

*East Asia Hotspots - Digital Democracy and Civic Tech in Taiwan - A Conversation with
Digital Minister Audrey Tang
Transcription*

Richard Haddock:

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Richard Haddock:

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Richard Haddock:

Thank you everybody, thank you listeners for tuning in to our newest episode of the East Asia Hotspots podcast. And I have with me an incredibly special guest, Digital Minister of Taiwan, Audrey Tang. She's the first openly transgender government minister in the world. Minister Tang is known for revitalizing the computer languages, Pearl and Haskell as well as building the online spreadsheet system EtherCalc in collaboration with Dan Bricklin. In the public sector minister Tang served on the Taiwan National Development Councils Open Data Committee and the K-12 Curriculum Committee and led Taiwan's first e-Rulemaking project.

Richard Haddock:

In the private sector minister Tang worked as a consultant with Apple on computational linguistics, with Oxford University Press on crowd lexicography and with Socialtext on social interaction design. Minister Tang actively contributes to Taiwan's g0v, a vibrant community focusing on creating tools for the civil society with the call to "fork the government." Minister Tang, thank you so much for joining us.

Audrey Tang:

And hello world, I'm really happy to be on this podcast.

Richard Haddock:

Great, thanks. So let's dive into the questions here. So Minister Tang, you've been an important contributor to the incredible work on digital democracy and civic tech fronts in Taiwan from g0v to

hosting hackathons to creating new and innovative platforms such as vTaiwan that allows citizens to be a part of the governmental decision making process. You have also been an advocate for implementing an open government model using these kinds of tools. What is open government and how is it part of Taiwan's contemporary national narrative?

Audrey Tang:

In Taiwan in 2013 if you ask the random people on the street that whether the government will offer a lot of participatory budgeting, whether you can walk to a minister's office and have 40 minutes of her time and as long as the transcript is online or whether there will be a working e-petition system that has half of the population participating and they'll look at you and think you're crazy. And so it's a really new thing in Taiwan. It's only until the Sunflower Movement, which is when we occupied the parliament for 22 days in March 2014. Did a real demonstration of the open government principles. The demonstration is not a protest is a demo in a sense of showing the viability of half a million people on the street and many more online can deliberate substantially on a complex agreement called a Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement when the legislators were on strike refusing to deliberate that in substance.

Audrey Tang:

And so the 20 NGOs each serving as kind of leading an aspect of dash CSSTA discussion eventually discovered that if you used the facilitation skills stride, if you used a computational linguistic skills that can make sure that people's ideas form a convergent whole, what we call a rough consensus. Allowing the most convergent voices to emerge rather than the divergent points. If you designed systems so that it attracts people to consensus rather than distracts people into divisiveness, then you don't have to facilitate that much. Because people can facilitated themselves and determine what is important for example, at that site the 4G telecommunication base stations was one of the hotspots for the conversation. And that's how the people on the street eventually reached agreement with people in the government that were not allowing PRC components in our 4G base stations and infrastructures, which is a conversation just repeated five years in the future from that time for 5G networks.

Audrey Tang:

And so that's proof that internet is not only good for disseminating voices as radio and televisions are, but rather is also a great tool when used correctly to listen and scale and have millions of people listen to one another and that's my vision of a government, is the governments going to where people are and listen and scale rather than asking people to conform to any particular technology.

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Richard Haddock:

I know that speaks volumes to me personally about collaborative government and civil society relations. So for the next question here, in what ways do you think technology can or should be used to enhance a civic participation, accountability and the overall democratic experience not only in Taiwan but also the United States and the world? And how does globalization of information technology impact these trends?

Audrey Tang:

So four years ago when I first become Digital Minister, our HR because there was no position as additional minister in a Taiwan cabinet asked me what do envision additional minister's work is? And I wrote a small prayer, a poem it has actually my job description and which speaks to this question. So just recite my job description. At first, it looks like this. "When we see internet of things, let's make it an internet of beings. When we see virtual reality, let's make it a shared reality. When we see machine learning, let's make it collaborative learning. When we see user experience, let's make it about human experience. And whenever we hear that a singularity is near, let us always remember that plurality is here."

Audrey Tang:

So plural version, a transcultural version of open government is what we in Taiwan has been striving for the past four years, five years now. So very simply put, it is a way to have more than one way to do democracy. Anyone anywhere in Taiwan who want to have a new way to do democracy can try it out. And having a lot of support and social innovators across 12 ministries. All they have to do is to walk into my office and talk to me for 40 minutes at a time or to hold a local town hall where would dial in using Zoom. Using telecommunication from five municipalities or they can raise a petition and collect 5000 signatures and ensure a face-to-face conversation with ministry or a buy-in or they can participate in a presidential hackathon where every year we give out five trophies that promises to implement their prototypes within a year from the presidential mandate.

Audrey Tang:

And so all these new ways to do democracy is no longer about voting, which is maybe five bytes of information uploaded per person every four years. But rather it is about everyday democracy where people can first share the same reality, understanding what the reality is in a policy making context and then bring out their new innovations without taking apart anybody's trials and errors. Because we say that we absorb the risk even within the career public service, if they try something out for a year and it fails, as long as it fails publicly they're accountable for it, then everybody actually learn more about it. So that's why we also introduced a Sandbox model where you can

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try [inaudible 00:08:15] 5G platform economy, fintech you name it within a continental law system. We're the first continental law system to introduce such innovations within the legal system.

Richard Haddock:

That's actually I think a very powerful prayer that you mentioned as well. And I remember reading it off of your profiles and the great Yale scholar Tocqueville once said that United States is this experimental laboratory for democracy and I'm very happy to see that Taiwan now is a leader for this kind of experimental techniques about what democracy means, what it is, who can be a part of it and what the future looks like as well. So this is all just a really coming together in a very fascinating, positive way in Taiwan. Related to this, the confluence of technology and governance can generate some very optimistic possibilities such as vTaiwan and also I think Cofacts as well. This kind of how do you defend or be responsible for democracy.

Richard Haddock:

But there's also some very disconcerting and even Orwellian applications as we are witnessing and Xingjiang and in the public discourse about the ethical limits of technology use. What are the current and future challenges that you and others face in the digital and open governance space? And what, if any, are the limits that you're running into when you're trying to create this open government?

Audrey Tang:

Right, so digital doesn't automatically mean open as you witnessed that it could also very much mean closed. Digital is a great amplifier if you want to make the state transparent to the citizens as we do, it amplifies that. But if you want to make citizens transparent to the state, it also amplifies that. And so it all depends on the configuration of a civic space. The more civic space there is, the less likely that it will turn Orwellian. The less civic space there is it will actually enable the state to fall into this perpetual sense of insecurity. And will take every opportunity to deploy more technology to shrink the civic space even more as we see in the PRC.

Audrey Tang:

And so I think the main challenge or the main limit that we're running into is just people kind of take technology like buzzwords like internet of things, virtual reality, machine learning and so on and kind of by default think them as good. You see that in a lot of so-called smart city narratives as if like city being smart while living the citizens dumber is a good thing. So where offers smart citizens and not necessarily for smart cities. And so I think if you get the values right, if you get a design and facilitation right in the first principles, then you can very easily see that digital technology can amplify these values. But on the other hand, if you start your values by saying that the government doesn't trust its citizen but nevertheless expect the citizen to trust back, it is

the paradoxical expectation to begin with and then you will deploy more and more reverse technologies.

Richard Haddock:

I like that distinction too, between a smart city and smart citizen. And back to the prayer that's you mentioned too, it's these fine lines about what technology means, but never forgetting the humanity within that technology use. So the Taiwan presidential and legislative elections recently concluded and much of the world, at least here in DC, watched closely how the digital spaces would be used or misused as an interactive space for individuals, organizations, and political campaigns. Mis and disinformation campaigns are now part of an ever-growing lexicon of techniques that various actors maligned or otherwise may employ in swaying the digital hearts and minds of citizens and voters. What is your assessment of Taiwan's digital sovereignty and its ability to preserve the integrity of information dissemination in this past election cycle? And how can States societies in your view work together to maintain and use digital spaces responsibly during elections, but also generally in the governance process?

Audrey Tang:

Yeah, because I view disinformation in a more epidemic metaphor rather than a warfare metaphor. Like it is intentional harmful to the public and truth that try to sow discord in people's cognitive space so that they stop talking to people with different positions and thereby taking away the main idea of liberal democracy, which is a free market of ideas right. If people only share their ideas with people already holding pretty much the same idea, then this marketplace of ideas dissipates and become filter bubbles. So instead of sovereignty, which is more of a territorial warfare metaphor I usually say there's total resilience.

Audrey Tang:

That is to say just as there are new virus like literally happening every year. What we are trying to do is to discover vaccines that can inoculate against particular forms of ideological or mimetic virus that sow discord in the citizenry. For example, very popularly during the mayoral election where this kind of virus of the mind ideological packages that basically evoke outreach from the citizenry by showing them just a random photo of someone suffering injustice, not actually from the governments but captioned as if it's from the government, suffering greater government injustice and things like that.

Audrey Tang:

And because people feel helpless and insecure after seeing such a picture, they will not bother then to fact check it's content but rather just reach for the nearest positive experience which is clicking share because that turns this personal anger into group outrage, which feels positive. And

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we found out that the best way to counteract such disinformation campaigns, is not take down because take down tends to actually make people even angrier, nor is it kind of just government press release that denounce the people who spread such messages, which pushes them even further away. Rather we hire professional comedians in each and every ministry to roll out funny messages, humorous messages that make fun of the ministers themselves, even the prime minister and in clarification of those messages and that are individually just funny videos and funny pictures.

Audrey Tang:

And so when people associate, for example, all of our Central Committee For Disease Management, for disease control, the CDC messages are now just pre-phased by a spokesdog for the CDC and they're handsomely dressed dog and it's fitting into the dog meme. And so basically all our Corona virus countermeasures, public information and clarifications are now dog-related and you laugh and that means that you will not actually be provoked into outrage the next time that you hear such disinformation from [inaudible 00:00:15:28].

Audrey Tang:

And so because we've found that fun and humor actually also vent this energy of anger without going into this vicious cycle of personal attacks or some kind of outrage against specific like Minister of Housing and Welfare, right? And so because of that it serves as a really good vaccine against that particular strain of disinformation and I can go on, but that is the basic idea. We develop vaccines, we inoculate the citizenry by rapid response.

Richard Haddock:

So using this comparison or analogy about inoculation, vaccination, this healing process I think is a very powerful analogy for this case.

Audrey Tang:

Yeah. I publicly endorsed a party that did not actually run into legislative election this time. Although they do have a city councilor in Taipei city and their name is in Mandarin 歡樂無法黨 (Huānlè wúfǎ dǎng) or literally the very happy party and its official English name is "Can't stop this party." All its founding members are professional comedians.

Richard Haddock:

Certainly the ones with the hottest takes or most astute observations about our societies. That's really great. With Dr. Tsai Ing-wen being reelected to serve as president for a second term, what are your priorities for the next four years for Taiwan's digital spaces including carrying out the Digital Nation & Innovative Economy Development Program or DIGI+ for 2017 to 2025? Do you foresee any major challenges in carrying out these priorities?

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Audrey Tang:

So just to recap, the main deliverable in the DIGI+ in the past four years has been broadband as human right, meaning that no matter where you are in Taiwan, even on the top, like the 4000 meters almost the peak of the Yushan Mountain, everybody now have 10 megabits per second at 15 euros per month, unlimited 4G connection at 98% coverage. And we're working on the remaining 2% using helicopters. And in any case, if you don't have that kind of broadband access, it's my fault. And so we actually delivered broadband as human right. We also delivered on media competency in K-12 education so that anybody anywhere in Taiwan, a lifelong learner of any age starting from seven years old can actually access the same material as a journalist would use for basic ideas of journalism training like fact checking and framing and all these different ideas.

Audrey Tang:

Because we know that children nowadays are no longer media consumers only they're all media producers. There are famous YouTubers who are 10 years old or 11 years old right? And because of that, everybody needs to learn what being a media means in the digital age so that you can have a vibrant civil society without suffering the kind of divisiveness and polarization that people who don't learn about journalism and go on being very influential YouTubers kind of do in liberal democracies. And so these are, I think a really good achievement that we did in the past four years and that enabled a participatory democracy without leaving anybody behind. Because if we leave, for example, any township behind in terms of broadband and education, then none of our open government digital democracy effort will hold legitimacy for that township. So we have to do the basics right.

Audrey Tang:

For the next four years were looking into establishing a digital council or a digital ministry, which is a new organization in a cabinet level that take care of the digital era issues such as protecting human rights, what we call data dignity. The dignity of people as producers of data. We're at a moment, kind of like in an era before labor union was invented so that every single data produce vis a vis large data corporations have minuscule bargaining power and we're looking to correct that using the principles as the early cooperatives, as the data collective coalitions and bargaining.

Audrey Tang:

So that for example, in Taiwan, primary school teachers often teach about data stewardship by teaching the way of measuring air quality and water quality now using very cheap, like less than \$100 measurement device that sends to a shared people's distributed ledger their completely

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picture of air and water quality. And because they're so powerful and so distributed, they actually have higher legitimacy than the Environment Minister. So the Environment Minister of course, can't beat them they're primary school teachers. So they have to join the primary school teachers the last network in the AirBox Civic Tech.

Audrey Tang:

And because of that they ask, "Okay, we can share our ledger with you, but we ask you to install into the industrial parks our measurement devices because we would also like to learn whether they contribute to air pollution." So it turns out that the government owns the land in the industrial parks. So it's a great illustration of a governance done in the civil society, endorsed but not controlled, not appropriated by the government and then together working with the private sector to further the sustainable goals on climate action and on water and land live protection without any single party having this kind of top down control, as we're still used to in data silos and multinational data corporations. So that's model is what we're looking to replicate and scale out in the next four years with the digital council or ministry.

Richard Haddock:

That sounds fantastic. Actually I'm curious to hear what are the actors involved in the cultivating digital literacy especially in the K-12 landscape? I know when I was a student here, this conversation about integrating technology in the classrooms just started to develop in a very exciting way and I wonder now too, if Taiwan works with other countries or exports some of its thoughts about digital literacy at the K-12 level. I'd love to hear your thoughts on that.

Audrey Tang:

Yeah. We just rolled out last year the new curriculum, which is very different from every other curriculum before it because we switched into a core competency model. That puts less emphasis, I would say almost no emphasis route memorization or on standardized answers around the teachers holding the "authority" over students and instead the teachers are now just co-learners. This ideas of co-learning is very important especially for the people who are in the rural, indigenous or remote places.

Audrey Tang:

Because through broadband as human rights, they can easily connect to other classrooms in other municipalities in shaping the two classrooms using wall size projectors for example, or large screens to feel that they are in the same physical space and participating in a larger class. While learning skills that are useful and applicable to solve their local problems. And so the municipal students actually get a feeling of what, for example, the agriculture situation looks like and they

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can co-design for example, a drone that sprays more responsibly for agriculture products for example, and fertilizers.

Audrey Tang:

And so basically this kind of what we call co-teaching across the municipal and rural spaces is a really powerful way to teach digital literacy because then it is not just like any other second language you need to learn like learn JavaScript as a second language. But rather it is a way that invites yourself into real social problems, real environmental problems, real economic problems in real places with real people that you develop your socialization throughout K-12 as a virtual but not so virtual classmates. And so that's kind of co-teaching is really booming in Taiwan and I think that is a model that inherently transcends cultural boundaries. And so we're happy to work with anyone who has a good fiber optic link.

Richard Haddock:

Definitely an important piece of tech for that. And I can see how this can cultivate, as you mentioned, a digital stewardship and to be able to connect with your fellow citizens, just humans really, not only nationwide but also internationally. So I can see a lot of good coming out of this. So the World Health Organization recently confirmed Taiwan's participation in a two day forum in Geneva, Switzerland held yesterday and today actually February 11th through 12th this year. That will bring medical researchers and experts together from different countries to produce a global research agenda, including the development of vaccines and medications for the novel Corona virus. Taiwanese experts will participate in the forum online and this reminds me of when you participated in the UN's Annual Internet Governance Forum a few years back in 2017 using a telepresence robot, which I thought was ingenious so that you could contribute to the global discussion on how developing nations can improve their internet connectivity and infrastructure. From these experiences how do you see the role of technology in connecting societies and nations across the world evolving? How can the use of technology reframe the discussion of international representation?

Audrey Tang:

The telepresence robots, of course, as you pointed out, it doesn't need a visa. It doesn't need a passport to enter and it's not representing me, it's re-presenting me, so-

Richard Haddock:

That's good. That's good.

Audrey Tang:

It's not a trusted intermediary, right? It is literally a video that's recorded a second ago or half a second if the connection is good. So in any case, what I'm trying to say is that this kind of representation as we observe ended WHO meetings where the experts participate just as themselves. They don't have any country affiliations and it's not just for Taiwan experts. Everybody joined as soon as they call just using their names and this is actually a really good and also symbolic way for multi-stakeholderism because previously multi-stakeholder meetings when it's coexisting with multilateral associations such as WHO and the UN system, they always have to exist in the kind of side track to the main track that is multilateral, that is state's representatives and there may be some CSOs, may be some academics and so on in the kind of NGO seats or now they call it major group seats, which is better. But in any case they are kind of on the periphery of the core multi-lateral model.

Audrey Tang:

But now because on the internet everybody has the same screen size, it is very difficult actually to make a seat arrangement that somehow highlights multilateral as the core and multi-stakeholder as the periphery, Everybody's just speaking for themselves quite literally there. And I think this is for the best, we have held the Virtual Islands Summit in conjunction with the East Caribbean islands and at each Island send someone to talk through this entirely virtual conference. We also have the agenda, we have the MC, we have the panel discussions, we have everything except that we don't have a venue, right. The venue is entirely online.

Audrey Tang:

So I spoke about Taiwan and somebody from Penghu Pescadores Islands spoke for the island. And so again this is very different, right? We're not saying Taiwan and Penghu together is a Republic citizens, but rather we talk about the two islands as you know, just features and how the climate change is going to affect those different islands and each Island talk about these islands. So it feels as if that these islands are now speaking through us. And this again challenges the traditional idea of Westphalian sovereignty, which is very human centric.

Audrey Tang:

And so in addition of saying that we cost zero carbon footprint by holding the Virtual Islands Summits, it is also a much safer way now given the novel Coronavirus compared to international travel and jet lag. And also with high bandwidth connection, you can actually now see much more of the micro expression that builds the rapport that's needed for face-to-face conversations and definitely more than if you're the person who you're talking with is wearing a mask.

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Definitely I can see all these benefits to kind of re presenting how people decide to represent themselves, communities around them and to connect with communities all over the world. Once you mentioned before about the Virtual Islands Summit, it's I think a very powerful tool to connect between different peoples and nations, societies. Do you see that Taiwan cooperates with the United States or other multi-stakeholders around the world in co-learning, co-teaching and perhaps co-expressing this new interpretations of the technology and humanity?

Audrey Tang:

Definitely. There's more than 10 global cooperation and training frameworks this year and it's no longer bilateral like US-Taiwan only. We have Japan as the third steady host and every GCTF we invite as fourth rotating jurisdiction as the kind of force rotating host. For example for sustainable management of materials are consequently economy if you're from Netherlands that marine debris and so on and that Netherlands is the rotating chair and we actually are very intentional in designing them to align with the Sustainable Development Goals because this is a decade of action. We have 10 years to get it right across the globe and these are kind of pre-vetted goals, back in 2015. Everybody agreed on delivering on those goals including broadband as human right, which is to be delivered this year.

Audrey Tang:

So we're kind of ahead of the curve and happy to help but in any case, what I'm trying to say is that even these shared goals and it is kind of a safe space for mini-lateral configurations as the GCTF to experiment with more of this kind of telepresence way of working across different jurisdictions and also be of solidarity between people of different jurisdictions by getting into the habit of listening across the space and with people who are virtually there.

Richard Haddock:

Yeah. Thanks actually for mentioning the Global Cooperation and Training Framework I think that's a great platform to explore what you mentioned about mini-lateralism. It started off 2015 as primarily a US-Taiwan cooperation to utilize experts in the United States and in Taiwan with third countries to discuss issues such as public health, women's economic empowerment, digital economy. And now it's grown these past few years into something incredibly powerful and that many people across the world can be connected with. And as you mentioned that Japan is now a part of this and another lens and exciting to see how this platform and others like it will evolve in the near future.

Richard Haddock:

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So for those of us interested in learning more about open government and Taiwan's role as a leader in the digital democracy space, how do you suggest listeners can get involved in the governance process? What were the tools and resources you used along your personal journey down this path?

Audrey Tang:

Yeah, we publish everything. I still publish to social archive to preprint server even as Digital Minister. So you can read it on social archive about vTaiwan, but if you're a less academic minded, there is a very accessible set of talks called pre print down by the Governance Lab at NYU, led by Beth Simone Noveck professor at NYU. And if you just Google for pre print I think you'll find the newly released, actually they released it a couple of weeks ago, tool kit that shared not only vTaiwan as this problem identification phase but actually across the entire life cycle of the governance processes. There's always touchpoints where this kind of intentional use of digital technology based on the principle of human centered service design can improve the quality, not just the participation itself as instrumental value. But really the quality of the rules step gets made in this way. So I encourage you to Google for pre print and if you have any questions, I'm accessible on Twitter @audreyt.

Richard Haddock:

Wow, that's fantastic. Well thank you so much for coming in and speaking with us. I know I've learned a lot more about not only open governance and how technology can be a powerful tool for people to connect with each other across the world, but also kind of what it means to be human in this technology wave of development and governance. So thank you so much, Minister Tang for stopping by and chatting with us.

Audrey Tang:

Thank you for the great conversation.

Richard Haddock:

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