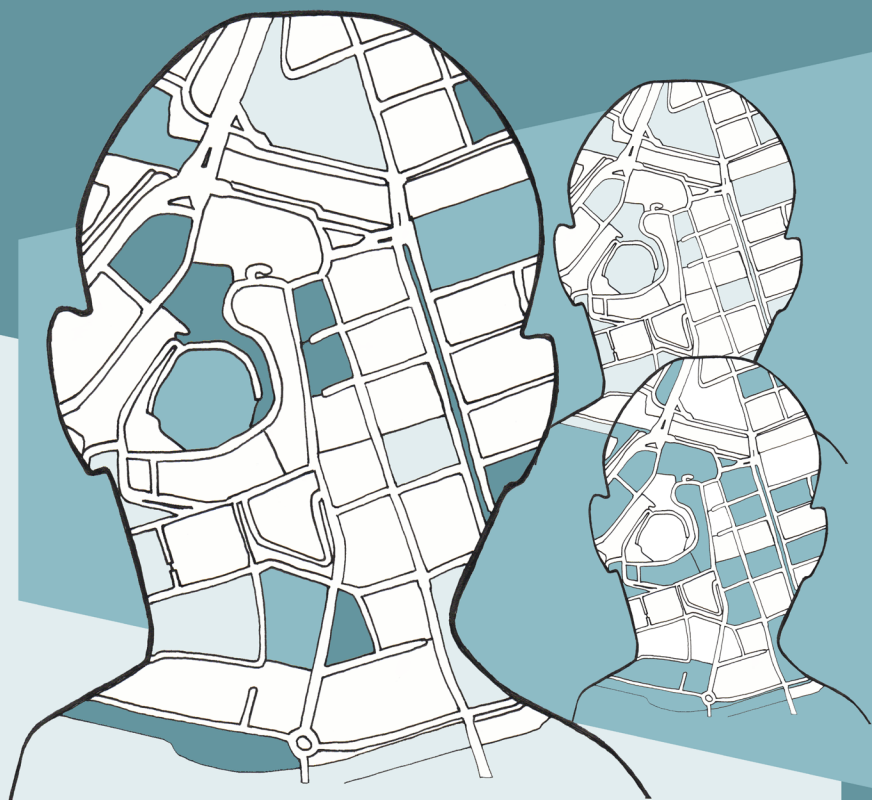


FROM ARROGANCE TO INTIMACY

A HANDBOOK FOR ACTIVE DEMOCRACIES



ANDY WILLIAMSON & MARTIN SANDE

Moving From Arrogance to Intimacy

The traditional models of hierarchical, power-based democracy and governance are dying. The old systems are no longer appropriate, trusted or liked. They are no longer fit for purpose. Whilst society remains stratified, power still lies in the hands of the few and democracy is too often focussed on 'doing to' rather than 'doing with'; more paternalism than partnership (the choice of gender is intentional too). Power, as we have discussed, is a problem, a negative drain on the good name of democracy and, ironically, democratic drift gives those with the power even more of it. But distributed power, used well, lies at the heart of the opportunity.

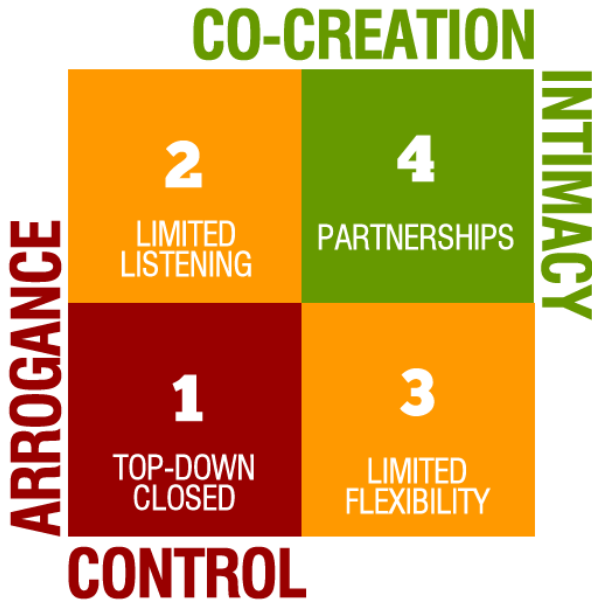
This outdated world is one of arrogance and control. Decisions are made by a small group of people, either elected, appointed or anointed. Information is gathered from a small range of safe sources and trusted intermediaries. Debate is not widely encouraged. This is a system rife with bias and imbalance. Lending itself to political favour and ideological hi-jacking. At its worst the arrogance of incumbency and the pursuit of power leads to corruption, nepotism and poor decision making. Even at its supposed best it's ideological and intellectual elitism, arrogance and a valuing of technocracy over democracy and the citizens it is supposed to serve.

Democracy comes with high barriers to entry and is too often focussed on power plays and a deficit-based discourse. No wonder it's a turn-off to an excluded public.

How can this change? How can we create democratic systems that are intimate, not arrogant, that are open, accessible and co-creational, not closed and controlling? How do we make our democracy interactive, co-creative and powered by positive power? The answer isn't simple and at its heart there is a burning need for cultural transformation. But that doesn't mean the building blocks to a new way of democracy have to be complex.

Let's start this journey by moving our democratic system from one firmly stuck in control to one that values a wider contribution from more people, one that lends itself to co-creativity. This journey has already started in a few places, in small ways, accelerated by the advent of new digital and social media that bring people closer to the conversation, make sharing easier and distribute knowledge in ways that were unimaginable a generation ago. It's supported by new ways of thinking about power relations and by an increased yearning for a new way of operating. Whilst technology is a vital enabler it's the latter human, social, power-based shifts that will both accelerate, disrupt and embed real transformation.

New digital and social spaces have supported some movement where limited listening widens the net of those who can be involved. Limited flexibility sees democratic institutions reach out beyond their traditional methods of engagement, bringing others into the debate earlier. But both of these models are built around an agenda where governments remain in control and still direct the nature and determine the scale of engagement. They are a first step on the path, they are not the journey.



In active democracies, engagement and therefore governance is a grounded partnership. Government is an equal partner. Equal with citizens. Government is one piece in the democratic jigsaw. An important part, yes, but no longer in charge. Suddenly an opportunity emerges to become the facilitator of change in a newly forming landscape.

Take Denmark's MindLab as an example, it was established as a cross-departmental innovation unit by the Danish government and is now a partnership between three Ministries and the Odense Municipality. It focuses on creating new solutions for government by involving citizens and businesses. MindLab helps to give a fresh perspective to public service delivery and has created a model that allows those on the inside to see the world from the perspective of those on the outside.¹⁸

¹⁸ See: www.mind-lab.dk

This new landscape is not without its challenges. Trust is crucial, yet it has fallen to all-time low levels. If it worries you that only a quarter of people in the UK trust their politicians, it should concern you even more that in a new democracy, Serbia, it's only 8%.

Much of the friction in civil society comes from inadequate engagement processes. People feel dis-empowered, they feel disconnected. They have been cut adrift. Changing this requires more than a new tool, a fancy smartphone 'app' or mechanism, change requires a demonstrable commitment over time.

We have to start small and build up. Change comes incrementally and there is no single solution, no switch that can be turned on to re-charge democracy. The failure, disconnect and decay go too deep.

So why become intimate? Why does it matter? We're not suggesting that everything that government does has to be 100% participatory and co-created. That would be crazy! Sometimes people just have to make decisions and get on with it. That is in fact why we elect them, pay leaders more. Even when we distrust politicians research shows us that citizens are often happy to leave them too it a lot of the time.

It's about balance. There are times when we need to do stuff together, do stuff with more people, listen to more people, talk to more people and look at the widest range of data, the broadest range of stories that we can get our hands on. Because doing this achieves a number of things:

- More information, managed properly leads to better decisions
- More interactive policy making means more appropriate service delivery
- Better service design reduces costs

And then there's one less obvious but no less important benefit:

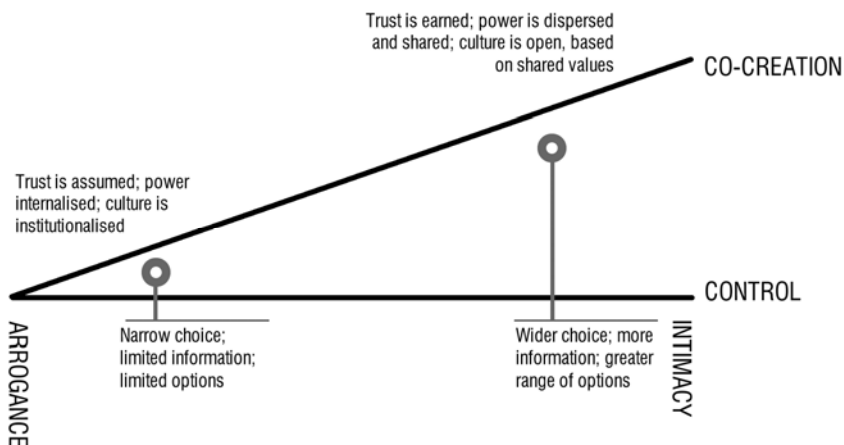
- Involving people in deciding what their world looks like gives them a sense of ownership over the outcome.

And all of this starts to build trust.

Moving from arrogance to intimacy – from control to co-creation – is not a binary shift. It's movement along a continuum. The further along that continuum we are able to work comfortably, then the more options we have available. Old-world, closed, controlling government – arrogant government – has little room for manoeuvre, limited sources of information and limited skills and knowledge available to understand, design and implement new policies and services.

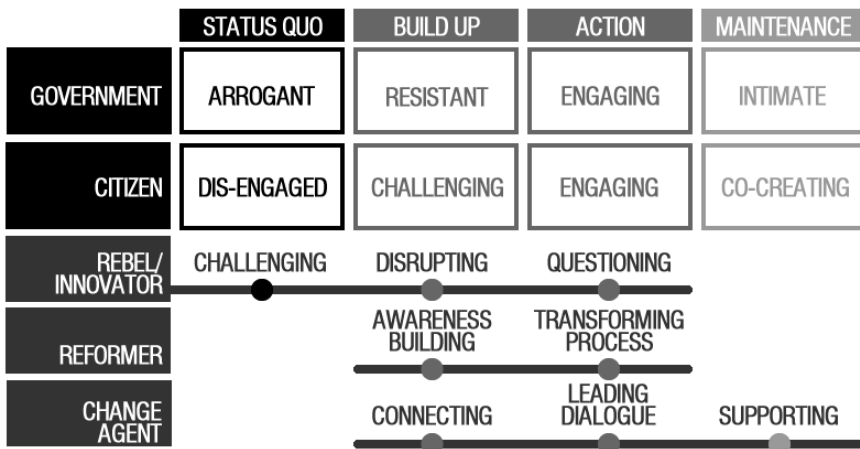
Compare this to the co-designed organisation, no longer constricted by silos, limited thinking and fear. Active democracies are networked democracies, now we can put the question out to many people in multiple formats, we can get others to ask the questions (their own not just ours) and they can in turn bring back to the conversation (because conversation lies at the heart of active democracy).

New ideas, new data, new stories, new people. Ideas, data, stories and people who were previously off our radar and out of reach. Yes, this requires a new attitude and new models for engagement but remember no one person, group or organisation owns the process anymore, there are plenty of people out there who can help us design it, build it and make it happen, if we let them in!



In the old world, trust is assumed, power is internalised, held on to. There is an institutional culture of power, politics and hierarchy. But trust has been lost, politics is seen as divisive and power corrupts. In the new system trust is earned through mutuality, co-creation and by demonstrable action. Power is dispersed around those in the process based on contribution, skills and knowledge. The culture is based on co-operation and shared values, it looks for a vision not necessarily consensus. It looks to harness the whole community in making decisions real. To do this it values the skills, knowledge and experiences of all the community.

There are a number of stages to democratic transformation, the roles people take on and how these change and evolve as the process shifts and matures (we'll talk about this a lot more in the chapter on 'Why Personal Engagement Matters'). We liken it to an addiction model, where you have to recognise there's a problem before you can seek to change and relapse is always a risk! When we map this across our continuum from arrogance to intimacy, we start to see the roles and actions that support an active democracy culture. What we need to be in order to be intimate, co-creating and interactive, so power can be shared for positive change.



We can see that the arrogant government/dis-engaged citizen dialectic – the place where we’re starting from – needs waking up to change. In the civic sense, we’ve described the role of the ‘rebel’ who leads the protest, raises the issues and campaigns loudly for wider recognition of perceived problem or injustice. What we see now is that public institutions need their own rebels too, people who can challenge the status quo, develop new and radical approaches to democratic engagement, service design and delivery. These people are the intrapreneurs and innovators. And like society’s rebels, they often face a steep climb to gain recognition. A key part of active democracies is building systems that hold these people and their ideas close and feed innovation from all sides into the system. A networked democracy is a system that embraces and encourages innovation.

We’re convinced that what must happen here is diffusion, dissemination and, above all, conversation. Active democracies rely on an innovation eco-system, open to all and based on collaboration, co-operation and social benefit. To make democracy fit for today, we’ve got to put these at the heart of what we do.

In the next section of this book we want to discuss the disconnection of citizens to politics and democracy. The issues and challenges that we face and must overcome if the ideals discussed above are to have a hope of setting in place a new, more open, co-creative and intimate democracy.

- ❖ Democracy has been arrogant and controlling for too long.
- ❖ We need systems that are intimate and co-creating if people are to reconnect.
- ❖ Democratic systems will be better and more responsive and creative if more people are connected to them.
- ❖ We need new attitudes, new models continuous innovation from all sides.
- ❖ From stronger connections comes greater trust and ability to thrive from diversity.
- ❖ Networks are stronger and more resilient than silos. Interconnected worlds, work through networks.

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We have a problem, too many of us feel that democracy is broken. We distrust politicians, despair at the rise of bureaucracy and feel ignored when it comes to the decisions that affect our lives.

Our democracies have become arrogant and controlling.

It's time to take democracy on a journey towards a new world of intimacy and co-creation. To go from outmoded ways of decision making to ones that support dynamic, organic and pro-social ways of connecting, conversing and deciding.

We need to create networked, active democracies and this book is about how we make that happen.



Dr Andy Williamson is the Founder of Democratiser. He works globally to re-imagine leadership, strengthen democracy and transform engagement, working with parliaments, governments and civil society.



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