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OpenGov Voices: Can we trust open data from an authoritarian government?

by guest author Niklas Kossow ✒ | OCT. 26, 2015, 9:02 A.M.

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A while ago I spoke to an acquaintance working on human rights in Central Asia. I told her that I worked on open data, trying to support governments in publishing data that is machine-readable, freely reusable and that can be distributed by anyone. When I mentioned that in the Central Asian republics this movement was just gaining track, I received a strange look and questions: "What do you think open data can change? And who would trust data published by those governments anyway?" A similar question was raised by Zara Rahman in a post on the irrelevance of open data in Bangladesh, a country in which press freedom is increasingly restricted and where Niloy Chakrabarti became the latest victim in a series of murdered bloggers.

Niklas Kossow

In her post she highlighted an important perspective, which seems to be often ignored when talking about open data: What's the point of open government and open data in the context of an authoritarian government? How can datasets be trusted when they are published by a government that lies to its people and has a secret police force that arrests journalists? Rahman stressed that for her democracy, freedom of expression and trust in government are a prerequisite for open government and open data to have a positive effect on governance. Rather than being a useful tool, administrations can use open government data for what has been referred to as open washing. Authoritarian governments can hide behind presumably open data and claim to be transparent, when in fact, they remain to restrict freedom at all ends.

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Her article made me think about Central Asia, where governments have recently started to become members of the global open data movement. Kazakhstan has already had an open data initiative for several years, Uzbekistan launched a portal in March, and Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are flirting with the idea. However, the Central Asian republics are regularly called out for a lack of democracy and human rights abuses. Human Rights Watch noted an increasing crackdown on freedom of expression in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, accusing the governments of press freedom and jailing opposition figures. In Uzbekistan, Human Rights Watch sees no freedom of expression as well as severe limitations upon NGOs and independent media. In Kyrgyzstan, a perceived democratic awakening seems to be dampened by reforms limiting freedom of assembly and restricting civil society organizations. In these contexts, access to internet sources is often limited. Freedom House's Freedom on the Net Report lists restrictions to Internet freedom in three Central Asian republics, with especially strong limits on access in Uzbekistan.

Are open data initiatives in these countries just a tool to whitewash otherwise oppressive governments? Are those who are advocating for open data in Central Asia utilized for government propaganda?

Maybe.

Pressure by the international community gives governments the impression that they can improve their image by launching open data initiatives. However, this view would leave out the potential benefits of the data that has been published. Yes, we might not be able to trust open data published by authoritarian governments. Still, these governments commit themselves to openness.

Civil society in the Central Asian context is often weak, but it still exists. Governments' commitment to openness gives them an advocacy tool for more transparency. If data are incorrect, civil society activists might be able to find mistakes and show the government that they are falsifying data. If crucial data are left out, civil society can appeal to the commitment to openness and demand more data to be published. It might be a small chance, but in an authoritarian context, civil society needs all the help it can get. Open data might be a small step towards fostering civil society, but it remains an opportunity and a step toward more transparency.

Also, it is important not to forget the potential open data has to improve public services and to foster economic growth. If data enables the formation of new companies, if it encourages people to find ways to improve public service, then it is worth being open and accessible. One of the advantages of open data is that we don't know what civil society and businesses will use the data for.

Citizens deserve access to government data, even if it is limited. The job of the international community is to not let this blur our view on the political realities in those countries.

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All governments, be they democratically elected or not, along with the institutions and entities that support civil society tend to lean authoritative. This is why a legal framework for open data that can effectively establish the technology and processes to validate and clean the data is necessary.

Even with legal frameworks in place private/public corporations are starting to micromanage the process. Asserting third party copyright over FOIA requests is one method being used to crimp the public open data pipeline.

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Having worked in these contexts, I think you strike a very good balance between excessive optimism and cynicism. There are huge problems when engaging with authoritarian governments, in practically every field.

That said, moving them along in some fields, and ideally showing that good governance doesn't mean that you lose control, is worth a try (though not necessarily a trumpeting around, unless it really works).

The other thing to consider in these contexts is that it can be good to fund independent data collection, in cases where you can't rely on the data. This too can be difficult, but it's a worthwhile endeavor. See here: http://onthinktanks.org/2013/0...

Thanks again for this piece.

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