Code for America:  
Scaling Civic Engagement Through Open Data and Software Design  
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**Introduction**  
Code for America (CfA) is devoted to improving government effectiveness, fostering transparency, and increasing communication around civic issues in local communities. The non-profit organization operates a range of programs, such as a peer network and yearly summit. Historically, the organization became known for fellowships, brigades, and an accelerator. This case study considers how these programs fostered organizational partnerships and created channels for participation in designing digital infrastructure through software production and open data. In the context of CFA, civic engagement is thick and impactful online and in-person collaboration on topics of public concern outside of deliberative modes or electoral politics. Code for America’s rapid scaling up and record of working with municipal governments provide examples of how technology design can be integrated with mechanisms for collective action and improving government responsiveness.  

**Connecting Code with Civic Engagement**  
Code for America (CfA) was founded as a non-profit organization in 2009 by Jennifer Pahlka, drawing on ideas such as Tim O’Reilly’s “gov 2.0” and “government as a platform.” CfA has grown to be an essential bridge between community needs and local government. The primary activities of Code for America involve technology design and implementation leading to increased transparency, process change, and increased communication among residents around issues of public interest. Altering the infrastructure for governance marks CfA as different from other progressive organizations focused on, for example, electoral politics or youth mobilization. Participation entails personalized involvement where individuals create or alter digital infrastructures to support community needs. In practice this resembles an algorithmic citizenry; monitorial citizens (Schudson 2004) surveil communities and bring about social change through direct action. Their voices can be heard in new modalities of data manipulation, design, and software production.  
  
  Code for America’s efforts tend to be applied interventions oriented to mitigate suffering around specific societal issues, echoing Popper’s notion of “piecemeal engineering” (Popper 1957). Online and offline communication mutually reinforce each other. Tools such as meet-ups, discussion forums and code
repositories exist as part of a larger mobilization effort. Precursors to CfA include Ethan Zuckerman’s Geek Corps and previous hackthons overtly oriented towards civic goals such as Random Hacks of Kindness. Participation ranges from peripheral to more long-term service through a range of technical and nontechnical roles. CfA’s primary programs have been brigades, fellowships, and a yearly accelerator/incubator, which ran from 2012 – 2014.

**Brigades**
Brigades are community-based groups that count activists, organizers and residents in their ranks. Compared with fellowships, which are arranged by CfA, brigades arise more organically. They become officially recognized by Code for America when they have met certain milestones, such as having a brigade leader and demonstrating sustainability. Brigades act rather autonomously, often running what Carl DiSalvo terms “issue-oriented hackathons” (DiSalvo 2014) — day-long processes where teams design solutions to address issues of public concern. Brigades are designed to have low barriers to participation and encourage both technical and non-technical roles in group activities. Employing open data and creating apps that act as tools often comes with opportunities for civic learning and community sharing. For example, assembling a list of open data resources raises awareness among participants about connection points between residents and their government.

**Fellowships**
The fellowship program connects technologists from a diverse array of backgrounds with city governments. Early to mid-career fellows devote a year to completing a major project. Typically they immerse themselves in the community, analyze their needs, prototype ideas, and meet with government stakeholders. They may bring about secondary effects such as changing public opinion and promoting communication between government agencies. Support for fellows comes from a mixture of funding from Code for America, the local government, and industry partnerships. In 2014 there were 10 cities and 30 fellows across the United States working on projects to improve health care, transportation and communication among residents. Fellows particularly advocate for improved transparency and improved effectiveness of local government services through open government data (Maruyama, Douglas, and Robertson 2013). After finishing the year fellows pursue a range of non- and for-profit career paths.

**Accelerator and Incubator (2013 – 2014)**
Code for America’s accelerator and incubator programs offered routes for “civic tech” companies to receive small grants and operational support. Civic tech is an
elastic category that encompasses a range of projects, many with a local dimension. For example, SeeClickFix allows citizens to report neighborhood issues in need of repair, while Civic Insight provides information on under-utilized properties. CfA is not alone in speculating that civic tech might be a growth industry where non-profit and for-profit companies operate in an informational ecosystem with government open data to produce software that acts in the public good.

Conclusion
Code for America is devoted to supporting and implementing institutional and resident collaboration across several programs. Brigades pursue a diverse set of goals and are often responsible for setting up hackathons and guiding local projects. Fellowships facilitate more empathic design of government services and training of leaders. The accelerator program supported “civic tech” with small grants. In the future, Code for America is likely to pursue further ways for participants to translate civic values of local communities across institutional, technical and humanistic registers.

References