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Ask Away: Digital Infrastructure for a 21st Century Democracy

To what extent can design facilitate youth political engagement?

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Design, Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand: 2015.

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Abstract

The number of young people turning out to vote is declining in Western democracies (Sheerin, 2007; Donald, 2010). This issue is symptomatic of the growing gap between traditional political systems and the 21st century citizen. However, the emergence of internet technology makes large-scale participation easier, which presents an opportunity to change citizens' relationship with government (Tapscott in Gormley, 2009). This research applies design processes to the way young people engage with candidates in elections. It suggests that an online platform can be an effective piece of infrastructure for alternative political participation.

Ask Away is an open source question and answer web application for people to ask questions, vote for the ones they want answered and then compare responses from political candidates. Through participating on *Ask Away,* citizens are able to engage candidates in direct dialogue, shape discussions and set agendas.

Human-centred, collaborative design thinking and making were used to develop the platform, which was used by 22,000 New Zealanders in the period leading up to the 2014 New Zealand General Election.

Learning through doing was core to this research. By designing, creating and releasing a working prototype, this thesis not only makes a proposition, but demonstrates the impact initiatives like this can have on civic participation.

Key Words

Political participation
Political engagement
Political efficacy
Transformational Design
Human-centred design
User experience design
Civic tech
Open source
Online engagement
Two way communication
Social media

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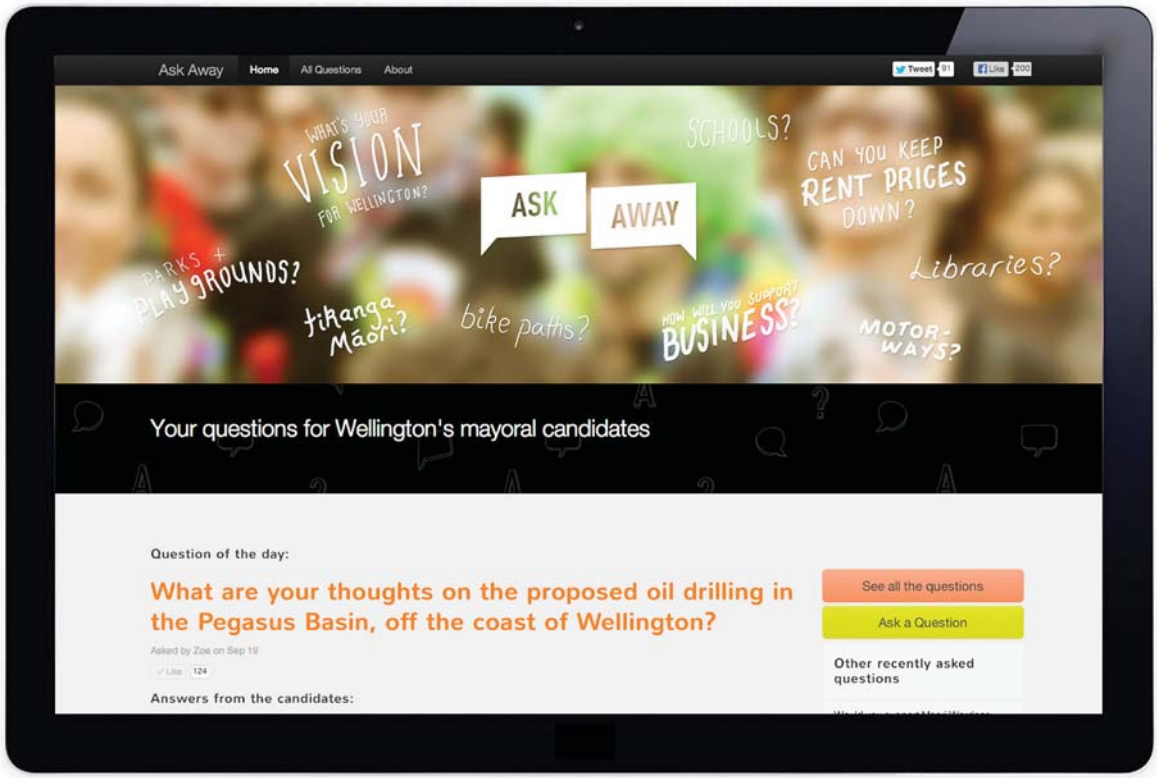

Figure 1: *Ask Away Beta in 2013 — Mayoral Elections.*

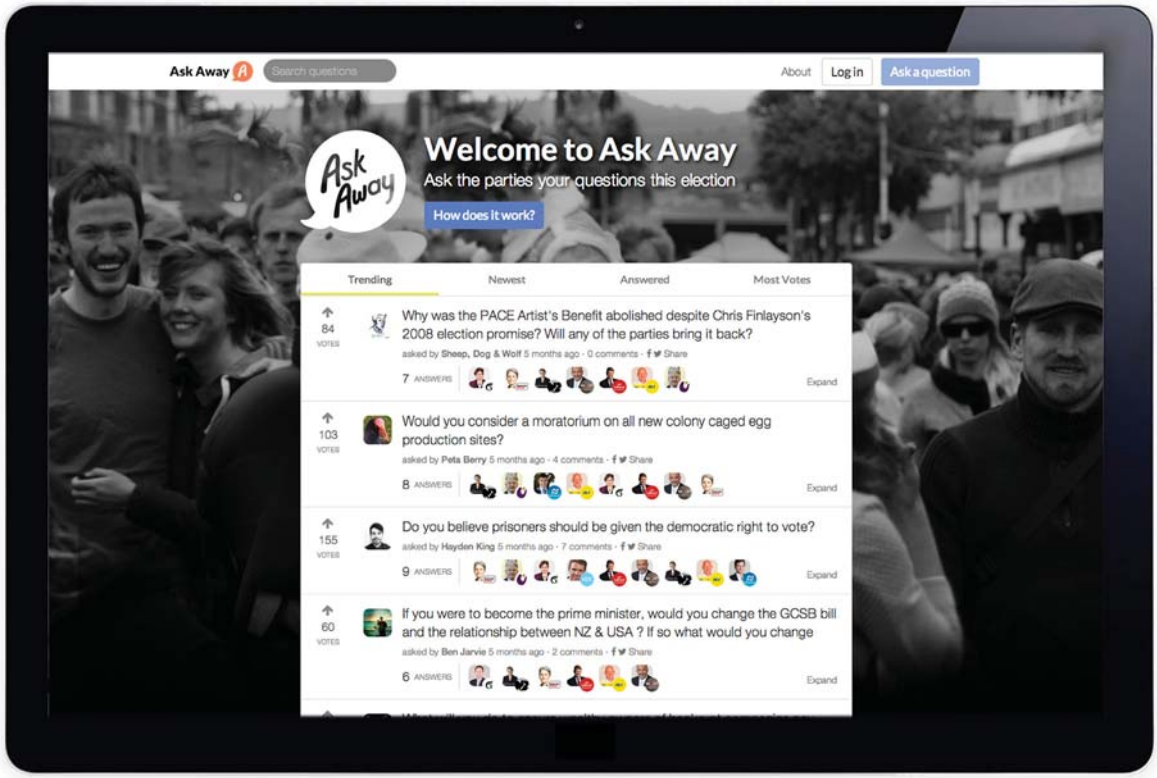

Figure 2: *Ask Away homepage in 2014.*