

Creating a Citizen-Friendly City Hall: An Evaluation of the Chattanooga 311 Innovations

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Abstract

With their many departments, functions, and telephone numbers, municipal governments can resemble impenetrable mazes for citizens in need of assistance. New technologies offer the potential to transform that reality. This paper reports on two such technologies currently being implemented by the City of Chattanooga, Tennessee (USA): (1) a 311 call centre, where citizens can call an easily remembered phone number for any inquiries or problems related to municipal government; and (2) a 'Chattanooga.gov' municipal website, where citizens can also direct inquiries to a 311 online connection or simply find answers to inquiries unassisted. The paper first describes the problem that these innovations are designed to address — the enormous phenomenon of 'citizen-initiated contacting' of government — before describing the evolution of the innovations within the US. The paper then reports on the ongoing implementation of these new technologies by the City of Chattanooga, Tennessee, an implementation that the author is evaluating. The conclusions discuss the potential significance of the innovations for citizens and their governments.

Introduction

With their many departments, functions, and telephone numbers, municipal governments can resemble impenetrable mazes for citizens thinking of approaching them. New technologies offer the potential to transform that reality. This paper reports on two such technologies currently being implemented by the City of Chattanooga, Tennessee (USA): (1) a 311 call centre, where citizens can call an easily remembered phone number for any inquiries or problems related to municipal government; and (2) a 'Chattanooga.gov' municipal website, where citizens can also direct inquiries to a 311 online connection or simply find answers to inquiries unassisted.

The paper follows this sequence. A first section explores the general phenomenon of 'citizen-initiated contacting' of government, focusing principally on the challenges that arise for citizens in attempting those contacts and for government in facilitating them. A second section examines the rise and evolution of 311 call centres and municipal websites in response to those challenges. The third section assesses how and with what impact those two innovations have been

implemented in the specific case of Chattanooga. A concluding section discusses the implications of the innovations in general, and the Chattanooga innovations in particular.

The challenges of citizen-initiated contacting

Citizen contacting of local governments, as well as other levels of government, represents an enormous phenomenon in the United States. According to a variety of sample survey data, the proportions of residents who contact their municipal government in a given year range from 20-60 per cent (Sharp 1986, p. 35). The lower estimates typically result from surveys that ask a single question, "Did you call city government with a request for service or a complaint within the last 12 months?", while higher rates obtain when respondents are asked separately about each service area (e.g. Thomas and Melkers 1999, p. 679). The higher figures may well be more accurate, reflecting how the individual service questions jog respondents' memories about specific reasons they contacted local government. Regardless, even the low estimate makes citizen-initiated contacting by its sheer volume arguably the most important point of contact between citizens and their local governments. Contacting rates certainly exceed, perhaps substantially, the proportions of residents who vote in local elections on an 'every other' or 'every fourth year' basis.

The surprise may be that contacting rates reach these levels in spite of the many difficulties that can deter citizens from initiating contacts. Consider the questions that can arise for citizens when they contemplate such contacting:

1. **Which government is responsible?** US residents typically live under the jurisdiction of multiple local government units, including incorporated municipalities, school districts, counties, and special districts. Most large US metropolises, for example, have over 250 units of local government (Rich 2003, p. 39). In the midst of that jurisdictional complexity, the average resident may not know which of these units of government, if any, is responsible for a particular service or issue. Some residents do not even know in which *city* they live. Thus, citizen phone surveys in the US typically ask for postal codes rather than city of residence because small proportions of residents think they live in the central city when they do not.
2. **Which department is responsible?** If the individual knows or can figure out which local government is responsible, the next question may be which department within that government is responsible for the particular problem. It may be obvious that the police should be called if the problem is a crime, but, if the problem is a pothole, one may wonder whether to call Traffic Engineering, Highway Maintenance, or some other department.
3. **How do I find the right phone number to call?** US residents may now locate government phone numbers in the 'blue pages,' the sections in their phone books for government listings, but those listings can be difficult to decipher. Government listings for the Atlanta, Georgia, metropolitan area, for example, cover 40 pages of three-column, ten-point, single-spaced

type. Even the narrow area of 'courts' for one of the smaller suburban Atlanta counties offers a choice of over 20 phone numbers.

4. **Will the number called actually connect you to someone who can help?** Almost anyone who has called a government office for assistance has at some time been passed from one person to another, perhaps eventually losing the connection, being placed on a lengthy hold, or simply never reaching anyone who could help. By way of personal example, I recently found a bulb out in a projector in a classroom where I teach. Not knowing whom to call, I called 'Instructional Technology.' "No," I was told, "we're not the office that handles that. You should call [a different number]." Calling that number, I received the same message and another number to call. When I called that number, I received the same message again, but was transferred directly to another number, taking me to . . . the person I called originally.

These and other difficulties in citizen contacting of governments create a variety of problems for both sides. Citizens may be discouraged from contacting government about legitimate issues that should be brought to the attention of government, and that discouragement may then exacerbate the already unhealthy alienation from and distrust of government. Or, even when the contact achieves the desired outcome (such as getting a pothole filled), the caller may have spent more time and energy than the task should have required.

For their part, governments may suffer if they do not receive the feedback from citizens that contacts can bring or, worse yet, if citizens become alienated, distrustful, and less supportive of those governments. In addition, confusion about whom to call may result in citizen requests arriving in a manner that unnecessarily complicates the work of government. For two examples:

1. 911 emergency call centres in many US cities have been overwhelmed by non-emergency requests from citizens (Halperin 1998). Not knowing where to call, many citizens call the easily remembered 911 when they have an issue with some aspect of government. In Atlanta in 1995, for example, 27.2 per cent of the respondents in a citizen survey reported having called 911 in the previous 12 months, more than called any department other than police (Thomas and Melkers 1999, p. 679).
2. Uncertain of whom to call, citizens often call elected officials, the more visible individuals whose names they are more likely to remember (Melkers and Thomas 2001). Those elected officials may then intervene in the affairs of the relevant functional department in order to get the citizen's request addressed. Elected officials may thereby perform an important service for their constituents, but the service might have been more easily accomplished by a direct contact from the citizen. That intervention may also invite unwelcome political intrusions on the bureaucracy's prerogatives.

Finally, this environment of multiple contact points and often-attenuated connections can undermine accountability. Even if citizens are able to monitor the response to their complaints — has the pothole on my street been filled? — they may not know whom to hold accountable if the response is lacking or inadequate. For their part, governments, which might profit from knowing how well their constituent parts manage requests, may receive no data on the quality of their responses, other than the occasional irate citizen complaint that a problem has not been solved.

The municipal response: 311 call centres and municipal websites

Municipalities in the US and elsewhere have gradually recognised the challenges of citizen-initiated contacts over recent decades, prompting a variety of efforts to meet the challenges. As early as the 1970s and 1980s, for example, some US cities instituted centralised complaint handling by channeling all citizen complaints to a single office. Cities in some other countries instituted administrative ombudsman offices to address “the problem of officials who exceed their authority or run roughshod over citizens in some way...” (Sharp 1986, p. 7).

Arguably the two most important initiatives on this front have begun only in the past decade or so. The first involves the development of a single 311 number and associated municipal call centre for citizens to use for a wide range of complaints and requests of their municipal governments. The second involves the development of municipal web pages where those same complaints and requests may be directed and where a broad range of informational questions about municipalities can be answered.

The 311 option

The 311 call option arose originally in response to excess demand on 911 call centres. As one observer (Halperin 1998, p. 39) noted, “911 became so ingrained in residents’ heads as the way to reach police that they were using it for all kinds of non-emergency queries they thought police could answer.” To address that problem, a 311 number was created and in 1997 received official authorisation from the Federal Communications Commission reserving the number as a nationwide non-emergency access code.

Beginning with Baltimore, Maryland, in 1997, US cities gradually began to adopt and implement 311 non-emergency numbers. The pace of change has been slow in that, by May 2005, only 25 cities and four counties in the US had adopted 311, with five other cities in the process. Included among the adopters are such large cities as Chicago, Illinois; Washington D C; Austin, Houston, and San Antonio, Texas; New York City; Miami-Dade County, Florida; and Los Angeles and San Jose, California, as well as a number of smaller cities, such as Chattanooga. (Interestingly, given

the earlier anecdote, adopters also include several universities, such as Wake Forest University, Oklahoma State University, Florida State University, and the University of Maine.)

The first 311 systems functioned essentially as adjuncts to 911 systems. Calls were to be limited to non-emergency police or fire incidents, with call centres housed in police or fire departments. However, interest among citizens frequently brought calls about a broader range of service issues, prompting many cities to broaden 311 to encompass all municipal services. Citizens are asked to think, if you see a crime in progress in your neighborhood, call 911, but, if the problem is failure to collect your garbage, call 311 instead. Of the current 311 systems, approximately half carry this broader focus. Under the leadership of former businessman Mayor Michael Bloomberg, New York City, one of the early 311 adopters, has even broadened the 311 focus beyond municipal services to become “a one-stop source for cultural and entertainment life” (Hu 2004), among other things.

311 can be expensive, which probably explains why 311 has not been adopted more widely. Although efficiencies may result from centralising previously separated multiple service call centres, there are substantial additional up front and continuing costs. The City of Houston, Texas, estimated that establishing its 311 help line cost \$2.5 million for such elements as “hardware, multiple software modules, professional services for interface development, and furniture and wall boards for the call center” (Wade 2001, p. 19). Continuing costs may be substantial, too, given the substantial additional volume of calls that a 311 option may trigger.

The municipal web page option

At much the same time 311 systems were being developed, municipalities were also building their Web presence and capabilities. Those capabilities may include access to all manner of information on municipal governments, options to conduct municipal transactions online (e.g. paying for traffic offenses, applying for permits, paying local taxes), and a capacity to make requests and complaints such as those that might otherwise go to 311.

In sharp contrast to the 311 experience, however, complaint options on municipal web pages have mostly not drawn high citizen interest. In the state of Connecticut, for example, easy-to-use web-based complaint options were drawing only a handful of complaints a month in each of a number of municipalities as of late 2003 (Meotti 2003). That usage has remained low despite a seemingly high interest of citizens in interacting with governments via the Web (Thomas and Streib 2003).

The reasons are not difficult to guess. Firstly, when someone has a request or complaint, the easiest option technologically may be to pick up a phone and dial 311 or another government phone number, not to search for a municipal website from which a complaint can be sent. That inclination may be especially pronounced among the elderly, who initiate a disproportionate share of calls to and other contacts with municipal governments, but who are typically not computer savvy. Secondly, people commonly prefer, when they need to complain, to talk a 'real person', someone who may listen to and interact with them about the issue. Calling 311 or another number should provide that opportunity, where sending a complaint through a website may not — with current technology anyway.

Yet, cities have strong incentives to want more citizen requests to flow through the Web rather than to 311. In particular, issues that go to the Web are likely to require less labour — no one has to be there to receive each complaint as it arrives — potentially reducing demands on the municipal workforce. Citizens need not be the worse for pursuing the Web option either, since many telephone calls to government offices ask for information (e.g. garbage collection schedules) that might be found more rapidly from a web page than by a phone call.

Citizens could also have good reasons to prefer the Web to calling for many, if not all, of their queries of City Hall. Firstly, for the many of us who spend substantial our time online, making a complaint through a web page may actually be easier than calling, even calling 311. Secondly, well-developed web pages might offer desirable options that call centres cannot, such as the ability to check whether anyone has already registered the same complaint (e.g. a gaping pothole) or to monitor if and how the city has responded to an earlier request.

Municipal websites with these capacities have a patron in the US in the Alfred P Sloan Foundation, a large New York-based foundation named after the late CEO of General Motors during its peak years. Through its program, 'Performance Assessment of Municipal Governments', the Sloan Foundation has recently funded local efforts to develop websites where citizens can, among other things, register complaints and monitor the municipal response to those complaints.

The goal — an integrated 311 and web municipal presence

The experience to date with 311 and municipal websites suggests that the ultimate goal should be a system that integrates the two. Such a system should offer useful redundancy, including especially the ability to register complaints or requests through either 311 or online. That redundancy can enable those who are not computer-savvy or who just want to talk to a real person to register their complaints through 311, while at the same time encouraging the

computer-savvy to pursue the online option. That integrated system would also offer some online options not available — or even possible — via the phone. These include more and better information on municipal services as well as the ability, after an initial contact, to monitor the municipal response to the request, complaint, or query. Such an integrated system might also include elements designed to accelerate the migration of the computer-savvy from 311 to the online option. Those elements might be more in the realm of encouragement than coercion, showing the advantages of online connections rather than making 311 less accessible or less hospitable.

The Chattanooga Initiative

The municipality of Chattanooga, Tennessee, is attempting such an integration. Set in the Smoky Mountains in Southern Appalachia on the Tennessee–Georgia state border, Chattanooga is a city of about 150,000 people. It is known for ‘the Chattanooga way’, referring to the community’s proclivity to think about and shape its future as a community, rather than leaving that future solely in the hands of business leaders and government officials. The city’s efforts on 311 and a new municipal web page reflect this tendency.

311 in Chattanooga

These efforts began with the adoption of a new 311 call centre, launched officially on 25 February 2003. That launch followed a series of focus groups designed to tap residents’ interest in the 311 system as well as what could make that system more attractive. The 311 system began as a weekday, 9 am to 5 pm, service with an option for leaving messages during off-hours, with a focus principally on public works issues. It has gradually been expanded to other municipal service areas.

As in other cities, 311 in Chattanooga has proved popular with citizens. In the first ten months after launch, more than 100,000 calls were received, including more than 50,000 service requests. As for the calling experience itself, a September 2004 survey of 311 users (Medley 2004) provided encouraging findings:

- Fully 70 per cent of respondents reported having their call answered on the first try. Once calls were answered, 66.5 per cent said they waiting four minutes or less before talking to a service representative.
- 75.9 per cent of respondents said the service representative with whom they talked “was able to help”, with only 18.8 per cent saying the problem was referred to someone else
- 81.2 per cent described the courteousness of the service representative as either “good” or “excellent”, with most (54.6 per cent) saying “excellent”

- 60.3 per cent said their problem was resolved in less than a week, and only 3.8 per cent said the problem was never resolved
- More than half (54.2 per cent) reported being “very satisfied” with the city’s response overall, with an additional 14.9 per cent “fairly satisfied”; only 19 per cent reported being “fairly” or “very dissatisfied”.

Comments from some individual residents echo the generally positive assessment of 311 (City of Chattanooga 2004). As two examples:

- “I wanted to comment on what a good idea 311 is...having one number to call for everything. I am pleased with it, and 311 staff deserve a pat on the back.”
- “I just moved here, and the 311 Center has been most helpful to me. . . makes me feel really glad that I moved here.”

While pleased with those results, municipal officials voiced an interest in moving more citizen requests from 311 to the Web. That interest reflected in part the judgment that most calls to 311 ask for information that could at least as easily be obtained online. In addition, although more than half of the 311 survey respondents (52.3 per cent) expressed interest in making their requests online, only four per cent reported actually doing so (City of Chattanooga 2004). Finally, of course, officials envisioned greater use of the Web option as meaning lower personnel costs for the city than with 311, as discussed earlier.

With that background, Chattanooga’s then Chief Finance Office (CFO), David Eichenthal, met this writer in late 2003 at a conference sponsored by the Sloan Foundation. Knowing how municipal websites were lagging as citizen contact points, I had been talking with Sloan officials about a possible project to build citizen interest in and use of a municipal Website as a model that might be followed in other communities. My conversation with Eichenthal eventually resulted in incorporation of these ideas into a Chattanooga-based project that has now been funded by the Sloan Foundation.

As a consequence of the vagaries of grant preparation, review, revision, and approval, this Sloan-funded project began only in February 2005, and consequently is not at the point of the evaluation originally projected for this paper. Still, the project is far enough along to report some results.

A new web page

As the first step, Chattanooga in late 2004 contracted with a private vendor to develop a new Website for the city, which was launched in March of this year at <<http://www.chattanooga.gov/>>.

This home page offers links to a variety of information on Chattanooga city governments, including an online 311 option, plus separate home page links for 'live', 'work', and 'play' in the city. The 'play' link, for example, can take the viewer to information on parks, recreation, and other services provided by the municipal government as well as to links to related sites (such as the Chattanooga Area Convention and Visitors Bureau).

The new website debuted as a work in progress rather than as a finished product. Given the low levels of usage of some other municipal websites — especially for making requests and registering complaints — city officials wanted feedback on what works and what does not work on the website as well as what changes might enhance its value for citizens. To gain that feedback, we are undertaking several kinds of research as part of the Sloan-funded web page development.

First, a survey was developed and offered as an online option to users of other prominent Chattanooga area websites in December 2004 and January 2005. The goals of the survey were: (1) to learn how citizens assessed the then-draft design of the city's new web page; and (2) to gain an initial reading on the utility of the web page as a means for communicating requests or concerns to city hall.

A total of 310 respondents completed the survey. As computer users who self-selected into the survey, respondents reflected a socially and economically stratified segment of the Chattanooga area population. For example, 58.4 per cent had at least a four-year college degree, and, in a community with a substantial African-American population, 91 per cent were white. Although consequently not representative of the general population, the sample may provide insights into the feelings and behaviors of the high-end computer users who may be primary users of the city's Web page.

To begin with, queried about the value of different kinds of information, respondents ranked as most important: (1) community information; (2) jobs; and (3) area attractions and events. In addition, although there was no direct question about schools and education, many respondents mentioned both when given an opportunity to mention other important areas.

Respondents expressed strong preferences for the online approach to doing business with the city. For example, 69.9 per cent chose online over mail and in-person options for payment of taxes, traffic tickets, and the like. Perhaps even more notable given the city's popular 311 phone line, substantial majorities chose online over phone as the preferred method both to: (1) "request services" (70.9 per cent preferring online versus 26.7 per cent phone); and (2) "suggest or complain to the city" (69.7 per cent online versus 22.3 per cent phone).

As the second research initiative, five focus groups were conducted in May of this year with random samples of Chattanooga residents to gain their perspectives on the website and some other municipal issues. Separate focus groups were held with: (1) African–American males; (2) African–American females; (3) Caucasian males; (4) Caucasian females; and (5) individuals over age 65. The groups were segmented in that manner both to: (1) eliminate potentially confounding inter-group dynamics (e.g. the tendency for males to dominate discussion in mixed-gender focus groups); and (2) gain information specialised by each population grouping. Although each group (with the exception of the over-65) was chosen to include at least half who were computer users, the groups appeared much more representative of the population than were the Web survey respondents.

Discussion with each focus group began with several general questions about the city and its municipal government, moving then to questions about where participants obtain information on the city and its government. With that lead-in, each group was divided into smaller groups of two to four members and asked to explore the city's new website. They were also asked to attempt some specific tasks, in particular, to register a complaint or request with the city. After ten to fifteen minutes at the monitors, attendees were asked a number of questions about the website and their experiences with it.

The outcomes of the focus groups suggested a number of conclusions that may prove useful in further development of the city's web page:

1. As suspected, participants did not understand clearly what the municipal government is responsible for. Thus, asked for their concerns about city government, all of the focus groups talked first about the city's schools, despite the fact that the county, not the city, governs the schools. In addition, asked to name the services provided by the city, none of the groups could name more than two or three services.
2. Many attendees appeared familiar with the 311 phone option, with several commenting favorably ("it's the best thing they've done").
3. Attendees had mixed success attempting to register complaints or requests. A few sub-groups readily went to the desired online 311 icon, but most, including all sub-groups in two of the focus groups, found the 311 option only when the focus group moderator eventually pointed it out. Some sub-groups were confused by additional separate 'quick contacts' and 'contact us' options, and sought to use one or both of those to register complaints. However, the former offered a means to contact elected officials, the latter a means to obtain phone numbers of municipal officials, with neither designed for making direct complaints or requests.

4. Despite those struggles, once they discovered or were shown the online 311 option, many attendees voiced a willingness to register complaints and requests there in the future. One respondent, after being shown the 311 icon, commented: “It’s easy, it’s real easy. The information they ask for is the same information they’d ask for on the phone.”
5. Some respondents voiced concern that the online option might not produce as good or as rapid a response as would a call to 311, but, when queried further, most — among those who were computer savvy anyway — said they would use online 311 if they could be assured of an email response within 24 to 48 hours.

Those findings suggest a number of possible changes in the city’s web page. First, given the confusion about municipal responsibilities, a prominent icon might be added (for example, ‘What does your City Hall do?’) that could link to a brief summary of the range of municipal services, plus links to high-profile local services that city hall does *not* provide. Second, given the strong interest in the online 311 option, that link might be made more visible and obvious as a complaint mechanism. Perhaps the icon could be set up to blink every few seconds, thus to draw attention; its current small-font caption — ‘One call to City Hall’ — might also be enlarged and perhaps modified to ‘One *click* to City Hall’, thus to highlight its online nature. Third, the confusing ‘quick contacts’ and ‘contact us’ options might be eliminated to reduce confusion about how to register complaints. Finally, the city could require city employees who receive the online complaints or requests to respond within 24 hours of receipt, even if only with an initial acknowledgment.

As the next step in the evolution of the city’s web page, research will be conducted on exemplary municipal web pages in other cities. This research will examine, in particular, how these other web pages encourage use by citizens for requests of their municipal governments. Some municipal governments will also be contacted to learn how well their approaches are encouraging citizen use of the online option for registering requests and complaints.

Finally, the city has also created a Citizens Advisory Group (CAG) to advise on web development and on other aspects of the Sloan-funded project (including citizen involvement in developing measures of municipal performance). The CAG will eventually be asked to comment on the design of the website and to suggest how knowledge of the website’s capabilities can best be disseminated around the city.

Working from these several kinds of research and the CAG involvement, we hope eventually to redesign the city’s website in a manner that will draw extensive use by citizens for making requests, registering complaints, and, perhaps most important, answering informational questions about municipal services. The website would then operate in tandem with the 311 call option to

provide citizens easier and quicker access to what they need from city hall. A final task in the project will be an assessment, later this year, of how well those dual options are functioning individually and in conjunction with each other.

Conclusions: The significance the Chattanooga Initiative

By implementing a 311 call centre and developing a 311 online contacting option, the City of Chattanooga has taken significant steps toward creating a more citizen-friendly City Hall. Those innovations promise to help the city's residents, most of whom do not fully understand who does what amid a maze of local governments, to make more sense and get more use out of their municipal government.

The most interesting questions may be to what extent and how rapidly citizens can be persuaded to take appropriate issues to the Web rather than to 311. Despite its popularity for seemingly all manner of activities, the Internet has yet to achieve similar popularity as a means for contacting local governments. Answering those questions for Chattanooga is a primary goal of this project.

These innovations may hold broader potential both for Chattanooga and elsewhere. With the complexity of governments continuing to grow, the 311 hotline and online contacting innovations may enable citizens to sidestep that complexity by going instead to a single source of assistance that will know where to go to find the needed answers. Citizens may as a result be better able to obtain what they need and want from government in a timely manner, improving the connections between citizens and their governments. That would be no small achievement, especially given how frequently citizens attempt to contact their local governments.

These innovations might bring other benefits, too. Where US citizens now typically distrust government and its representatives, positive experiences with the new 311 options could nurture new trust. On the governmental side, where agencies and officials frequently have frequently favored secrecy, accountability to these help lines could nurture more openness and transparency, improving those important aspects of government.

We should be careful, though, not to exaggerate the potential benefits. For one thing, for the many, or most, citizens who contact their local governments only rarely or never (see Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002), the 311 innovations may have minimal impact on their connections with government. Pessimism on this count gains force from the fact that only a minority of the May 2005 focus group participants knew about the 311 phone option, despite its extensive marketing and easy availability for the past two years.

These contrasting speculations imply an important research agenda that exceeds the scope of the current project. As 311 call centre and online options diffuse across the U.S. and international landscapes, there is a need for before-and-after studies of how those innovations affect citizen connections with and feelings about government as well as government's connections with and feelings about citizens. To this writer's knowledge, research of that kind has not yet been undertaken.

Effective engagement of communities also entails much more than these help lines can offer, even if their promise is realised. Whether by phone or online, 311 mostly offers a means for individuals as individuals to connect with their governments, where, by contrast, community engagement involves individuals more as members of communities and only sometimes working with government. As I have written elsewhere (Thomas 1995), that engagement requires many additional skills and efforts on the part of citizens, citizen groups, and government.

Still, recognising that change tends to be incremental with its impact also incremental, it would be sufficient if the 311 innovations produce incremental gains in the ability of individual citizens to resolve their problems with government. That outcome now seems probable. It would be a nice bonus, but not essential, if those gains also promote other kinds of effective community engagement.

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