

App Utopia

<https://m.tribuneindia.com/news/musings/humans-at-service-not-apps-446993>

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Sitting in my verandah I was enjoying the freshness that rains, especially unseasonal ones bring to the dust ridden leaves on the trees in the garden. Suddenly there was a loud explosion- the power cables going into my meter on the electricity pole on the road were on fire.

The local complaint number was as usual busy. So I called the toll free number of the electricity department. After going through the regular menu options (it is never clear to me why they have the option of choosing English or Hindi since whatever one chooses, the agent only speaks in Hindi), I got through to an agent and registered my complaint. Immediately, I got an SMS with my complaint number and I was confident that things will be taken care of. Little did I know!

A few minutes later, I got another SMS that according to the information with the department, my complaint had been resolved! This was odd since no one had come and the wires were still on fire. So I called again but this time after all the menu options, I was told by a recording that there are a lot of calls and I should call later. This seemed like a sensible thing to do- much better than my bank's or mobile service provider's call center which puts me on hold for 10 minutes before I can speak with an operator and frequently after being made to wait, the call is disconnected.

Since there was also a Whatsapp option, I tried registering my complaint. Here the process was smooth and I got a ticket number by SMS again. But, once again, in a few minutes, the complaint was noted as resolved even while the fire now had burnt through half the wire.

My experience with the electricity department is not a one-off thing. Increasingly one sees technology replacing the human interface in delivery of public services. Latching onto the bandwagon, the government in my state has launched a Swachh Haryana app. If one has a complaint regarding garbage on the street, one just takes a photograph (with location tagging) of the garbage heap and uploads it on the App. I did this with

the huge pile of garbage next to my house. I promptly got a tracking number to track the complaint. But, lo and behold, a few days later the app reported the garbage has been cleaned while I could still smell it outside my house. To top it all, a photograph of the same heap was uploaded as proof that the complaint has been resolved!

Technology of course played a big role in delivering services during Covid. In the national capital, there was a scheme where when you tested positive, the control room would automatically be alerted and they would deploy two marshals to sit outside your house to ensure you are quarantining at your place. A friend's daughter tested positive and the next day two guys appeared outside his flat and announced that they would be sitting on the landing outside his door.

This might seem like a wonderful initiative- apart from ensuring quarantine, they also offered to assist in doing chores like getting the milk etc. There was only one problem- my friend lived on the first floor. The stairs, as in all DDA flats were common for all the floors. The marshals decided that quarantine meant that no one, not even the upstairs neighbours could use the stairs! This led to some altercation but the marshals, as is usual with people with any kind of policing power, were adamant at following the letter of the law. Finally, in the interest of good neighbourliness, my friend hit upon a plan- every morning when the marshals reported at 8 am, he would give each of them Rs 500/. They would upload on the app a photo of themselves in front of the house to mark their presence and go away for the day. They would then report back at 5 pm, upload another picture and that was that! Everyone was satisfied with this arrangement- my friend, his neighbours, the marshals, the department which could show how sensitive they were to the needs to the community during these difficult times.

Technology is a wonderful thing- the ease with which a complaint could be registered by a few taps on the smartphone or by a phone call is of course extremely convenient. Those of us who are old enough to remember the hoops one had to go through to even register a complaint at a public office would certainly appreciate the difference. However, our tech evangelists, who seem to think that technology is the magic wand for all of societal problems, seem to be unaware of the simple fact that services are not delivered by apps- human beings are still needed to actually perform the service. It is this human link in the delivery chain which is crucial and if that fails, no amount of AI enabled ease of use would ultimately be of use. After all, burning wires have to be fixed

and garbage has to be removed by human beings. Deep Blue or Alpha or any fancy algorithm is not going to be of much use in actual delivery.

After struggling to get the electricity department people, I decided to be brave enough and went and cut off power to the wires so that the meter wouldn't burn down. However, this meant that there was no power in my house. Repeated complaints did not get me anywhere. Finally, I went to the electricity office, narrated my tale of woe to the person there. He must have taken pity on my plight because the technicians came in an hour, reconnected the wires at the pole and finally there was light. Even in this tech delivered utopia, the old fashioned human interaction still seemed to do the trick.

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