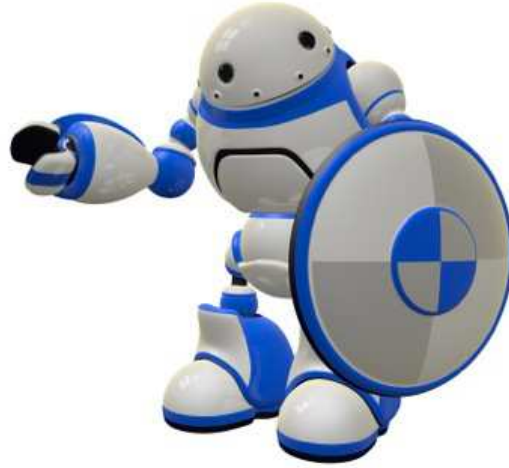


Digital proxies – your online representatives?

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What is a digital proxy?

A digital proxy would be someone who undertakes someone else's online affairs because he or she cannot use the internet for some reason. This would include participating in digital democracy and other online interactions with government and other institutions, analogous to being a traditional voting proxy or holding power of attorney, and potentially managing your digital 'estate'.



Where did this idea come from?

It crystallised at [Democratic Sector Day](#)¹ (thanks Oliver and colleagues, Christian and other people at the Digital Participatory Democracy table!) from several sources:

- My sister isn't able to deal with government and bureaucracy. So, with her permission, I do her tax returns, applications for state benefits, and any other tasks requiring digital, numeracy or literacy skills.
- I also complete our father's tax return.
- Our mother won't go near the Internet.
- In many elections, people can nominate proxies to vote for them if they cannot get to their polling stations.
- I am very able to take part in digital democracy – I'm almost never away from at least one internet device. But what about
 - *Those who can't even afford a roof over their heads*, let alone the most basic feature-phone?
 - *People living in not-spots?* (My prime example is friends who farm on the west coast of Arran. They can only get very patchy dial-up connections. It's hard enough for them to do necessary tasks such as filling in DEFRA's online forms. I doubt whether they have the time or patience for anything else online.
 - *Disabled people* who cannot afford screen-readers etc. Being disabled tends to lead to low income, so the people who need extra services and equipment tend to be those who can least afford them.
 - *Any other people who cannot use the Internet to interact with the 'digital-first'/'digital by default' state?* Online voting isn't that far away. In fact it was an option in Edinburgh's 2013 community council elections. Most Universal Benefit² claims will need to be made online³.

So I think we *digirati* need to consider the sort of society we may be foisting on others who potentially cannot benefit from it. That concern isn't new – the digital divide⁴ (wikipedia) has been around for years. But perhaps digital proxies could help mitigate this chasm.

So what is that idea again?

With your permission, and following your instructions, your digital proxy would represent you online, by voting for you online, acting for you in online participatory democracy (e.g. emailing your councillor, commenting on government consultations, taking part in participatory budgeting etc). Your digital proxy could also manage your digital estate: social media accounts, music bought from and stored in the cloud. This is distinct from traditional power of attorney, where an attorney is empowered to act on your behalf to manage your finances and tangible property. It's also distinct from traditional proxy voting, where a proxy is empowered to vote in a specific election, often in a specific way.

Some questions (aka *What could possibly go wrong?*)

- *How would DPs be procured?* Not every family has someone with the skills and time to be a DP. In Scotland, the Office of the Public Guardian registers powers of attorney⁵ and monitors guardianships⁶. Could it and its equivalents elsewhere handle DPs – an extra task when government budgets are rapidly shrinking?
- *Would DPs need to be paid?* If so, how would this be arranged? By results (e.g. tax refunds)? By time spent on the tasks?
- *Who would pay DPs?*
- *How should the DP act if you have not instructed them?* For example, what if you've not told them how to vote, or how to respond to a change in benefits legislation? Should your DP act as he/she believes you would act – or not act all without specific instructions?
- *Where should the boundaries be set?* You might be able to take part in some online activities but not others, or might be able to do so intermittently. (Maybe more than 20 minutes in front of a monitor brings on migraines. Should your DP be able to take over after 15 minutes? Is that even practical?)
- *What if your DP and your other representatives disagree?*
- *How would you know to trust a DP?*
- *What happens if your DP doesn't do as you instruct?*

No doubt there are many more potential issues.

It's possible that existing facilities from the analogue age could apply to digital matters. For example, I could give my partner power of attorney, i.e. a specific instrument allowing her to control my finances and property when I no longer have mental capacity to do this. If I lose mental capacity before I grant her power of attorney, she could seek guardianship over me. There's no automatic limit to the channels attorneys and guardians can use, so my partner would be able use my online banking, instead of needing to visit my bank in person. Similarly, I believe it would be facile to extend proxy-voting legislation to cover online voting.

To the best of my knowledge, neither of these specifically cover my other interactions with government and other significant institutions, or automatically covers my digital estate; these are where my digital proxy would step in to represent me and safeguard my digital estate. But, to the best of my knowledge, the legal, technical and governance frameworks around our digital existences and estates are not in place. I think we need to start safeguarding our digital futures now.

(This is an updated version of [this post](#)⁷. Huge thanks to my ever-wonderful partner for suggesting inclusion of digital estates.)

¹ <https://twitter.com/oliverescobar/status/566518307839541248>

² <https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit>

³ http://www.adviceguide.org.uk/scotland/benefits_s/benefits_welfare_benefits_reform_e/benefits_uc_universal_credit_new/benefits_uc_claiming_universal_credit/uc43_uc_how_do_you_claim_it.htm

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_divide

⁵ <http://www.publicguardian-scotland.gov.uk/power-of-attorney>

⁶ <http://www.publicguardian-scotland.gov.uk/guardianship-orders>

⁷ <http://bruceryan.info/2015/03/13/digital-proxies-a-potential-new-research-area/>