

## Special Interview with Audrey Tang

### (Taiwan “Digital Minister”) #2

#### Speaker:

Audrey Tang (Taiwan)

Chikako Masuda (Institute of Administrative Information Systems)

Kei Wakabayashi (Interviewer / Black swan publishing)

*This article is an official transcript of the dialogue.*

[<Continuing from #1>](#)

#### *How to develop government digitalization*

**Kei:** Do you think it will take time in a country like Japan, where many people are old, and they don't have that much, you know, not all of them, but mostly, don't really get the idea of like, how digital technology works. Of course, they use their smartphones, but you know, but...How would you, sort of like, get them to, sort of, participate? What, what's the, sort of like, how do you, sort of, nudge them to, you know, participate? Are there like, sort of, like any, I wouldn't say trick but, you know...

**Audrey:** Well, *the trick is to offer unlimited 4G*, right, for a fixed

price. So...for 15 euros per month, you can get unlimited 4G anywhere in Taiwan. And because the people who are more elderly, they prefer video communication over text. If they can just freely call each other, of course it's better than telephone because you can see people, and it doesn't require a lot of hand holding because there's really only one button which is dial, and the other button which is hanging up, right? So it's also very easy to teach, and so I think it makes a lot more sense for the elderly people to think of this as a, you know, super phone that also saves on the cost, because if you make regular landline phone calls it cost you the more you talk, but this one, you know, you pay the same every month anyway, even you video conference like five hours a day, right? So, and these are the tricks, but these are also real economic reasons why people prefer these.

**Kei:** And did you invest digital, it's like, investing in educating people. What did you have to bring the IT literacy to the population?

**Audrey:** Right. So, yeah, we call it digital competence and media competence. We don't call it literacy, because the literacy kind of assume that you're the reader or viewer of images. Competence means you're the producer. So when we're doing our digital opportunity sensor classes to elderly people, as well as to very young children, we always say that you're a producer, because with a limited bandwidth, with everybody who want to film something can just do so and share it with everybody. So it make much more sense to show that how journalists work, how to check

your sources, how to fact check and things like that, assuming they're a producer. It's actually almost impossible to teach that if you're only a viewer or reader. So we can teach things with useful social and productive skills in mind and making sure that everybody can democratically access the source.

**Kei:** And how do you see the government is using IT technology? I think there's a lot of ministries, right? And then there's a ministry of...like agriculture or transportation. So where do you think is easiest to start digitalizing?

**Audrey:** Yeah. I mean, digitalization is the easiest if there's any place where you feel that the manual work is too much. So, with digitized this counter disinformation using a Bot, the robot dog thing because it takes ages for people to manually correct their families on the group chat, right? So whenever you feel that there is a chance for automation, and that you feel like everybody who do this is doing the same job is a very boring or trivial job that everybody can do and you request minimal training and everybody differs only by speed and accuracy, that is the point where a digitalization and automation works.

**Kei:** When you look at the government, do you see a gap between, you know, some ministries are advanced, but some ministries are kind of slow or, do you see that difference?

**Audrey:** Not really, because all the public facing ministries face the same problems. So, all the ministries share a common open

data platform in Taiwan, data.gov.tw, a common participation platform, [join.gov.tw](http://join.gov.tw), and so on. And so, because the National Development Council is in charge of both planning for long-term plan, as well as for auditing and making sure that everybody stays under KPI, they are kind of the hub around which other ministries can get into the common platform of open data and participation. So, the ministry all they have to do is to participate to engage, to commit their consultative or deliberative processes into an outline part, but all the technical issues are solved by the National Council.

**Kei:** I see. Interesting. And, can you tell me about how do you collaborate with local governments? And how the central government and local government, how their roles are different and, can you describe about it?

**Audrey:** So, the municipal governments usually have their own budget and their own digitalization vision and sometimes much more advanced than the central government. And, we look to the best practices of the six municipalities and spread those ideas, because you know, in R&D, only the first mover absorbs the cost. The follower doesn't need to do much, right? So, the municipalities absorb the initial research cost, but the development, that's what we in the central government can try to get the counties and the small areas, the more rural areas, and so on, to piggyback on what the municipalities have developed. So, like participatory budgeting and things like that, all started in a municipal level before it spread to other places in Taiwan.

**Kei:** Oh, I see. So you have always to keep monitoring what's going on in the municipalities or local government and, if it's proven that that some system or some project works, you make it into more public assets. Is that what you're saying?

**Audrey:** So, yeah, that's what I'm saying. And what I'm trying to say is that this is also Open Innovation Network. So, you don't make distinction between, say, a municipalities in Taiwan versus, say, a municipality in Japan. If Tokyo has a dashboard to stop the coronavirus, oh wait, you actually have one. Then we help internationalizing this, right, we contribute to translations, making sure that it reads well for people in Taiwan, and the civic tech community intel also have the same dashboard. So that you can use the Tokyo-developed COVID, Japan-developed idea, and you can see the Taiwan situation in Japanese. And that is important because then all the innovations that we do here in Taiwan can contribute back to the upstream that is the Japanese version. And for people who speak Japanese, suddenly now, I just pasted the email, you have a very friendly view of what's happening in Taiwan.

**Kei:** Mm-hmm. I see. So, do you have to communicate regularly with local government? Are they like...position as same as yours in each like municipalities or local government, do they have like IT...wouldn't say "minister," but, you know, who is in charge of like, IT development in each municipality?

**Audrey:** So, I think the IT department in each municipality takes care of the more imminent need of the shorter-term need. They

have a much more agile mandate from the citizens, whereas the people in the central governments more care about the standardization, the international, like, GDPR compliance. So, we have a naturally complementary role. We don't tend to step on each other's slides because there are very clear delineation that we work on the open standards data municipalities prove on, and if they prove to be good practices, then we make sure that everybody learns about it.

**Kei:** Okay. And, do you regularly communicate with those people? Or how do you, sort of like, check on what they're doing and, you know, find out what, if, what they're doing is good? And how do you sort of like, do you regularly communicate with them?

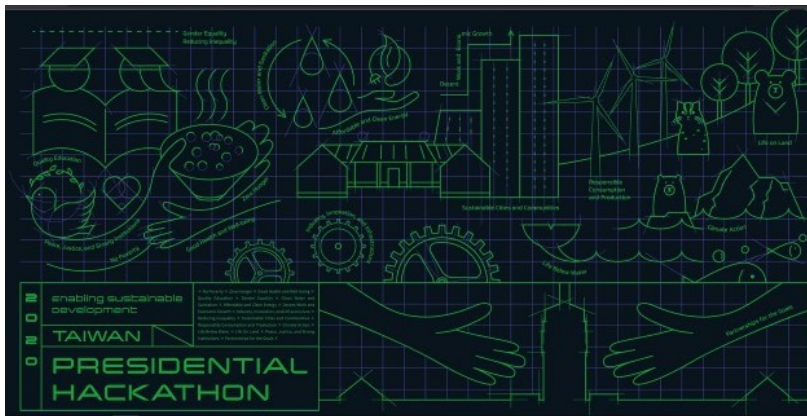
**Audrey:** Yeah, certainly. So, there's many mechanisms through which the Chief Information or Technology or Data Officers in all municipalities meet in the so called, "Smart Region," so, we use the word shinzon, which is both rural and urban. So smart rural and urban cities, gatherings, and there's a lot of mechanisms also, like the Presidential Hackathon, where we include the municipalities and they can propose, for example, to municipalities information departments can work their very first social welfare. And they collaboratively propose some idea for the entire nation to adopt when we award them the trophy of the Presidential Hackathon. Five trophies per year. It is a micro projector that you turned on it shows the president promising to the team whatever you did in the three months, we will make a national policy in the next 12 (months).

**Kei:** Hmm. And how often do you do that? Is it like an annual thing?

**Audrey:** Annual, yeah. Mm-hmm.

**Kei:** I see. Interesting, interesting.

**Audrey:** And there is a Japanese promotional video, actually, as well. And you can see it on the YouTube here, as well as the Presidential Hackathon website. It's international. Yeah.



<https://presidential-hackathon.taiwan.gov.tw/en/Default.aspx>

**Kei:** Okay. And do you get like international participants?

**Audrey:** Yes, of course last year the winners were Honduras and Malaysia.

**Kei:** Really? That's cool. Hmm, interesting. Interesting. And...I think everyone, you know, especially for during this time with coronavirus, Maybe it's not a good way to say this, but I think many governments are seeing this as, kind of like, a chance to, sort of like, experiment new systems or new way to have like private sector or citizenship participating in, like more of, public service and...do you see that way also? Like the same as a mechanism is not a good word but do you see as an opportunity to sort of like, drive new things during this time?

**Audrey:** Well, I think this time it is like we are looking at each other and we see each other's face very clearly, much more clearly than if we meet face to face with mask. Instead, it really is as a demo, a demonstration. That's where people, for example, they don't video conference much. Maybe they remember a video conference in the bad old days, we had very high latency and very pixelated and things like that. But nowadays, we can do, you know, 720p, at least, very easily. Now, and with almost no latency. And so, for people to reengage in video conferencing and the things involved in the technologies like cameras and settings and so on, people nowadays sometimes surprisingly find that is actually easier than they thought they've been kind of scaring themselves. Because it used to be very difficult, like years ago, or even just three years ago. So, this is a good time for us to purge the cache in our brain to forget about all the difficulties that we engage in previous generation of technologies and see that it truly is actually very easy and convenient now. So even after the coronavirus

passes, I think people won't forget the positive experience that we've had during videoconferencing and other technologies.

**Kei:** Okay, I see. And in Japan, there's always like, some kind of like fear with like, digital technology that it might lead into, like, into surveillance society and it's always an argument in Japan that somehow like freedom and safety is kind of like a tradeoff. And so, basically, how we see it is like, you know, we have like, China, which is, Mainland China, which is like super developed authoritarians, and yeah, but are they like, sort of like a...and also there's..., on the other hand, you have like America was like, the Godfather is like the superpower that's governing us.

**Audrey:** Yes, so I think these are so technocratic authoritarian surveillance state and corporate capitalist. They are kind of two extremes, right? Yeah. Extreme in the public sector and extreme in the private sector. But the need of a social sector is kind of ignored if you overemphasize the public and private sector.

So, I'm even allergic to the term public-private partnership, because I'm like, where is the civic sector? Where is the social sector? Now, I say, yeah. And so, I think, making sure that we use the right words, instead of saying the third sector as if we were the minor sector. We say very clearly that we're at a civic sector where the social sector and we should own the data, we should build data coalitions and data collaborative that, then, engage the public sector to work on the social success terms so that the private sector can be convinced to donate their capitalistic resources to

the common agenda set by the social sector. I really think the social sector-led approach is not a middle ground between the public and private. It is indeed its own way of thinking.

**Kei:** That's, that's really interesting. I mean, why is it, like in Taiwan, is it like a good, kind of historical thing that the social sector is like, really strong? How did it come about?

**Audrey:** Well, it's both, because, as I said, the social democratic community building started, like, at least in the 80s, but even before, when the lifting of the martial law is on the table, but we didn't get presidential election until 1996. So, it means that the social sector has more than 10 years as a head start to build

legitimacy compared to the President. Right? So that's a very fortunate that's one thing, and also the Constitution itself. Right? We call ourselves a Mingo, literally a republic of citizens. So, the idea of direct participative democracy has always been the agenda of doctors, scientists and so on who is a student of the theory of [Henry George](#). Henry George is again a social sector thinker. He is neither left or right but rather, social.



## Importance of the Radical Transparency

**Kei:** I see. Henry George...And you mentioned about *the radical transparency*. Does the other minister that does the same thing as, as you do like you, you open up every interview, but is it like, something that everyone is doing? I mean...

**Audrey:** The tool that I developed is all free software, right? So, it means that when other ministries hold here, for example, multi-stakeholder forums on the national action plan on open government, of course they can use the same tools without paying any vendor because I'm kind of an internal vendor, right? And that saves everybody's time and cost and risk. So, they are happy to use it, but I'm not forcing anyone to use it. When I say all the ministry can send delegates to my office, not all ministries do like a ministry of defense never send anyone. So, I know nothing about national defense. And all by their voluntary choice.

**Kei:** I see, I see. Do you wish that, you know, the Ministry of Defense would join or is it like, just up to them?

**Audrey:** Well, it's up to them. I don't really have any "wishes." At the beginning, the Foreign Affairs Ministry also didn't send anyone. But when Minister Joseph Jaushieh became the Foreign Minister and opened his Twitter account, very popular one, he suddenly

knew that there is a new branch. It's not quite public diplomacy, because it is still professional diplomats, but it's conducted in the public, right, Twitter diplomacy. And so, he started sending delegates to my office and we collaborated with each other on this Twitter diplomacy thing.

**Kei:** I see, I see. Did you get, when you say like, radical transparency, did, do you get some, like opposition's from the cabinet that, you know, it's kind of like, make a conflict between like national security or...

**Audrey:** Yeah, *radical transparency means transparency at the root, right so transparent by default, and it takes extra effort to deduct or to remove things* like, if we're in a meeting and I talk about my friends' story, but that friends did not clear their story for a publication, of course, before we publish a transcript, we have to at least anonymize that friends, it's just basic human decency dimension of Privacy Act, right? So that, again, is not violating the radical transparency, because radical only means "open by default," it doesn't mean that you cannot take away some things in the interest of privacy or choices, or things like that. So, it's not fundamentally incompatible.

**Kei:** And is it like, there are some kind of like, enforcement, that if you, sort of like, violate the transparency and you get punished, or do you have like...

**Audrey:** Well, if you violate the transparency, then you don't get



to visit me, right? Because that's the only thing here. So this is my principle for handling official visits to wish the ministries Tseng. It talks about radical transparency and if you try to violate that, and start, I don't know, lobbying and in violation of law or business regulations or legal agreements, then of course, I just file you to my Department of Civil Service Ethics. But that's what's required by the law anyway.

**Kei:** Okay. And, will you say that lead the projects like the masks or, you know, the Bots, and then...does it have to go through some like, does it have to go to Parliament? Or, how is this sort of like decision making...

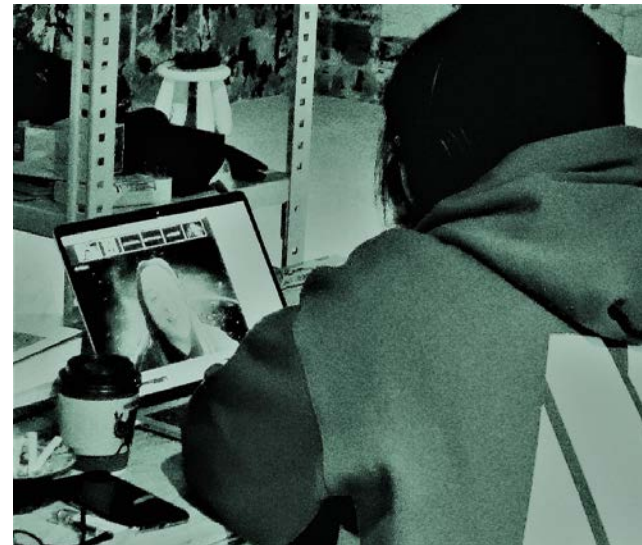
**Audrey:** The Prime Minister, of course, the Prime Minister, to "Okay", all the regulation and all the new budgets that we propose, and because as horizontal minister, I don't have my own fixed budget, or the budget, or the projects that I make, come from the ministerial budgets. So, my role is just to make sure that those three ministries can each own their part. Instead of saying that, oh, I have some budget and I distribute it to you. I am not a distributor of purchase or personnel. I basically bring the good ideas that concerns those ministries. I bring it to the Prime Minister who says okay, and then they get the part that they need to make.

**Kei:** Okay. So your organization is like...

**Audrey:** It's purely horizontal.

**Kei:** Okay. So, and somehow from each ministry ...

**Audrey:** Exactly, exactly.



**Kei:** During this corona outbreak, how are the private sectors? How's the private sector companies, or do you have them like involved in some...

**Audrey:** Yeah, very much so, very much so. Yeah. The private sector companies are great when you have a socially accepted solution and you need to produce it in a massive scale. That's what they excel in, right? So, as I said, CoFacts system, which is the GOv's project, a prototype of the doctor message, Bot, it started

as a very simple Bot. But the LINE Company eventually saw that contribution and built something like the CoFacts dashboard into the LINE dashboard itself. So nowadays, if you go to factchecker.me, you see something like the CoFacts dashboard, but it's sponsored by the LINE Company itself. So, it lends both development resources, but also it scales better, because in the social sector probably it does not have the infrastructure, like the LINE Company does, of course, who can run such a dashboard with much more economy of scale.

**Kei:** Mm-hmm, is it, like kind of, like, a collaboration thing or, the sort of, like, Privacy Company, sort of like...

**Audrey:** Yeah, I think in Open Innovation it's very hard to tell them apart. Because of many people who are active g0v, their day job is also IT companies, they may be working in media or even in TSMC and so on, and the doctor's message, the dog Bot started as a pet project from Trend Micro, it wasn't an official Trend Micro product. But then it won an award. So now Trend Micro is devoting more resources to it. And so, all the lines between sectors are very blurred if we were working in Open Innovation.

### ***Message to government innovators***

**Kei:** Okay, so can you give Japanese people, kind of a message about, you know, how information technology and digital

technology can, sort of like, give hope to, like, this situation that we're in right now, and can you, sort of like, elaborate the, sort of like, power of, like, digital technology, especially in these times? It's kind of like a message.

**Audrey:** Yeah. So, I will just quote my favorite poem from **Leonard Cohen**, right. Yeah.

***“Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack, a crack in everything. And that is how the light gets in.”***

<https://youtu.be/mX2xIW7Oa9c>

**Kei:** Hmm. Cool! Are you a big Leonard Cohen fan?

**Audrey:** Yes.

**Kei:** Okay, nice. And are there like, any sort of, like, policies or like, programs or projects regarding, sort of, like, helping the cultural sector?

**Audrey:** Oh, yeah, very much so. Our Ministry of Culture is very much.... I think, our investments into digitalizing all the historical monuments and so on, into Virtual Reality compatible models, has now really paid off, because of social distancing. People can spend all their time visiting museums in their handheld devices, or VR, while we do an open museum exhibit and things like that. So,



I think it's a really good time to get into a much deeper interaction with art and culture. Now that everybody has plenty of time on their hands at home.

**Kei:** Okay, what about like the music industry?

**Audrey:** Yeah, so, in the fashion pop music centers. There was a recent experiment of people jamming together like half of the band in one city, and half of the band in the other, and they jammed in 5G. And so, I think that will really liberate the music industry because then you can have live performances, literally anywhere instead of just a few very large domes, which are, of course, kind of difficult now with human coronavirus. And if you can jam together, I mean, you can do pretty much everything, because jamming musically requires the most, the lowest latency. And if you can do that you can do pretty much anything else.

**Kei:** And did it work?

**Audrey:** Yeah, it worked pretty well. Yeah.

**Kei:** Okay, well, that's interesting. Okay, I think we're good. Thank you so much for your time. And they I think it's hard to build a plan but, how often have you been like, visiting Japan?

**Audrey:** Like three or four times last year?

**Kei:** Okay, cool. So, when this whole thing is kind of settled, you'll

be in Japan.

**Audrey:** Yeah, I'm happy to visit, of course. And I think my colleague already said that even if I cannot make a physical visit in September, I'm happy to just do another video conferencing call.

**Kei:** Okay, cool. Thank you so much. Thanks so much. Okay.

### *Question from public*

**Chika:** Audrey, sorry. One thing that... our journal leaders sent us some questions.

**Audrey:** Do have the questions with you now, because I still have eight minutes.

**Chika:** Ah, okay. One thing is, "what age is the best age to get the education for programming?" That's from the Ministry of education.

**Audrey:** Ah, okay. Yeah, I think any age before 150 is good. After 150, I don't know.

**Chika:** Japanese government decided to start programming class from elementary school. Do you think it is effective to raise digital talents?

**Audrey:** Yeah, of course. So, in Taiwan, we use a lot of tangible interactive things when teaching logic and programming. So, it doesn't really need to be very advanced, some Arduino-based or Scratch-based interactive things - the kids love them. And so, I think the earlier the better really, because programming is not just like a language, it's a way of thinking, right? You learn about computational thinking about design thinking and things like that. So as early as, I don't know, three or four years old, if you start talking about problems, talking about issues as a designer or programmer, we think that is also teaching programming. It is not necessarily about programming languages.

**Chika:** Okay. So, second question. This one is from the member of Japanese government's IT strategy team. Most of the countries like the UK or Denmark which is well developed digital government, they try to shift to develop with the **Agile** style. How about in Taiwan, are you still using waterfall method?

**Audrey:** Yeah, we have. We have Agile procurement plan. And we also have a Government Digital Service Guideline that tells you when you should use Agile and when you should not use Agile. So, it's just one of the toolkits that we have in our disposal. Mostly you go Agile when you probably don't know what problem you're solving. And if you know, the problem you're solving really well, you're just making optimizations, Agile doesn't make much sense. And so, it includes guidelines of when to use and when not to use.

**Kei:** Interesting.

**Chika:** Okay, thank you.

**Audrey:** Okay. Yeah, very nice to meet you. Looking forward to visiting hopefully in the flash video in September.

**Kei:** Yes, yes. Thank you very much.

**Audrey:** Bye.

**Audrey Tang** (born 18 April 1981)

Audrey is a Taiwanese free software programmer, who has been described as one of the "ten greats of Taiwanese computing personalities". In August 2016, she was invited to join the Taiwan Executive Yuan as a minister without portfolio, making her the first transgender official in the top executive cabinet.