Open Government and Public Crowdsourcing in Practice

Theme	Ethos — Issue 10, October 2011
Author	Jairus Yip
Topic	<u>Governance</u> <u>Public Administration</u>
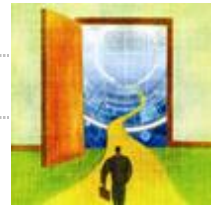
CONTENT

Government efforts to engage citizens in collaborative public initiatives are still in their early stages, but there have been some successes.

Advances in technological capability and widespread adoption mean that the Internet has become a cost-effective medium, both for disseminating information and for collecting ideas from an informed public that is no longer content to be passive recipients of government policy. Some developed societies have explored open government approaches, where government data is released to the public through the Internet and other channels, both to enhance public sector transparency and accountability, and to empower the public to develop useful applications that make innovative use of the data to improve civic life.

Such crowdsourcing strategies, pioneered by the private sector to tap the collective intelligence of their public user base, were first explored by governments in engaging their business communities. Open government and crowdsourcing have since become part of the evolution of government-citizen interactions that have been enabled by technological advances. Nevertheless, these approaches both depend on and help to nurture an evolving culture of greater transparency, trust, participation and open collaboration between government and citizens, unlocking collective resources beyond those available to the public sector.

PRINCIPLES AND CHALLENGES

Open government and public crowdsourcing approaches have numerous benefits: they engage citizens, enable social innovation and enhance institutional legitimacy. They can significantly improve the quality of public outcomes without necessarily incurring higher costs, as citizens participate in the determination and delivery of results (both at the government-citizen and citizen-citizen levels) towards shared priorities. Data transparency and rapid feedback can make public service systems more robust. Over time, these benefits may accrue towards a more resilient society, with citizens more directly involved in the collective concerns of their community.

However, these approaches also present their own challenges. First, there is the task of selecting what to release from the vast store of data held by the government; there are legitimate concerns over data quality, security and privacy. Second, the risk of the released data and information being misconstrued and misused by citizens might result in citizen-developed applications that do not accurately reflect actual conditions. This means that the government has to be clear on how the data is intended be used, with appropriate caveats. Third, there is a need to frame public issues in ways that promote broad collaboration, and to sieve the signals from the noise so that crowdsourced initiatives are not captured by narrow interests. Last, equal representation needs to be ensured so that the concerns of groups who do not participate in social media channels or Internet platforms (due to the lack of digital access or other social factors) are not excluded.

The success of open government and crowdsourcing efforts also depends critically on public involvement. Citizens have to see themselves as active participants rather than individual consumers of public policies and services. At the same time, they need to appreciate that the business of government is complex, with

inevitable trade-offs and compromises.

Open Government and Crowdsourcing Initiatives in the United States, United Kingdom and Canada

UNITED STATES (US)

The *Open Government Directive* was initiated by the Obama administration in December 2009 to increase civic participation and engagement[1] and create a culture of transparency, participation and collaboration across US Federal agencies. It stipulates four broad guidelines:

1. Make government information available online and in open formats.
2. Ensure that government information that is published is of a high quality.
3. Establish an open culture of transparency, participation and collaboration in every government agency.
4. Create an enabling policy framework for open government that is up to date with changing technological trends.

• Data.gov

An integral component of the US Open Government initiative, Data.gov aims "to increase public access to high value, machine readable datasets generated by the Executive Branch of the Federal Government". A centralised website for government data offers 389,730 **raw**[2] and **geospatial**[3] datasets from a myriad of federal agencies. A "Developers' Corner"[4] teaches users to develop applications making use of the available data; as of June 2011, Data.gov had 236 citizen-developed applications. Notable member applications are featured in their "**Apps Showcase**"[5] site.[6] A "**Data.gov Communities**"[7] section attempts to "bridge policy makers, technologists, data owners, and citizens", by inviting them to recommend data to be shared, create applications to make the data more user-friendly, share views on the policies to improve government transparency, and exchange ideas with each other. Citizen feedback from citizens is an integral component of Data.gov, with various channels for users to rate and comment on the datasets released, as well as to request datasets they want to see in the future.

• Reboot.FCC.gov

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) provides easy-to-search databases with over 150 downloadable datasets, and connects with citizens over a variety of online and social media channels. *Reboot.fcc.gov*[8] is dedicated to ideas for transforming the organisation into "a model of excellence". Using the social media tool *IdeaScale*, citizens can submit, comment and vote on ideas. IdeaScale sieves through the multitude of ideas received and floats the ones which have garnered the most votes and comments to the top of the list, giving decision-makers a better sense of the concerns felt on the ground.

• HUD Ideas in Action

HUD Ideas in Action[9] is a discussion forum powered by a tool called *UserVoice*. It is jointly operated by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in partnership with non-profit National Academy of Public Administration. HUD employees and citizens can share and discuss ideas, and vote the best ones for follow-up action. Forums are topic specific and moderators are assigned to respond to off-topic or misplaced contributions. HUD is using this platform to solicit ideas for their 2010–2015 Strategic Plan.

• cityofboston.gov

A number of open government projects at *cityofboston.gov*[10] tap on citizen ideas and expertise, and offer social networking sites for the community to connect and interact.[11] *GIS Data Hub*[12] maps different types of information about the Boston government by location. **Solar Boston**[13] is a two-year programme to

increase the amount of solar energy in the city from one-half megawatt to 25 megawatts by 2015, with a dynamic map tracking solar energy use in the city. **Data Dashboard**[14] offers municipal datasets and aims to build a "larger, easier to use and more data-rich" site with citizen feedback. *Citizens Connect*[15] is an iPhone application with which citizens can take pictures of municipal issues such as potholes and graffiti and report them to the City Council.

UNITED KINGDOM (UK)
The UK has set up *www.data.gov.uk*[16] to consolidate government data in a single searchable website. The goal is to "help people understand how government works and how policies are made." To date, there are over 5,400 datasets searchable through the website, from across government departments and local authorities. Citizen developers can download "raw datasets" to create and share applications for public use. Feedback, comments, recommendations, suggestions and requests are also actively solicited.

• Citizen-developed applications

CycleStreets[17] is a citizen-led non-profit initiative that lets cyclists plan their routes throughout the UK, made possible with the release of Ordnance Survey maps under the open government initiative. *FixMyStreet*[18] is a one-stop website that reduces the hassle of reporting local problems such as broken streetlights and graffiti. To notify the council, citizens only need to enter the postal code or street name and area, locate the problem on the map and describe the problem. Citizens can also view updates on reports submitted by others. The website was developed by mySociety,[19] a registered charity comprising volunteers who seek "to build Internet projects which give people simple, tangible benefits".

• Encouraging public crowdsourcin

Not content with simply releasing data, the UK Government's project "Making A Difference with Data" or *MADwDATA*[20] seeks to "spread understanding about open data and transparency in local public services". The initiative demonstrates how government information can be used by citizens to "raise issues, campaign and otherwise influence things that affect local communities". Projects promoted through the site include gathering of feedback from citizens on the data they would like to access, publishing of good data visualisation and application examples, and guidance material for citizens planning to campaign on various local issues.

• Cultivating an open government approach within the civil service

The UK Civil Service has adopted a range of tools to encourage discussion and crowdsourcing among civil servants. The portal *www.communities.idea.gov.uk*[21] is a safe platform for knowledge sharing across the public sector where users can set up or join communities around specific issues. The intranet-only *Civil Wiki*[22] is a secure knowledge sharing and collaboration tool for civil servants. The content generated is moderated by its users.

CANADA
Unlike the US and UK, Canada lacks a government-led centralised open data website. However, some citizens have taken the lead in pushing for more open and accessible government.

- The citizen-developed *datadotgc.ca*[23] collates and makes available public government data on a single website for easier access.
- Open government efforts have also taken off at the city level. Toronto's "*Open Data Framework*"[24] supports open initiatives by improving "data standards, terms of use agreements and open data website design."
- Currently under development, *www.datato.org/app*[25] will let citizens request for the release of specific datasets. The site lets government agencies review data requests and needs from citizens, and will eventually include details from publishers on "known and existing data sources, so that community members can rate them for prioritisation".

NOTES	
01.	http://www.whitehouse.gov/open/documents/open-government-directive
02.	http://explore.data.gov/catalog/raw/
03.	http://www.data.gov/catalog/geodata
04.	http://www.data.gov/developers
05.	http://www.data.gov/developers/showcase
06.	Examples of crowdsourced apps on Data.gov include: FlyOnTime.US (http://flyontime.us/about), a free resource for air travellers to track the performance of the commercial air system in the US, and Employment Market explorer (http://pujaplicaciones.javeriana.edu.co/Employment/) hat helps users compare and analyse local, regional and state unemployment markets.
07.	http://www.data.gov/communities/
08.	http://reboot.fcc.gov/data/
09.	http://hudideasinaction.uservoice.com/forums/95655-public-feedback
10.	http://www.cityofboston.gov/
11.	http://www.newurbanmechanics.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Boston_OpenGov_Strategy-RGoodspeed.pdf
12.	http://hubmaps1.cityofboston.gov/datahub/
13.	http://gis.cityofboston.gov/solarboston/
14.	http://www.cityofboston.gov/doit/databoston/app/data.aspx
15.	http://www.cityofboston.gov/doit/apps/citizensconnect.asp
16.	http://data.gov.uk/
17.	http://www.cyclestreets.net/
18.	http://www.fixmystreet.com/
19.	http://www.mysociety.org/
20.	http://www.madwdata.org.uk/
21.	http://www.communities.idea.gov.uk/welcome.do
22.	wiki.gsi.gov.uk
23.	http://www.datadotgc.ca/
24.	http://www.toronto.ca/open/
25.	http://www.datato.org/app/

Data.gov.sg

Singapore's data.gov.sg was launched in June 2011 as a "first-stop portal to search and access publicly-available data".

It currently offers over 5,000 datasets from 50 government ministries and agencies.

Singapore's technical infrastructure, small size and high internet adoption rates suggest promising conditions for considering open government and crowdsourcing approaches. Such initiatives and their working processes should be carefully structured to meaningfully engage citizens and harness their contributions in ways that translate into better decision-making and perceptibly improved outcomes. Initial efforts to generate awareness, gather support and encourage participation from the public will be critical.

For governments and citizens to truly create public value by building on each other's contributions, a climate of mutual respect and a sense of shared ownership are vital. The good news is that these initiatives, when managed well, can help deepen the confidence and trust necessary for future efforts. New ways of framing roles, new skill sets and aptitudes of Singapore public officers and citizens, as well as new rules of engagement, may need to be developed, before the full potential of these approaches can be unlocked.

Jairus Yip was a research intern at the Centre for Governance and Leadership, Civil Service College from May to July 2011. He is currently a third year Political Science student at the National University of Singapore. His research interests include public administration in Singapore.