OPINION

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eGovernment upside down

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PUBLISHED ON: 05 Sep 2016

Imagine that you were almost twenty years old and you wanted to change the world by helping people who are somehow barred from enforcing their rights, what would you do? The Londoner Joshua Browder answered this question by programming the chatbot *DoNotPay*, which is claimed to be ["The World's First Robo Lawyer"](#).

DOING GOOD WITH A BOT

It is a [chatbot (programme allowing for natural language conversations)](#) that can be approached by people with specific problems like homelessness or unjustified parking tickets and helps them to file a letter to the competent authorities. The idea was sparked when Browder received 30 unjustified parking tickets at the age of 18. He wondered how he could help people who wanted to take action against a parking ticket. He then successfully programmed [a chatbot which asked people simple questions](#) in order to obtain the knowledge necessary for making their case. After an automated conversation, the bot advises people on the right course of action and potentially even returns a letter that they can use to send to their local authorities. In order to understand the administrative process and the relevant criteria, Browder [filed several freedom of information requests](#). Browder programmed two versions for London and New York, which became a huge success: [The Tech Insider says](#) that 3,000 people used the service, 250,000 parking tickets were appealed, with 160,000 successful appeals, saving the appellants a combined US$ 4 million.

The young coder extended this idea to compensation in cases of late trains or late flights. Yet, he was also frequently contacted by users asking him for help with other problems. This is

when he discovered the problem of evictions and ensuing homelessness. Collaborating with lawyers and several non-profit organisations, he went on to extend his chatbot to cover this topic as well. This new area revealed limitations of such automation projects: while there was an enforceable right to housing in the UK, the situation in the US varied from one city to another. Shelly Nortz from the advocacy group Coalition of the Homeless told the Washington Post about the problems of automation: "Automation can be helpful, but it can also be incredibly flawed. A lot of our clients don't fit into cookie-cutter situations and I'm afraid of vulnerabilities that could rise from a bot handling applications and other legal issues."

TAKE AWAY FOR EGOVERNMENT

This story certainly challenges some general assumptions concerning eGovernment. First, eGovernment is not a one-track development: inventions and ideas can also come from other actors and especially from civil society. As in other fields, innovation is often sparked by collaboration and there are several attempts to institutionalise such collaboration. Take for example the innovation lab of the World Food Programme, bringing together different actors from international organisations, the private sector as well as civil society. In the case of *DoNotPay*, Browder collaborates with different local councils and other administrative entities. For his latest project, helping refugees who speak only their native tongue, Browder managed to get access to the super computer Watson.

Another lesson from this story can be framed as automation paradox. This describes the insight that automation and digitisation can lead to more instead of less humanity and an example of how the internet can narrow the gap between individual and state. In the case of a *Robo Lawyer*, this fact is achieved by making certain legal services available for free. This most probably helped people to invoke their rights in situations in which they would have otherwise omitted any action. In other cases, digitisation replaces the work of civil servants and, thereby, frees up some time resources. As a consequence of automation, civil servants might have more time to focus on atypical or difficult cases. Again, the example of *DoNotPay* is telling, as Browder was always open

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to comments and input from people in need and has continued to develop new features for them.

The chatbot is also a good example of how a rule of law culture can be implemented. When we think about the evolution of the rule of law, we often think about landmark cases taking judicial and administrative review to another level. Yet, the rule of law can also be concerned when there is a widespread under-enforcement of rights just because individuals do not have enough resources. There are different reasons barring people from enforcing their rights before a court. Digitisation can allay some of the difficulties, if it is implemented the right way.

As this example shows, eGovernment is not necessarily a disruptive game changer that can help to improve government services, the development can happen evolutively. The initiative does not necessarily come from the administration. Automation can help to further the rule of law culture and to make the administration more humane. Not exactly what you would expect from digitisation of government, is it? But then, you do not expect a twenty year old to succeed in changing the world...

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