

Title: Global Open Data Initiatives and Inequalities in Data Journalism Performativity

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Abstract

This paper brings a fresh perspective on data journalism materiality that taps into research on public transparency which can offer a helpful framework for understanding how external social actors impact unequal access, data materiality and data knowledge construction. Drawing from our empirical work, this paper explores 1) nuances in unequal experiences in data access from journalists working under different transparency frameworks; 2) the impact of unequal access on data journalism performativity; and 3) practical strategies and solutions to overcome data access obstacles across different transparency environments.

Keywords: Data journalism; data access; public data; transparency; open government; right to information; comparative

Aligned with the growth of open data movements around the world, high enthusiasm has permeated academics and practitioners who view data as the panacea that will address long-standing social and political problems (Vrushni & Hodess 2017), particularly in the Global South (Laperriere 2019). Many see high potential in the datafication of journalism to improve citizen empowerment and government accountability. It is widely accepted that data materiality serves as the breeding ground of data journalism's performativity, in some cases functioning as the sole ingredient for news construction. However, public transparency initiatives have produced inconsistent outcomes, such as countries with access to information laws proving more responsive to information requests about government activities as compared to countries with administrative provisions instead of laws or no laws (Open Society Justice Initiative 2006). Relying on notions of materiality (Boczkowski, 2015) and public transparency (Janssen, 2011, 2012) as conceptual lenses, this paper advances the thesis that journalism as constructed knowledge (Schudson 2003) is understood through raw materials of news, and raw data are socially-constructed materials with unequal access and ramification.

To develop this argument, this paper brings in a fresh perspective on materiality that taps into research on public transparency which can offer a helpful framework for understanding how external social actors impact unequal access, data materiality and data knowledge construction. These processes are relevant to journalism because often journalists rely on data from public institutions to construct "absolute truths" and "authoritative objectivity" (Lewis & Westlund, 2014). Yet, some scholars have problematized the absolutism of objectivity in data stories, due to the imbalance in data representation and access and uncertainty about data contexts and data design subjectivity (Tong & Zuo, 2019).

In this paper, we define public transparency infrastructure as the legal framework and bureaucratic infrastructures surrounding data and information access that affect the amount, the quality, and the type of data provided by public institutions (see Camaj et al. 2022).

Governmental data transparency approaches derive from two closely connected movements: Right to Information (RTI) and Open Government Data (OGD). Although they share many similarities, RTI and OGD also have striking normative and epistemological differences (Janssen, 2011) that have important consequences for who makes the decision to publish the information and what information is being made available (Noveck 2017). The RTI framework tends to focus narrowly on information about how government works (such as government budgets and expenditures, revenue data, etc.), while OGD more often strives to make available data on government operations (such as data on economy, environment) (Noveck, 2017). Countries have adopted different models of transparency initiatives that range from legislation that requires publication of all public data, to customary publication of data, to environments in which there is no legislation nor custom for data publication (Alonso, 2011).

Following this literature, we propose a theoretical framework that combines global adoption of RTI and OGD in a 2x2 typology that can help us map out inequalities and understand nuances in data accessibility, usability, quality, topicality - all material characteristics that directly affect practices and outcomes of data-driven stories. The two-dimensional typology creates four transparency categories that helps us classify different countries around the world. Low Transparency includes countries that have low quality or nonexistent RTI and OGD infrastructure; Rights-based Transparency, fall countries that have high quality RTI infrastructure and low quality or nonexistent OGD infrastructure; Technology-driven Transparency, includes

countries with high quality OGD infrastructure and low quality or nonexistent RTI infrastructure; and High Transparency, includes countries that have high quality RTI and OGD infrastructures.

Drawing from our empirical work based on survey data, in-depth interviews and content analysis, in this paper we apply this theoretical framework to 1) explore nuances in unequal experiences in data access from journalists working under different transparency frameworks; 2) discuss how unequal access to data and information impacts data journalism performativity; and 3) explain practical strategies and solutions to overcome data access obstacles via innovation in collaboration and open-data advocacy. Results of this line of work suggest that technical and economic inequalities that affect the implementation of the open data infrastructures can produce not only unequal data access, but also different trajectories in journalism knowledge production. Journalists operating in open data infrastructure are more likely to exhibit a dependency on pre-processed public data and less likely to question the social construction of data, while journalists operating in closed data infrastructures are more likely to use RTI legislation, rely on alternative data sources, and challenge the data authority. Reliance on RTI infrastructures in non-Western countries promotes a deliberative discourse about government actions, advocacy for data access and quality, and an adversarial relationship with the state.

Results of this line of work inform the debate on the empiricism of data journalism in knowledge construction emphasizing not only how open data (or lack of access) can impact journalism epistemology, but also power relationships and journalistic roles across socio-economic and data infrastructures. This framework also addresses the mythology of big data, or the widespread belief that open data offer a higher form of knowledge that can generate insights that were previously impossible, with the aura of truth, objectivity, and accuracy (Boyd & Crawford 2012, p.663). Starting from the notion of the social construction nature of data and

consequently data journalism, this framework challenges the objectivity viewpoint in data that has implications for data journalism research, pedagogy, and practice.

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Table 1. The conceptualization of transparency typology infrastructure

Right to Information (RTI)	Open Government Data (OGD)	
	Low	High
Low	Low Transparency	Technology-driven Transparency
High	Rights-based Transparency	High Transparency