

Chapter 15

Developer Challenges as a Platform for Citizen Engagement With Open Government Data: The Australian Case

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ABSTRACT

Every year, state and national governments churn out enormous quantities of data on public life. The rapid growth of information and communication technologies presents new opportunities for everyday citizens to manipulate, use and disseminate these data in innovative ways. “Developer challenges” harness this potential by inviting citizens to experiment, play and develop data-based applications for the public benefit. This chapter explores the evolution of government initiated developer challenges in Australia and uses existing theoretical approaches to assess their impact, benefit and potential to generate value. The authors find that while developer challenges can provide an effective platform for citizen engagement, more attention must be paid to the quality of the data and to the activities carried out after the events finish. Moreover, the authors propose that in order to generate value there needs to be a higher level of involvement from the government with the applications developed during these challenges.

There are data in every aspect of our lives, every aspect of work and pleasure, and it’s not just about the number of places where data comes, it’s about connecting it together. And when you connect data together, you get power in a way that doesn’t happen just with the web, with documents. You get this really huge power out of it. -Tim Berners-Lee, TED talk, 2009

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INTRODUCTION

Open government data is based on the idea that national governments have a moral and political obligation to release public data. ‘Open government data’ is data that has been produced or commissioned by a government or a government agency and is free to be used, reused and redistributed (Open Government Working Group, n.d.). It is an essential component of any democratic government which ensures citizens that political decision making remains transparent and accessible. In reality, however, ‘open government data’ often remains buried in difficult to access websites and archives. As a result, a growing number of governments around the world recognises the importance of not only publishing public data, but also of creating opportunities for public engagement and interaction with socially and politically relevant data.

Despite the obvious moral, economic and social imperatives of citizen’s engagement with open government data, governments have struggled to move away from a top-down approach to the management and design of the use of government data for service delivery (Luna-Reyes, Bertot & Mellouli, 2014; UN DESA, 2013). This approach has been challenged by the increase of technologies which facilitate the processing of large quantities of data with relatively inexpensive equipment, and by political thinkers that embrace transparency and advocate for citizen’s rights to have access to government data (Luna-Reyes et al., 2014; Shadbolt et al., 2012).

Importantly, the full benefits of open government data can only be achieved through genuine citizen engagement. In this approach, the emphasis is placed on sharing power and information and on creating mutual respect between the government and its citizens (Sheedy, 2008). Thus, citizens can develop further their sense of responsibility and understanding of complex issues. In the same way, public servants can gain a deeper understanding of the general public’s views and priorities. This two-way process enables governments to improve the decision-making process around public policy (Sheedy, 2008).

One way to promote citizen engagement and interaction with open government data is ‘developer challenges’. These developer challenges, organised and coordinated in most cases by government bodies, aim to engage software developers, data experts and other interested citizens in the creative and innovative uses of government data (Desouza & Bhagwatwar, 2012). Importantly, the participants in developer challenges represent a cross-section of the public and participate in a voluntary manner. In this sense, they are ‘citizen developers’. The objective of these challenges is twofold; on the one hand, they can promote active citizen engagement with government data, and, on the other hand, they can enhance service delivery through the creation of accessible, user-friendly applications (Desouza & Bhagwatwar, 2012). Challenges can be seen as a good example of co-production in action, combining government data with the creativity and imagination of citizen developers to improve services and policy development. Developer challenges can also be seen as tools to engage citizens as the general population use the applications developed during these challenges (Kuk & Davies, 2011).

Developer challenges often result in the creation of different software applications, such as interactive websites and mobile applications. These applications are considered to be one of the most effective methods for delivering the benefits of open government data to people (Desouza & Bhagwatwar, 2012; Kuk & Davies, 2011). Whilst many developers are motivated by the belief that these applications can improve people’s lives (Socrata, 2011), governments are also increasingly aware of the need to create incentives to encourage developers to participate in open government data initiatives (Desouza & Bhagwatwar, 2012).

Another important element when implementing an open government data framework is the creation of enabling legislative and policy frameworks (UN DESA, 2013). However, while many countries have

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