FWDThinking Episode 1 - July 2, 2020

[00:00:00] **Alistair Croll:** [00:00:00] Hi everyone. And welcome to the first ever episode of FWDThinking. FWDThinking is a semi-regular show we're going to do on the future of digital government, technology, governance, ethics, and it's being brought to you in collaboration with FWD50, the digital government conference that happens in Canada, every November, and the Canadian School of Public Service's, Digital Academy. So we're going to be making these available on YouTube and on the CSPS's busrides.ca website. We're going to have a bunch of conversations over the next few months, leading up to FWD50 in November, and I'm thrilled to welcome, my occasional cohost because she's halfway around the world and the logistics of getting us together like this are interesting. Please join me in giving a very warm FWDThinking welcome to Pia Andrews. Hi Pia.

Pia Andrews: [00:00:53] Hey, how you going?

Alistair Croll: [00:00:54] I'm doing well. What time is it where you are?

Pia Andrews: [00:00:56] Oh, I try to not think in time anymore. It's just not [00:01:00] helpful. Very early. It's a 14 hour difference. So I'm working early my time to accommodate as much of the Canadian Workday as I can.

Alistair Croll: [00:01:08] Wow. Thank you so much. And you're in Australia, but still working hard for Ottawa.

Pia Andrews: [00:01:12] Absolutely. Yeah, the service Canada digital channel will not wait for anything.

Alistair Croll: [00:01:17] So, we're gonna be doing this on a fairly regular basis. And, we are going to try and include the audience as much as possible. We're going to use the #FWDThinking, that's FWD Thinking. And when we, at the end of this, we've got some trivia questions and we are going to be awarding a FWD50 ticket virtual ticket to one person who gets them right. The first person to post the answers on Twitter with the hashtag #FWDThinking, will get a ticket to FWD50, and some other goodies. I think we have some books and stuff planned, and we didn't really get into a detailed topic today because we wanted to frame what the future looks like.

So before we get into that Pia, why don't you tell us a bit about yourself and then [00:02:00] we'll introduce another guest.

Pia Andrews: [00:02:01] Wonderful. so hi, my name's Pia Andrews. I have been at the intersection of, technology, government and society for about 20 years, working in public sectors, private sectors, political sectors, nonprofit, With basically something of a obsession in understanding the system, the system that we call the world and the societies in it and, and how they all work.

And, and trying to bring my particular skillset around, around tech, around the internet, to how we can improve public sectors, to be awesome, and to be what people need them to be, to be more humane, more empathetic, more, More people friendly. So that's kinda what I do. I'm a professional geek. I currently work for ESDC for Service Canada, and I'm doing very exciting work as part of a huge transformation program there, too.

to look at how we transform benefits delivery, but my particular role is leading a [00:03:00] amazing team on designing and delivering an actual digital channel for Service Canada. So it's a very exciting work, very exciting team to be working with. And, I sort of keep joking. I feel like I've joined the Avengers, you know, that there's just so many superheros in Canada to work with, not just in government, but everywhere. So it's just, amazing and delightful every day.

Alistair Croll: [00:03:18] Although to be fair. New Zealand has some pretty good Avengers too.

Pia Andrews: [00:03:22] Oh my gosh. Yeah, absolutely. New Zealand, Australia. There's some amazing people around the world, but, Canada is a little unique in the genuine investment in trying to transform ESDC, like that that's quite a substantial opportunity that you don't normally see. Normally people are trying to fix this or that, but ESD is actually. Investing in and the government's investing in, transforming itself, you know, how do we modernize ourselves for service excellence now, and tomorrow? It's a, it's a really wonderful aim, so , very cool!

Alistair Croll: [00:03:51] Sure, and I have two things I'm going to spring on you later, but this is called foreshadowing. I want to talk about martial arts and I want to talk about gov hacks, but we can [00:04:00] come back to those.

Let's introduce, someone who's gonna be joining us today. Jesse Hirsch. Jesse, if you want to tell us a little bit about yourself and then we'll get into some of the questions we have lined up for today.

Jesse Hirsh: [00:04:12] I always have difficulty describing myself because self-awareness is something I think that is entirely fictional and elusive, but I write, think, read, play, experiment with technology, politics, culture, in particular how it ties to government. Public policy and the notion of the state and people's relationship to it.

But really I'm an internet person. I've, you know, been on the internet now for maybe 25 years, very much seduced, but also perplexed by this network of networks and all of its potential, both mythological and actual. And then pursuing and investigating this myth of the internet. I've really just found a way professionally [00:05:00] to keep myself engaged, both as an intellectual and a practitioner.

And I've always felt that government should play a role in the internet. I mean, I remember here in Canada, there used to be, we used to call it the information highway or the information super highway. And there was always this false notion that it belonged in the private sector and that there was no role for the public sector.

Whereas I spent most of my life. Trying to situate the internet, both as originating from the public sector, but belonging in the public sector as infrastructure, as a kind of public resource. And whether that's been through my own pursuits in the open source world or the larger notion of open government, or more recently the idea of the automation of the state and the extent to which we live in an algorithmic society, in which more and more of what we do and how we think is augmented by automation. I think it's a really exciting time to be alive in terms of thinking and [00:06:00] writing and engaging these ideas, but also a very serious time to be in terms of their impacts and what's at stake. So it's really, I think to Pia's point about being a professional geek, I'm a professional student or professional player when it comes to ideas and learning.and experimenting and am privileged enough to be able to do so.

Alistair Croll: [00:06:23] Awesome. So we have a good group together for our first conversation about this, which I want to make sort of framing for all the things that are coming up because we've got lots of other topics. But what I really want to think about this time is what it means to think forward.

And it would be remiss to not mention the fact that we're in a time of huge social reckoning, both, for social justice issues, systemic racism, but also for the adoption of digital technologies, the acceleration of technology. I think if last year was a masterclass in US civics, this year is a masterclass in [00:07:00] statistics and everybody's just learning stats, right?

I mean, we all of a sudden understand ratios and percentages and sampling bias and so on. And I think that, what's fascinating about the current situation is just that it's taken away so many excuses and those excuses going away is good because now we can do stuff, but it's also, there's also risk of recklessness if we do it without thinking about who does it affect?

 I was talking to one of our speakers for FWD50 this year, who does digital design and design thinking for, not just social justice, but also the social safety net. And I remember years ago working with Code for America. And they had a program yeah with the state of Kentucky to fight, what's called FTA rates. So if you're a accused of a crime, you have to appear in front of the court, you're given a court date and if you fail to appear, they can arrest you. And so failure to appear, it turns out. disadvantages the most vulnerable and disenfranchised in our society because [00:08:00] they don't have a cell phone. And so then they get arrested, which can escalate to violence. And now they have another charge and they're incarcerated and that's a horrible spiral because they don't have a cell phone. And so can we fix systemic injustice and racism and policing without tackling whether people have access to the digital technologies to get their fair day in court?

Years ago, I talked to the folks at Taser, who make what they call non-lethal control devices, and they have (it's a) great euphemism and they have a second product, which is the tool for body cams.

So when cops wear body cams, that stuff gets uploaded to a cloud platform. And if you go back and look at the Magna Carta, You know, that amazing document gave you the right to see, to confront your accuser. And that was pulled up in the constitution, and so on, but we

need to amend that to be, I get the rights to confirm my accuser using the tools my [00:09:00] accuser has used because you know, if you're going into court, And the other side can do license plate tracking and facial recognition and all this other stuff.

And you're just handed a hard drive full of video. That's hardly a level playing field. So it feels like, you know, ideas that are as old as the Magna Carta need to be updated for the digital era. So, I'm going to shut up, after that monologue. How are we going to make sure that we don't have these, these unintended consequences of the failure to appear rate or the imbalance of evidence when you have to defend yourself in the public field. You've got more than one second to answer. So please go ahead.

Jesse Hirsh: [00:09:43] So it's very difficult, I mean, technology is not neutral and the social impact of technology is very difficult to anticipate ahead of time.

But creating the flexibility and responsiveness to deal with such emergent phenomenon is [00:10:00] possible. I mean, there's principles like inclusive design, which suggests that if you're going to design something, if you're going to design say the automation of the criminal justice system, then you should include criminals in participating and how it's designed so that you anticipate all of the users in the system.

But I think there's an equal argument to say maybe some things shouldn't be automated. Maybe there are some ways in which the human should stay in the loop or in which there's some necessary need for human oversight or algorithmic accountability, so that there is always a human verifying, these types of decisions, which doesn't mean that you can't have greater efficiency or even greater fairness when it comes to the system.

But certainly the pre pandemic. The field of algorithmic responsibility or AI and ethics was exploded, that there was a lot of more interest in funding and research, especially on the government side to say, you know, maybe there's a way to use this [00:11:00] responsibly. You know, the government of Canada globally, I think, was showing a lot of leadership in coming up with the algorithmic impact assessment framework, which is it good to start when it comes to thinking about these things, but to your point, these are early days.

And I think, I shouldn't say post pandemic, cause we're not yet post-pandemic, but now that we're in the pandemic, my concern is we are going to rush forward to automation, partly as a stop gap, partly as a way of managing a huge amount of data, huge amount of need. And we may not be able to do the due diligence. We may not be able to do the preventative work necessary.

And I lately have been taking a very, Provocative position, which is to say that bias in AI can never be eliminated. That all AI will be biased. The question is, what bias do you want? So in a criminal justice application, you could say, and this has been research that much of [00:12:00] the algorithms and automation that's being used is racist because it's inheriting the systemic racism that exists, in many localized, criminal justice systems. And so it's inheriting those biases into the system. So rather than say, we should remove that bias. I think it's valid to say we want a different bias. We want them bias to be anti-racist and we

want the bias to be anti sexist or any classist so that we guarantee that it gives a more or a more likely a fair process. But the point is that's still a bias and that's okay.

And I think that shows how this debate and discussion evolves, but slowly in the sense that I think the difficulty is that technology tends to move faster than the policy debates that we have around it only cause policy debates take time.

Pia Andrews: [00:12:57] I agree with a lot of that. I might [00:13:00] add to a little bit, I think a lot of success is measured in two fundamentally incorrect ways. The first way is, purely economically. you know, and so everything comes down to a dollar. So everything comes down to efficiencies or effectiveness or, or throughput and, and the challenge is that actual success for systems that we build, particularly public sector systems, particularly public services, should ultimately be measured in the human impact. How has this improved the quality of life? How has this better reflected the need and the values and the, aspirations of the people that this government serves, this public sector serves, which of course will be different for each different country, different nation, and frankly, different communities within a particular nation as well.

So the first thing is until we change how we. Until we change success away from pure economic measurements into human measurements, then we'll continue to fail because, you know, any machine can [00:14:00] tell you, you know, the economy would be perfectly efficient if we just got rid of all the people. And next thing you know, we've got summer wars, but the second way that we fail in how we measure things is we measure things iteratively.

So. We're looking for a 10% discount or improvement or reduction or increase, or a 15% of people feel really proud to, you know, be able to, Oh, we had 120%, response or 200% response. The world is increasingly exponential. And I talk about this a lot. The problems that we're facing, the opportunities we're facing the change and speed and impact are only exponentially growing.

And frankly, this horrific pandemic has been a case in point. People are not good at understanding how to develop exponential responses to exponential problems. They are used to, throwing more stuff at the wall, throwing more fuel in the tank, putting bigger wheels on, but if you actually need to make it a space, you know, the biggest car with the biggest wheels and the best fuel is [00:15:00] not going to get you there. Right?

So at some point we need to reimagine where we're trying to get to, and then actually say, cause until we figure out where we're trying to get to, we're just going to continue running away from what's in our rear vision mirror. So we're just effectively driving with a rear vision mirror. I've sort of been joking recently that there's a good reason why a waterfall is called waterfall it's because you're running off a cliff at a great speed.

So we need to have not just agile policy and processes and project management. We need to have agile programs, which means we need to have real time monitoring. We need to have systems that bring policy and implementation together. We need to have participatory governance so that we can actually reflect, and understand, public values, public needs,

public direction, aspirations, and frankly, Futures in what we do today, because otherwise everyone says, no, no, no, what we're going to do in the future it's a tomorrow problem. It's a next year problem. It's the next budget cycle problem. It's the next government problem, whatever they come up with every excuse in the sun to not change what they're doing [00:16:00] today, because they are under pressure to just augment what they're doing today, not to change it.

So what we're facing, I believe is a necessary, transformation and I'll just quickly add just very quickly. one of the, I mean the pandemic's horrific, like there's no two ways about it and I feel constant guilt that, in one hand that it is bringing some opportunities to change and to improve things on one hand, there's a positive, if it can be called a positive that the whole world for the first time in any of our generations and probably a hundred years, has a universally experienced moment. You know, a universal experience. Everyone feels the same fear and horror and perplexedness and loss, and, confusion. Everyone feels that. And that's one of those very few moments of social cohesion that we could actually come together and recognize what we have in common, more so than what we have in different.

So we have an opportunity almost due to the crisis. To use the crisis to never go [00:17:00] back. And these two camps are coming out. One is saying, how do we return to pre COVID? And the other camp that's saying that pre COVID was actually really terrible for all of us. It just didn't affect you as much. So how do we actually, shift because we never want to go back.

So, you know, we were talking, we could adopt all kinds of different technologies, methodologies, or the rest of it, but the first thing I think, is , to get into one of those two camps, quite clearly. I'm certainly in the camp of, we need to change for the better, because we can't ever go back.

We discovered something like 50% of Canadians were within $200 of insolvency pre COVID. The system hasn't worked for a long time. And so we need to dramatically transform it and not be satisfied with incremental change.

Jesse Hirsh: [00:17:43] So it it's, it's funny you frame it that way because. I mean, I do think that we are thinking in this binary form and it's not just the before versus the after, but you know, lately it's been masks versus not masks and, [00:18:00] you know, before, like it's interesting how there's all these little divides, but I think in seeing them in binary, they're actually more diverse.

I think it, it cuts in a bunch of different ways. But I agree with you a hundred percent on the kind of guilt that this is such a fantastic opportunity, that the opportunity has to come amidst a genuine tragedy. But I also agree that it needs to be participatory that the opportunity to get this right is both inclusive and accessible, which comes through the participatory. But the problem, and I don't say this as a bad thing. I say this as like a challenge accepted, like this is the problem we need to be open to is in the media world. There's the concept of don't read the comments, right? That you go and you read the media story, but if you scroll down into the comments, you're just going to get really depressed because the types of comments that would often be posted on news stories, were

[00:19:00] the worst imaginable responses, not in any way reflective of the audience, but there was a self-selecting filter that the people who bothered to post a comment or argue with the people who posted a comment or news stories, were really the worst possible perspectives.

And it, it strikes me that the private sector, one of the biggest failings of the private sector in the last 10 years was their inability to figure out user participation. Their inability to figure out how to manage comments in that I utopianly, always believe that the comment section could be the most brilliant Hivemind out there that if the right news organization really invested, not just in community relations, but the right balance of user moderation.

And I'm an old Slashdot user. So I remember the whole meta moderation and the way in which Slashdot comments at their peak were [00:20:00] amazing and gold. And you would always go to read the comments, and so to me, that's, that's the challenge that the governments face now moving forward is how do you open the gate? But still manage both the quality, the conspiracy theory, the sabateurs, the weird kind of multiplicity of the internet from gaming to trolling to legitimate participation, and still ensure that it's inclusive and accessible.

That that strikes me as a worthy, but difficult challenge.

Pia Andrews: [00:20:34] And it's an old challenge, right? The fact is any of us that have been involved in open source for years, know how to do this. Like there's a whole group of people that know how to do distributed development of good things towards a good outcome.

And yes, you get fracturing and yes, you get challenges, but we have the tools. We have the cultures, we have the means. We have the instincts, right. 10 years ago, like it bothers me to say this profoundly 10 years ago, I was working for. [00:21:00] I did a brief stint in politics. Don't hold it against me. It was a good way to learn the system. I prefer democracy to politics, but it was a really good experience. And I worked with really good people, but we ran, we ran public open collaborative policy, efforts. Right? So we, we actually use, I mean, and none of it was high tech. It was. you know, social media and wikis and mailing lists. And, we even ran an event where anyone, anyone could come and do their five minutes on what they want. We knew that someone might get up and say something crazy. And frankly, there were a couple that were certainly out there, but the point is they only had their five minutes to do with it. So, you know, if it was really terrible, then you know, that might've backfired, but nothing was really terrible.

Most people given a platform to participate in policy, in governance, want to bring their ideas. And that diversity of perspective is absolutely critical. So 10 years ago we were doing participatory policy development. People are talking like, it's a new thing. Like it's only just enabled, we were doing it 10 years ago.

Others were doing it [00:22:00] 15 years ago. In New Zealand, they used to have a thing called policy juries. I used to actually go and find a demographically balanced group of people like a jury, pay them for three months to be brought up to speed on a complex policy area to then participate in the policy process.

Now this is a 30, 40 years ago. the problem, I think that, I mean, there's a lot of challenges, but the problem comes down to what is the role of government in society fundamentally? Because if you see your role as managing a product. If you see your role as getting inefficiency, if you see your role as all these other sort of little micro jobs, but you're not actually contributing to that overarching view of what the role of government is, then you've got a problem. Right?

And, the fact is in countries like Canada, Australia, New Zealand, UK, there is a very clear understanding that public sector should be about public service. That's a good starting point, but we almost need to reinstate that moment and say, well, if it's about public service, how do we engage the public in that service is a very natural next [00:23:00] step for a lot of public servants. It's just that our processes aren't necessarily aligned to do that yet, but you've got to start with the, the why and the intent before you can, because otherwise every little intervention you make to change it, will only change this or that bit there or that bit there. Does that make sense?

Jesse Hirsh: [00:23:16] And I think the opportunity that this particular crisis affords is not just looking at the bits and bites of digital service delivery, but the raison d'etre of government as a whole. Right?

Why is government here? What role is government playing? And it's phenomenal how we went from this time last year to a small L libertarian view of government where most people are like, you know, I don't want bigger government. I don't want government playing a roll in the economy to where we are now, where the government is literally subsidizing the entire economy. Well, as close as we could get to a universal basic income, albeit temporary. And everyone is accepting that the government has a [00:24:00] very valid role to play in society and the economy. So I think it has an opportunity to rethink the whole shebang.

Alistair Croll: [00:24:06] But Jesse, I mean, I, first of all, I completely agree. We are conducting the largest social experiment in the history of humanity.

Like we will look back at the data we're collecting now.

Jesse Hirsh: [00:24:15] And let's not forget the largest medical experiment to.

Alistair Croll: [00:24:18] Yes. If you accept that every society is a group of people, who've agreed to live by a set of laws, including the laws about what we do to you, if you don't abide by those laws, that's the weird pact, right?

That's a, that's a sort of workable definition. every society is an experiment about the balance between the rights of the individual and the will of the many and so on. But I think, especially when you look at countries that are for profit healthcare systems, most people think of a disease as something that happens to them.

But this is new in that now you realize the health of the person next to you affects you. Right? In the past, it was like, the health of me affects me. So I'm going to go buy my own [00:25:00] MRI, leave me alone. And it's obvious that we get these shared resources, but it

feels like this is the first time in recent memory when people have gone, Oh,the health of the person next to me - and I'm talking about specifically, Wallstreet Banker.

Pia Andrews: [00:25:14] We've been through this argument in micro and the fact that it's gone off the rails has been just, stupendously strange. We've had exactly that conversation about immunizations and the fact that people were starting to be okay with, you know, not having heard immunity was really, really troubling.

So hopefully this brings everyone back to sanity.

Alistair Croll: [00:25:32] Yeah. So David McRaney who spoke at FWD50 a couple of years ago was talking about - he's been interviewing, people in cults about what makes someone join or leave a cult. And he's gone and talked to former branch Davidian members, flat earth deniers, you know, and all those kinds of people or flat earth proponents , and he said that one of the big defining issues of a cult is when compliance with a system of belief of the organization becomes the leading, like. In group [00:26:00] signaling. So if you play football, soccer, you know, playing soccer is your thing. Once you start to believe that supporting your team is the thing against all rational belief, it becomes a cult.

And so as soon as our behaviors become signals of in group support, like wearing a mask or not wearing a mask, you know, is digital really better for us? I mean, I'm going to be provocative here. Obviously I'm a nerd and I think it is, but, digital inherently because we have a digital society based on ad revenue and ad revenues are based on engagement and engagement happens when we agree or disagree strongly with something.

Have we built a system that is destined to polarize us and therefore all of the gifts of digital are taken away by the fact that it makes us hate one another.

Pia Andrews: [00:26:54] Jesse. Do you mind if I jump first?

Jesse Hirsh: [00:26:56] Go ahead.

Pia Andrews: [00:26:58] First of all, obviously when [00:27:00] you set it up with a premise like that, then you're setting it up. So no one can disagree with you. So I'm going to reject your premise to start right.

Alistair Croll: [00:27:04] Perfect. Please do

Pia Andrews: [00:27:07] The digital, the internet overall has been, I think, exceptionally good for our species, because it gave us a way to do what mankind has always been best at, which is, rapid cumulative learning. It gave us the ability to build on each other's strengths and lessons learned and knowledge faster.

And then of course, when we went through, as we have been. Massive locking up around intellectual capital. The fact is that the gatekeepers really couldn't stop other people doing peer to peer sharing, and then we ended up getting more and more commons emerging, to flank those gated, intellectual property, common, Gates.

And then we could just create our own IP comments is right. So the internet and digital, I think actually has provided, humans, a lot of opportunity to rapidly learn to get out of the 19, I don't know, thirties or forties or [00:28:00] fifties thought bubble that said that there's some form of normal cause radio and then television created dumb users of us all, where we had broadcast into our faces.

A concept of normal that we all had to prescribe to. The internet has done has the best thing it's done is demonstrate, there's no such thing as normal and has helped us all actually get a little bit more comfortable with not being the same as the, the voice or the picture that's shoved into our screens, right? Or into our radios.

So on one hand, it's been really good in that way, but to your point though, the, a lot of the success systems are measured wrongly, to the earlier point. So if we actually were measuring success differently, if our, if our economy valued not purely economic outcomes, we would actually, I think get great, huge differences, like right now, a, an AI let loose on the world, self replicating, will be motivated to create - and you and I've talked about this before, you know, the Peppa Pig snuff video, you know, mashup of content to get greatest [00:29:00] hits in order to, get the financial modeling from YouTube, right. As a very small, very basic case in point, But I would love to see a world where all of our financial systems would actually reward an AI, to go and set up a business, pay its staff equitably, contribute to great environmental outcomes, ladi ladi la.

But, our economic system isn't set up that way. So I think the experiments, the very early experiments of Nepal and Bhutan around actually taking happiness as a, as a miserable, I think that the later experiments in, I know the UK, but in New Zealand, looking at the life, the life standard framework, which was called the wellness framework, which takes, you know, economic, social, human, and environmental as the four capitals.

If you start to measure those four capitals equally, Then you might actually choose and have a mechanism to choose something which may not be the most cost efficient, but actually gives you all the other benefits substantially more. But until our systems don't embed those more human measures of [00:30:00] success, then we will continue to see less human friendly outcomes.

So, broadly speaking, it's connected people, it's enabled people. It has also enabled some really awful things. Of course, like a freeway has enabled better crime, but all in all, it's enabled that very basic human trait, the very, very important aspect to our own evolution, which is rapid, cumulative and, continuous learning and evolution as a species.

So, I think it's a very, very important part of who we are moving forward. we just need to change some of the frameworks.

Alistair Croll: [00:30:34] Yeah. I think genetic evolution took millennia. Mimetic evolution has dramatically accelerated and that's a wonderful thing.

Go ahead, Jesse.

Jesse Hirsh: [00:30:46] I wonder if that's just scale.

I mean, we think that memetic evolution is dramatic, but I wonder if looking back 200, 300 years from now, it won't seem that dramatic, especially in [00:31:00] terms of where we will be. And I feel the notion of polarization is a symptom, not a cause. Right? That I don't think digital or algorithms or social media deserves the blame.

And I think Pia is spot on and saying, we're overthrowing the tyranny of normal, right. That there is no normal, but that leaves us in a vulnerable state. Cause all of a sudden we're grasping with our own uniqueness. We're grasping with our own identities in a, on the one hand liberating context. But on the other hand, terrifying, cause there's a million different choices and a million different ways.

Alistair Croll: [00:31:37] Does that mean we then don't buy into collectivism?

Pia Andrews: [00:31:40] No, no, no, no

Jesse Hirsh: [00:31:42] My point is we also have to recognize what I think we're all discussing. It's it's the power of money. Right? And if you look at politics and I, and I like Pia, you sort of slyly juxtapose politics and democracy, right? But if you look at the US political [00:32:00] industry, it is a trillion dollar industry, whose primary purpose is polarization, right? They're trying to push people into one party or the other that incentivizes that kind of polarization. And there are other sorts of industries that are beneficiaries of polarization. So I agree a hundred percent that we need different values in terms of how we frame or use the technology or build these systems.

And that's part of the problem with our current monopoly. Where pre pandemic we were sort of finally getting critical of the role that Amazon and Facebook and Google are playing. And we still are. This Facebook boycot is getting more and more interesting every day. And the antitrust actions around the world are getting more and more serious, but under lockdown, we're using these platforms even more and we're depending on, on these platforms and even more.

So it's an interesting [00:33:00] paradox between not just the symptoms of what we're seeing. And I agree a hundred percent with that benefits, but with the real world power dynamics that are at play, not because of digital, but at the same time as digital. And maybe we could be looking at digital as a response, or maybe we should be looking at each other.

And, our political systems, democracy, the state,

Alistair Croll: [00:33:23] Is that a trap? Because we need. I mean, if we want to change, we change through politics and politics profits off polarization. So how do we get ourselves out of that cycle?

Pia Andrews: [00:33:34] Well, it doesn't actually. So as an Australian, I'm going to just be cheeky for a moment .This is one of the, and I debate this with my own countrymen as well. there is one benefit of mandatory voting. When you don't have mandatory voting, one of the outcomes of polarization is you polarize people just to not vote at all as well. Right? So you try to get rid of as many people voting as possible, potentially. So mandatory voting kind

of [00:34:00] actually balances that out just a little bit. They can't be too crazy because, everyone is going to vote.

But to your later point though, new values, I actually think we need to get back to our old values a little bit, like, I think we've almost adopted a whole bunch of faux values in, that are, that are aligned with, again, this idea of what success looks like. It's sort of businessification or bringing manager managerialism into public sector means that you then are suddenly having to have this false. False trade off between what's financially good. And what's human good. And what's human good, always loses because what's financially good is all that's measured. Right? So we almost need to get back to our old values of what's actually, what's good for the community. What's good for people. And if we took to go to your earliest point, Jesse, the greater public participation in the design and the governance and the policymaking, that would naturally reflect values more. And then that would naturally then flow through to, through, to, to better outcomes better, public sectors, better everything. But for me, it's not just, there's a small point. I think that's missed [00:35:00] here, capacity. Why are we relying on all those so much is because a lot of public sectors everywhere, and this is just my observation, not speaking on behalf of anyone, which I should have said right at the beginning of the whole talk, but that's all right.

Most public sectors have been hollowed out. Their capacity and goes to like your early point about small government. There's been this weird, you know, international pressure to have small government, but the government should be, the public sector should be like the ballast. It should be that government as a platform isn't just about technology. It's about government as a social platform, as a support platform. so that then businesses, individuals, communities can thrive. Right? So, because we've been hollowing out the capacity of public sector, then in the case of a crisis, then you have to lean more heavily on whoever's got capacity. Right?

So part of this, I think, brings back the question of building back up the capacity for the public sector to scale its own efforts. Not because it should do everything, but because the bits that it should do it should be able to do at a, at a, at a pinch.

[00:36:00] **Jesse Hirsh:** [00:36:00] Well, and that notion of infrastructure, I think is essential.

And, you know, one of the, you know, one of the things that we sort of, Alistair sort of alluded to earlier is the notion of the digital divide. Right. And the idea that whether it's been in the lockdown, whether it's during the pandemic, there are many people whose internet access or whose access to technology is not at a level that, that allows them to participate effectively.

Whether it's students doing remote learning, whether it's people who are trying to find work or do work or access government services. And it, you know, the last six months, I've been doing a lot of research into community based internet and municipal based internet. And it's really led me to the conclusion, really reiterating what we've been saying all night that the internet should not be for profit. That in many cases, the internet shouldn't even be private sector. That, you know, it is literally the kind of [00:37:00] public infrastructure that the rest of society is built upon, which, you know, pre- pandemic, I think many people took for

granted. But the pandemic really laid clear that the internet is an essential service and is part of a essential infrastructure.

And to me, it's something that, whether it is literally managed and controlled by the public sector or subject to a certain level of subsidy and oversight by the public sector, it's a clear example of something that should not be part of the marketplace, but should be part of society as a whole.

Alistair Croll: [00:37:34] Well, and the framers of the internet, they said, look, there's .Com, .Gov, .Net and .org, and we only seem to talk about one of them, right?

Jesse Hirsh: [00:37:42] Well, and one has dominated and there's reasons why it's dominated. But I think that that's really no longer viable. I think it's no longer possible because if we are serious about this digital future short of having, you know, different cases in society, then we need to get [00:38:00] serious.

And unfortunately, where I live in the Ottawa Valley, I mean, not only does the internet suck, but the plans, the government plans for the internet here suck because they're focused on wireless. They're focused on, you know, giving people wireless connections in which the upload speed is terrible. So you're telling them that they can't participate, they can only consume.

And similarly, they're never going to keep up with the speeds of fiber. So the entire internet is going to be developed for fiber optic speeds at gigabit or more than gigabit speeds. Whereas the rest of rural Canada, the rest of most of the world will be stuck on wireless and really left behind in a tragic way.

And. You know, the, if you were to have the commercial entities run fiber to everywhere in the country, the cost would be ludicrous because in certain parts of the country to certain geography, you gotta do [00:39:00] stuff differently. And that's where local talent, local knowledge makes a difference. So I'm unfortunately kind of skeptical about whether this challenge could be addressed, but at the same time acknowledged that it must, be that it is not something that can be ignored, that it has to be a clear priority. Coupled with the idea of digital government is ensuring full digital enfranchisement.

Alistair Croll: [00:39:24] But I mean, being paranoid, the US government gave $400 billion to cable providers to try and roll out rural fiber broadband. And nobody did anything about it.

Jesse Hirsh: [00:39:38] Because the people who are eligible for those programs, right? Are rooted in a for profit model and they have no desire, no interest. Versus you could very easily create both a funding framework, an oversight framework, and a policy framework for community controlled or municipally controlled internet [00:40:00] that was responsible and cost effective because you're getting people locally to figure how to do it, and they'd have that knowledge. And it's not for profit. So you're looking at the social impact, not the economic.

Alistair Croll: [00:40:12] It sounds like the conclusion here is, hey, corporations have had a chance to do it. If we want participatory government, by all in a digital framework, we have

to make sure that everybody can participate, including things like if you're working two jobs, you probably don't have time to get into some public consultation. So how do we deal with that problem? Because it's not just, you know, the, it's not just the. I am a, I'm a citizen who feels like doing stuff online. You have to have digital literacy and the time to do it, but, do we need to create like a crown corporation and then what's going to happen to the telecoms every time that happens in Canada, it seems like it doesn't happen.

Pia, It looks like you're trying to jump in.

Pia Andrews: [00:40:48] Look, I think that there's a couple of things that come through that. Digital public infrastructure is not a term you ever hear used. I started using it a few years back just to try to get people to think we're very, very [00:41:00] good at public infrastructure, like particularly in an, in, you know, in our countries, right? Because we have relatively social libertarian countries, which are focused on, you know, public health, public education, public transport, kind of things. People expect and understand, not just. In the general public in government, the concept of public infrastructure. And yet we have no digital equivalent. We have no digital public infrastructure. The reason I am I'm borderline obsessed with legislation as code is partly because we needed to deliver services effectively to do policy modeling effectively to have a more, high confidence in changes to policy and changes to law, moving forward. But, but it also helps with accountability and a little bit, it's almost like obvious legislation is the, that is one of the spines. It's one of the cores of government and yet not having digital legislation is that one of the biggest barriers to implementing it? Right. So looking at what government is uniquely responsible for. And setting that up as digital public infrastructure has to be part of the [00:42:00] conversation, not just, different models for wrong, because how you actually then roll things out might be a different thing, but there are certain things governments are uniquely responsible for, and you can find it in constitutions, in law, in, in regulation. Right?

But to your point about capacity, capacity is so much more, there will always be people who have more capacity are more privileged by almost by definition. People who are less privileged have less capacity. So, so we have this habit of like creating something and then going and trying to market it to people to try to like scramble for the, the, the tiny amount of attention they have between jobs and schools and, and, you know, feeding their kids and all the rest of it.

What we actually need to do is address that human capacity as well. I mean, I would love in some country somewhere to see something like a civic gap year, you know, not only would it give the chance for, you know, imagine if 10% or 5% of a public service was actually, if you like places for a demographically balanced group of individuals, anyone could put their hand up for civic gap year and get paid a [00:43:00] reasonable wage to work on and the same wage, by the way, make it equal to work on any area of policy they want. Yeah, there might be particularly passionate about disability, particularly passionate about regional, particularly passionate about service, whatever it is that drives them, give people valid opportunity. And by the way, that could be a really great social cohesion opportunity.

Quick thing on the internet access. I think people just, it's amazing actually how, how disconnected things can be. So in Australia, as you might know, we had quite. Not quite -

enormously substantial, fires this year, or this from last summer. So from last year to September through to this March or so. And, I mean, I was in the middle of one of those and it was right across the country, so it was huge. And you, you know, Australia is almost as big as Canada, so you know how big that is? And, you know, we're out of power, so obviously no internet, no power, no anything. couldn't use the radio, luckily we did find batteries, but they weren't set up properly. So we did eventually find batteries and were trying to get the radio, so every half hour you'd sort of get an update, but we [00:44:00] didn't know if a fire was going to come sweeping over the Hill any second, and the most infuriating thing on the, on the radio. And, when we managed to get it, it was just check your app and we're like, are you kidding me?

So, but this is the thing there's such a disconnect. There's such like, Oh, well, there's an app for that. So you can use the app. And the fact is that in emergencies, you really need to be able to get out of the Headspace of, of what's normal and actually think about what people need from their perspective, which we're actually pretty terrible at doing, which involves again, going back to getting people involved.

You joked before about getting criminals involved in using a user centered design. In new South Wales government, you know, we looked at what does customer service look like? And every department was challenged and the regulators were like, well, we don't involve the regulated entities in the design of regulation.

Like, well, why not? If you want them to comply, right. It's not about taking what they say and saying, well, they're saying no regulation, so we'll do no regulation. It's about understanding what will actually make it easy for them to implement the things you want them to implement. How could you make it [00:45:00] easy for them to comply? How could you make it understandable and consistently applied? You know, these are actually not terrible things to explore.

so, but yeah, capacity and infrastructure and what the role of government is in both of those and how we actually free up human capacity, not just, digital capacities is a big, I think policy question in a very busy world.

Jesse Hirsh: [00:45:20] And I think that goes back to what you were almost defining as the nature of digital, which is rapid iterative learning, right. That this is really what's, it's afforded us. And we talk about that in the theoretical, but I've always been frustrated that at a certain point, it raises your expectations. Like when I worked at media organizations, I was frustrated with the idea.

And this is true of universities, too, that all this information, all this knowledge is passing through the organization, right? Universities do tons of research. Media organizations do tons of reporting, but it's like, it goes in one ear and out the other, right? They'll learn that sitting all day is [00:46:00] terrible for health and they'll still spend every day sitting.

Right. And it's, it strikes me that government now is going to face similar expectations. And that's why I'm, I'm fascinated by your concept of, you know, legislation as code and being able to adapt and adjust it the way you would code. But I think it also speaks to the

expectations in terms of adaptability, where, for example, there's a growing field of research that says coercion doesn't work. That people don't respond to being coerced. That they're much more, and even in criminology interrogations now, you're adversarial with the suspect they shut down. But if you have a conversation with them, they open up. So it strikes me at some point, democratic governments might realize maybe coercion is not the best way to actually get people to comply with laws, but instead we should work with them and find ways in which we could get, make them understand the value of the laws or the [00:47:00] reason of the laws. And then they can help us understand what a better bureaucracy or a better public service delivery would be like. And I think digital offers us. those thoughts not just because it gives us the excuse to think things are differently, but because we are all adapting and we are all constantly learning and it gives us the expectation of responsiveness and change when it comes to new knowledge or information becoming available.

Alistair Croll: [00:47:27] So I'm trying, first of all, very pro-technology. I grew up with an Apple two and didn't stop there and I just kept going and I can still remember the sound of my mom, of me yelling at my mom when she picked up the phone while I was on my 300 baud modem and disconnected me. Right? Like I viscerally remember that. So I'm trying to be a little, I'm trying to be a little contrarian here. I do think that, you know, AI is prejudice. Like it's not prejudiced. The definition of AI is when it's doing a [00:48:00] projection or a classification, whatever, it is prejudice by definition. That's what it does is it's pretty judging, right? So of course it's prejudice.

And Jessie, I love your idea of if it's going to be biased, why not bias it in alignment with the change we want to see in society? That's a really interesting thought, but, and a contrarian point of view, we have to trust the government to be accountable to us. There's a great example of this: I've been to China a few times and I have WeChat installed on my phone. And when you go to China and you have WeChat installed on your phone, someone can send you money on your phone in the form of a red packets or rinminbi that happened in chat, so I went to Huaqiangbei, and I had a person there who, you know, I went to the market, which big tech market, and I paid them and they wanted to pay me back in, in, on the, on the app. They didn't want to accept money. So I talked to someone recently who was essentially banned from WeChat and they became an unperson. They couldn't communicate with anyone. They couldn't pay for anything [00:49:00] because somebody said something that the government didn't like, they became banned for a violation of the rules that have been put in place by the tech firm at the behest of the government. And they were essentially de-platformed from life.

So I think there's a, we have to, we have that problem. The government, the more digital technology we rely on from government, the more it can de-platform us. So we have to have that accountability. But also this Cassandra problem, which is we can tell what the future should be. We have abundant data. We know exactly what behaviors people should be exhibiting for COVID prevention, but they don't do it.

And Cassandra of course, was cursed with the ability to see the future. And no one would listen. I feel like those two things, the Cassandra problem and the government trust problem. Get underneath these issues. And I know we have to wrap up in a couple of

minutes Pia, so over to you. And then, we have a couple of closing announcements, but let's solve these problems.

Pia Andrews: [00:49:49] Well, just quickly on that, I think, again, when you involve people in the process, you naturally get something that more aligns to what's real and meaningful to them. So, until we see [00:50:00] that systematized and normalized, then it will continue to be government putting on people and all of those little red flags that don't reflect that it is reflection reflective of their values. We'll continue to see the marketing sort of approach to new things in government but, this is why the overarching thing we need to do, and we need to create space for a diverse representation of people to participate in is, designing better futures.

Here's the future. Here's a few, a range of futures. He's a hundred futures we'd like to enable. And even though they might be very broad in their ideological premises or cultural expectations, we can reverse engineer them to say, here are the things we need to put in place to enable good features. And here's a range of 50 really terrible futures. You've just outlined a very simple one - what are the things we need to put in place to design against those futures. I feel like there's a lot of reactivism to reacting to something that's good or reacting to something that's bad [00:51:00] and, and not actually designing the better way or the better path.

And the challenge, I think that we're all going to continue to face is that the, something better isn't going to just magically come across and it's certainly not going to come through iterative reacting to whatever the latest thing is. We have to design towards something better, or we will, as I always say, the same old thing with shiny new toys , we have a significant problem otherwise

Alistair Croll: [00:51:25] That feels like it should be a t-shirt same old thing with shiny new toys.

Pia Andrews: [00:51:28] Yeah. As a bad thing. Yeah.

Alistair Croll: [00:51:31] Yeah. So, We have a ton of things that we've brought up that we've sort of put in the links here and if any of you have other things we should post we'll put them in the comments when we post this online.

But we are going to ask some questions of people and since it seemed like a good, inaugural time and we just had Canada Day up here, I'm gonna ask three questions.

First of all, what was the last - you don't have to answer cause that'd be cheating. We need the people watching this to answer, using the FWDThinking hashtag. So #FWDThinking, what [00:52:00] was the last province or territory to become part of Canada? Some of you may know the answer to that.

And the second thing Canada's playing host to the Digital Nations this year, the Digital Nations is a group of countries that share digital best practices, digital policies, and, it rotates around member countries. So this year it's in Canada, we're actually running some of it with FWD50. Who were the founding countries in the Digital Nations?

And, the third thing is, there are a couple of great civic government organizations Code for Canada and Code for America, that we've partnered with over the years. Code for Canada, obviously tries to get people to take the sort of civic gap year , and it's a start to some of the things you alluded to Pia. When was Code for Canada founded?

 So first person to give us the correct answer.

What was the last province or territory to become part of Canada? Who were the founding countries in the digital nations? And when was Code for Canada founded? And tweet those to #FWDThinking, you can also mention @FWD50Conf on Twitter, first person to get [00:53:00] those, gets a free virtual ticket to FWD50.

So we'll see there. and we have a lot of stuff lined up for the coming months. we are going to be talking about empowering digital teams, the tyranny of agile in government. What is HR like in the digital era and why is it so hard? I'm going to talk about lean analytics, a personal love of mine, ethical AI, the story of Canada's digital government movement, cloud, and cyber security, failure stories and then of course, FWD50 itself.

So I think this is an interesting conversation. I love the idea of digital infrastructure. We're okay with building trains and roads. Why aren't we okay with the government building technology infrastructure? But also how do we put into place the checks and balances and imagine the nightmare so we can immunize the law and the platforms against those kinds of things.

Because I think until people have a sense that there's some amount of immunization for what could go wrong, they're not going to support the vision of what will go right. So very briefly, what do you think is the biggest distopia? I already said one, which is like [00:54:00] de-platforming a citizen who doesn't agree with the country.

What do each of you think is a possible downside to government digital infrastructure that we need to immunize against?

Awkward pause. Come on, Jesse. You're the futurist here?

Jesse Hirsh: [00:54:14] Well, the obvious is social scoreing, right? I mean, I would argue that the byproduct of algorithms is hierarchy because algorithms sort and rank information sort of as its purpose and the concern, and this is happening already in the private sector. The concern is that in being able to manage the information about each individual, that you would create a score for them. And there's different purposes, different applications, different kinds of scores. I mean, I've also been doing research on the social credit systems, plural, that are happening in China, many of which quite frankly, are totally legit and actually decent ideas. And [00:55:00] I think the issue of scoring, given that we already have credit scores, is not new, but I think if mishandled, or if not properly regulated, that would be my dystopia, right? That, you know, political parties, currently Canadian, federal Canadian political parties do currently maintain scores of Canadians. Right? Cause they all have constituency voter databases that rank constituents, that ranked voters as most likely to support the party or not. So to what extent would a system like that in a corrupt

government be merged with a government system. That's the dystopia that I fear, but that's just the first one that came to mind, you know, get me a drink and I can come up with lots.

Alistair Croll: [00:55:46] That does sound like a fun drinking contest though.

Jesse Hirsh: [00:55:49] I don't personally think that the dystopia is found in the public sector because it already exists in the private sector. Right. So give me a public sector, dystopia any day of the week, [00:56:00] over the private sector to dystopias that we're currently wrestling with.

Alistair Croll: [00:56:03] I think that's a good quote. How about you Pia?

Pia Andrews: [00:56:06] It's funny, you know, it's only just now as you were using the word, Jesse, that I've realized the irony in a way that the word rank. means both to rank things in order, but also it's a terrible, terrible smell. Right. and, it hadn't occurred to me until, till you were just saying it, but so here's my, my dystopia unaccountable government, and public sector through private, sorry, through political.

When you automate decisions, when you don't maintain traceability line of sight of the legal or precedent upon which a decision is made. Even if that decision is a subtle decision. When you lose that traceability, you lose two of the fundamental tenants of democracy. The first one is the ability to appeal, appeal, ability.

And the second one is the ability to audit both of which force, a certain amount of personal systemic, and organizational accountability. [00:57:00] Right?

So for me, the, the there's so many great opportunities that technology creates, but what we should be doing is not just, you know, designing transparency for fun, or for, you know, for niceness. We should be designing. I want to see government's designs that don't need to be trusted. We shouldn't need to trust governments. They should be trustworthy, and we need to design the trust infrastructure to protect auditability and appeal ability. If you can't audit it, you can't measure, monitor and hold it to account.

If you can't appeal it, then you are failing the citizens that are served or should be served by that system.

Alistair Croll: [00:57:43] Yeah. I was talking to David McRaney about this and we concluded that the difference between a human and an AI is that the human should have a recourse. And I think that that, that, that comes down to, you know, what we were talking earlier about the Magna Carta, the ability to confront your accuser, to see the evidence and have it be [00:58:00] explainable and transparent is huge.

Jesse Hirsh: [00:58:01] I think AI's deserve that right too. I think equal rights for robots and humans.

Alistair Croll: [00:58:09] Alright. This is a fascinating conversation I can tell we're gonna have lots to talk about. Thank you both for being here for this. If anybody has questions or wants us to talk about other stuff on future episodes, #FWDThinking, we're going to post this to

YouTube. It'll also be a part of the Canadian School of Public Service's, Digital Academy on Bus Rides.

Thank you both for being here. if you have questions or if you want to hear more of these, you can subscribe to the video when it's posted and we'll be back with lots more stuff. We're going to spend some time looking at empowering digital teams next. We're going to do this every two or three weeks leading up to FWD50.

So get those answers in and, thank you all for being here, Pia, thank you so much for getting up early and spending some time with us from halfway around the world. Stay safe out there and we look forward to lots more questions like this and, more examples of forward-thinking. So thank you all very much.

Have a [00:59:00] great day. Thanks for watching.