, or visit the GP a few times a year. That's as physically close as they get.

To these people, interacting with government already feels somewhat like interacting with Amazon. It sends them benefits, passports, recycling bins, car tax disks from mysterious dispatch offices and it demands money and information in return. The difference is in emotional tone – the Amazon online interactions tend to be seamless, the government online interactions either painful or impossible – time to pick up the phone.

Increasingly, when a modern citizen looks at a government website, they're literally seeing the state. And

if what they see is ugly, confusing or down-right-broken, increasingly that's how they're going to see the state as a whole.

This change in public perception means that a previously marginal problem (bad websites) is now pointing towards a rather more worrying possibility. As government websites continue to fall behind private sector websites, governments will slowly look less and less legitimate – less and less like they matter to citizens, less and less like we should be paying any taxes to pay for them. Why pay for something you can't even navigate?

It is time for the directors and CEOs of public bodies everywhere to wake up to this possibility, before the ideologues get hold of it.

Governments have the wrong management structures for a digital future

I don't buy the argument that government websites are bad because all the ubermensch have gone off to work for the private sector. The public sector can often teach the private sector a lot about information design, like British road signs and tube maps, which are fantastic. And, of course, there's the super team at Gov.uk, who represent the kind of change I'm writing about here.

The real difference is one of management structure and focus. At Amazon, CEO Jeff Bezos and his executive colleagues worry all the time about whether their site or app or Kindle are as good as the competitors. But in central and local governments around the world, the top bosses do not stress every day about whether the user experience of their website is up to scratch, or whether conversion rates are lower than desirable.

The main reason that they don't worry is because their management boards don't historically contain anyone whose job it is to worry about the performance of digital services. A council chief exec will worry about finance because their finance director will constantly be nagging them about money. But a council CEO won't be worrying about whether 10,000 people left their website bitterly disappointed last week, because such issues are not 'normal things to discuss' at a board level.

Getting digital people to the top table

The solution, at least in the near term – is to recruit or promote people with digital remits and experience right to the top tier of decision making in government bodies. It means creating new roles like 'CIO' or 'Head of Digital' which have the same seniority as 'Head of Adult Social Care' or 'Head of HR'. And it means empowering those people to make painful changes that are required to make digital services become brilliant and user-centric.

Clearly, this presents dangers. How do you know what powers to give the new role? How do you stop them damaging critical services? And, most problematic of all – how can you tell that a digital expert isn't a charlatan? After all, they have niche expertise that you don't have – how are you supposed to sniff them out?

The answer is that it isn't easy, and that a lot of knowledge sharing and learning from mistakes will be required. As a shameless plug – we can help here – we can help vet candidates and define their roles in Britain and abroad. But none of this hides the fact that becoming digital – learning to run a public organisation that is a website, will be a fraught affair. The reward, though, is nothing less than helping to guarantee the ongoing legitimacy of government (quite apart from all the happier customers). To me that seems well worth going through some pain for.

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About the author

Tom Steinberg *is the founder and director of mySociety, an international non-profit group which aims to help people become more powerful in the civic and democratic parts of their lives, through digital means.*

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