

Chapter 33

Evidence of an Open Government Data Portal Impact on the Public Sphere

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ABSTRACT

Data portals are being created as part of open government strategies to increase transparency. But although the potential of the internet to increase transparency (as data disclosure) has been widely considered in the literature, there is no reported evidence of any of the released data actually being used by their ultimate recipients (citizens) for public accountability purposes. This descriptive research effort aims to find evidence of the impact of open government portals, asserting whether data is indeed being used and for what purposes. One contract portal was selected and Google Search was used to find portal references on the internet. A qualitative content analysis approach was adopted, whereby references were examined with respect to its main purpose and data usage. Evidence was found of contract data being used, among others, to identify possible situations of corruption, nepotism and misuse of public resources, support argumentation on public policy debates and, in general, to hold public officials accountable in the public sphere through ‘blame and shame’ sanctions.

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2009 Transparency and Open Government Memorandum issued by President Barack Obama (Obama, 2009), followed by the correspondent Directive (Orszag, 2009), marks a turning point in the public and political awareness concerning open government principles. Shortly after, in 2011, the Open Government Partnership¹ was launched to disseminate the Obama open government principles and nowadays the partnership includes 65 participating countries committed to “develop and implement ambitious open government reforms”.

The ideas behind the Memorandum and Open Government Directive (OGD) were not totally new as they can be traced back to contributions and different perspectives from transparency advocates, technol-

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ogy savvy futurists, eDemocracy civic engagers, and bureaucrats aiming at legal compliance (Linders & Wilson, 2011). Nevertheless, the Memorandum and Directive clearly state and systematize three main goals of open government: transparency, public participation, and collaboration (Linders & Wilson, 2011).

Among these objectives, achieving governmental transparency through data disclosure has been the focus of attention by both academics and researchers, even prior to the ‘new’ open government prominence. This attention has concentrated broadly on two themes: the effects and impact of transparency as data disclosure, and the role technology may play in supporting transparency and increasing its impact. When considered together, these broad themes illustrate what Yu and Robinson (2012) call “The New Ambiguity of ‘Open Government’”: whether the open government expression refers to “the politics of open government” or “the technologies of open data”.

In what concerns the political dimension of open government, the OGD clearly identifies two potential impacts of transparency (Linders & Wilson, 2011), namely public accountability (Meijer, 2009) and added economic and social value stemming from the re-use of disclosed data (European Commission, 2011). But the importance of transparency in modern governance, broadly considered as the access to government information, is sustained by a number of other normative claims made in the literature about its effects, namely, that it fosters democratic participation, increases trust in government, supports prevention of corruption, and allows for informed decision-making (Bertot, Jaeger et al., 2010).

The technological perspective, on the other hand, emphasizes the potential of the internet in general (Bertot, Jaeger et al., 2010; Jaeger & Bertot, 2010), Web 2.0 technologies (Bonsón et al., 2012), social media (Kalampokis et al., 2011a; Kalampokis et al., 2011b; Bertot, Jaeger et al., 2010; Criado et al., 2013), data disclosure platforms (Alexopoulos et al., 2014), and open and linked data (Open Government Working Group, 2007; Eaves, 2009; Shadbolt et al., 2012; Berners-Lee, 2009) to promote transparency and data disclosure.

In what concerns data disclosure, open data portals such as Data.gov or Recovery.gov have become flagship initiatives of computer-mediated transparency (Meijer, 2009) and open government. However, despite all the technological potential and the effective creation of open government data platforms (data portals) around the world², “it is not yet clear is how to assess the impact of the programs and policies created in pursuit of transparency” (Harrison et al., 2012). Furthermore, even when such assessment is attempted there is still a lack of evidence of the actual impact of such initiatives.

For this purpose, several empirical studies (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer 2012; Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012b; Grimmelikhuijsen, 2010; Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013) have been conducted to analyse the link between internet transparency and increased perceived public trust in government. Results seem to indicate that, actually, “transparency could contribute to political cynicism and citizen trust in government might decline” partially due to the gap between expectations and reality of public-decision making processes rationality (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2010). Despite these efforts, the empirical understanding of the relation between government transparency and trust is still limited (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2012).

Similarly, Fox (2007) reviewed empirical evidence for the assumed link between transparency and accountability and concluded that “one does not necessarily lead to the other” and that “those who make this assumption are confusing the normative (that which our democratic values lead us to believe in) with the analytical (that which the social sciences allow us to claim).” Meijer (2007) further corroborates the lack of empirical evidence of the linkage between internet-based data disclosure (public performance results) and one of its expected impacts (accountability) by stating that “no research indicates whether citizens and other stakeholders actually use the information.”

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