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#OpenData: Digital-Era Governance Thoroughbred or New Public Management Trojan Horse?

Winner

By Justin Longo

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Introduction

Governments collect, generate and compile vast amounts of digitized data continually—e.g., census and survey work by public statistics agencies (Dillon, 2010), or the monitoring of system conditions across a range of domains from the natural environment to public health (Hodge and Longo, 2002)—as a purposeful data-collection activity aimed at fuelling policy-oriented research. In addition, as governments do the things that governing entails—e.g., collecting vital statistics, administering the tax system, recording government operations activity, managing public infrastructure and natural resources, surveying and recording public and private lands, processing regulatory requirements, or managing social service delivery—a wealth of digital data is amassed as a result (Cate, 2008).

Advances in Web 2.0 (the social web) and Web 3.0 (the semantic web) technology and their applications, and the emergence of masses of rich data from “location-based services” (Ratti, Pulselli and Williams, 2006), continue to increase the flow, stock, and potential knowledge embedded within government data. With this growth in the volume of digital data and capacities for mining insights from it, calls for governments to provide open, easy-to-use and largely free-of-charge access to public data have grown in recent years (e.g., Lathrop and Ruma, 2010).

The #opendata¹ movement has generated significant momentum in a short period of time

¹ As a phenomenon related to the Web2.0 / Gov2.0 revolution, the reference here and in the paper's title is to the prevalent use of the #opendata hashtag on the Twitter.com micro-blog service (Bonnemann, 2010; Smistad, 2011), which is an excellent source for keeping abreast of new open data initiatives. According to the Twitter analytical tool at tweetvolume.com the hashtag #opendata was used 60,900 times (over a period identified on tweetvolume.com as “all time”), whereas the hashtag #gov20 (for Gov2.0) was used 28,700 times (clearly, these are approximations; note also that tweetvolume.com (and similar services; see Chadwick, 2011)

(Ginsberg, 2011). Propelled by the general advances of Web 2.0 and the expectations of Internet users that have developed alongside, the movement was given a significant boost by Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web, who challenged governments to share their data repositories through an open, linked architecture in an often-cited presentation at the TED Conference (Berners-Lee, 2009).

In this short note, I review the benefits—to both governments and the public—that many open data advocates agree are achievable from making digitized government data more open. Following this, I focus on one of these purported benefits and propose an alternative interpretation that identifies a potential downside to open data as currently framed. This interpretation builds upon a key contribution to the Gov 2.0 / Digital Governance literature: Dunleavy et al.'s (2006) sketch of the reported death and post-mortem configuration of the New Public Management (NPM) “wave”. The post-NPM transition to “digital-era governance” (DEG) is characterized as involving three themes: *Reintegration* (putting corporate hierarchies back together); *Needs-based holism* (agile governance, and efforts to simplify, re-engineer, transform and change agency / client relationships); and *Digitization* (electronic channels as genuinely transformative). Their thesis is that DEG represents a potential paradigmatic shift away from, and a replacement for, NPM (Dunleavy et al., 2006). Part of this DEG landscape can be extended to include the motives and implementation of the open data movement (through “digitization”). However, this note argues that an alternative reading of some elements of the open data advocacy coalition originate in the NPM reform agenda and seek to revive it.

The Benefits of Open Data

Based on my reading of this emerging popular and academic literature (e.g., Bizer et al., 2008; Brito, 2008; Dietrich et al., 2010; Gurstein, 2011; Poynder, 2010; Robinson et al., 2009; Shadbolt, 2010; Smith, 2010), there are three central benefits that proponents argue can flow from greater openness by governments in sharing public data resources:

was disabled in February 2011 as a result of Twitter's new policy on whitelisting (Melanson, 2011) and Twitter's efforts to centralized data mining through the data reseller Gnip.com thus revealing how while greater openness in government data is being advocated, data collected through the social web are increasingly being enclosed behind private walls).

Third-party developed citizen services: by providing access to public sector data archives, private sector entrepreneurs will be able to add value to raw data through the development of citizen-service mobile and web applications that re-use public data in innovative ways, principally through data “mash-ups”.² The development of third-party, citizen-service “apps” is a key driver of recent open data strategies announced by the British Columbia Government (2010), the federal opposition Liberal Party of Canada (2010), the United Kingdom (Cabinet Office, 2011) and some advocates (Livingston, 2010; Open Data Network, 2011). While there are potential market (Anderson, 2009) and strong social forces (Benkler, 2006) that motivate software developers to invest the time needed to create these applications, governments and partner civil society organizations are working to support these forces through various “apps for” contests (Economist, 2010; Kay, 2011; Nichols, 2010).

Expanded policy networks for knowledge creation: by making the raw evidence base widely available, open data has the potential to unleash a civic army of data-fuelled “public” policy analysts that can substantially increase the limited policy analytical capacity in government (Bertot et al., 2010; Eaves, 2010; Noveck, 2009). Allowing non-government analysts (whether researchers in organized policy-oriented think tanks and civil society organizations, academics, journalists, or citizens operating independently or connected through collaborative tools) access to raw government data, coupled with the proliferation of powerful data analysis software, cross-tabulated and assessed in previously unconsidered ways, holds the promise of previously unrevealed insights emerging from a collective policy capacity (Napoli and Karaganis, 2010). A related stream focuses on advances in data visualization and geolocation capabilities through which access to massive datasets expands the possibilities for the drawing of inferences from visual and spatial representation of data (Grammel, Tory and Storey, 2010; Viégas and Wattenberg, 2010).

2 A data “mash-up” refers to a web page or Internet-enabled software application that combines data and functions from more than one source to provide a new service (see, e.g., Phuoc and Hauswirth, 2009). A leading use of government data in mash-ups relies on the Google Maps Data API (application programming interface - a software element containing a set of rules and specifications that one software program can follow to access and make use of the services and resources provided by another software program) which allows applications to view, store and update map data through a Google Maps interface. An example is <http://whereismystreetcar.appspot.com/>, a privately-developed system showing the real-time position of streetcars in Toronto which mashes-up data from the Toronto Transit Commission and presents it using the Google Maps API.

Transparency and accountability: with more people aware of how governments spend public money and address social problems, corruption will be exposed, public resources will be better targeted, outcomes will be improved and trust in government and legitimization of the public sphere will be enhanced (Osimo, 2008; Sifry, 2010). This is a leading objective of the U.K. open data initiative (see data.gov.uk), perhaps driven in part by the experience of the MPs' expense scandal (Kelso, 2009) and the successful use of "crowd-sourcing" to unearth previously hidden examples of misappropriation of funds (Rogers, 2009). This motivation is also evident in other policy position documents (e.g., Liberal Party, 2010; United States, The White House, 2009). This category rests on a well-grounded premise in the civic engagement literature that a cornerstone of democratic systems is a fully-informed public (Fung, Graham and Weil, 2007) and that open data can promote democracy (Bauhr, Grimes and Harring, 2010).

Commentary: An NPM Trojan Horse?

With the accelerated opening up of government databases (see, e.g., Australia, 2010; Canada, Parliamentary Information and Research Service, 2010; European Commission, 2009; 2010; Ginsberg, 2011; New Zealand, 2009; Schellong and Stepanets, 2011; United Kingdom, Cabinet Office, 2011; United States, The White House, 2009; United States, Executive Office of the President, 2009), coupled with the potential for the many watchers that the new Internet provides, open data in a Web 2.0 world has the potential to enhance government transparency and accountability.

Greater government transparency is a general long-run trend in Western governments, driven in large part by growing expectations on the part of citizens (Dahl, 1989). But if we remove considerations of public pressure (i.e., that people increasingly expect more digital openness from their governments) and focus on the challenges of governing, what would motivate governments, particularly political leaders, to support open data initiatives? There is of course the possibility of genuine belief in democratic principles and the right of the citizenry to know the business of government. It is possible that some politicians and leaders within government believe that open data is both the *right* thing to do (oriented towards benefit #3), as well as the *smart* thing to do (in reference to benefits #1 and #2) (OECD, 2005).

This note is focused on whether an alternative motivation is possible or likely. My hypothesis, based on a small but growing number of examples highlighting political support for open data, is that some advocates—particularly politicians, but not exclusively—are motivated by beliefs (both explicit and unconscious) forged in the New Public Management (NPM) reform agenda. From this perspective, support for more open data aims at building coalitions of citizen consumers who are encouraged to use open data to expose public service decisions, highlight perceived performance issues, increase competition within the public sector, and strengthen the hand of the citizen as customer.

The New Public Management agenda arose in response to the political leadership of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan and the neo-conservatism of the late 1970s / early 1980s, and became an umbrella term for public choice-oriented economic and managerial reform of government administration (Hood, 1991). Based on modern business practices and public-choice literature (Hughes, 2008), NPM had a significant effect on public administration in its heyday and enjoys continued support for its overarching principles and philosophy of public management (de Vries, 2010).

A principle problem with NPM, and one reason its support has seen such decline (with Dunleavy et al. (2006) going so far as to pronounce it “dead in the water”) is that it significantly increased institutional and policy complexity while at the same time lacked robustness in the face of complex governance challenges. Other problems with NPM—whether the inefficiencies introduced through recourse to competition (Isett et al., 2010), or intolerance for public service “mistakes” resulting from innovation (Savoie, 1995)—also exist and they have likewise contributed to NPM’s demise. Ultimately, it was the experience of NPM-fuelled policy catastrophes that caused the persuasive logic of NPM to dissipate (Dunleavy et al., 2006).

When an opposition politician, or newly elected leader, wishes to affect the course of government, especially if faced with what she or he perceives as an entrenched and intransigent bureaucracy, one strategy is to build a public constituency that will apply pressure for change that supports that political agenda (Peters, 1987). NPM, with its roots in the public choice literature and its emphasis on empowering citizens as “clients” or “consum-

ers”, seeks to weaken and undermine entrenched bureaucracies and disrupt the status quo (Savoie, 2003). We would also suspect that the life-cycle of a politician or party (from powerless opposition outsider to governing insider) would be inversely correlated with being an open data advocate—i.e., as power and longevity increases, enthusiasm for openness will decrease (Schlesinger, 1991). Also, if governments are able to selectively release data sets, we would suspect that governments will likely be more supportive of opening data archives related to policy successes than if the data relate to ongoing policy challenges or could be used to highlight perceived policy failures.

There is, of course, no political slogan that links NPM and open data, no clear articulation connecting a new public management-inspired philosophy and the objectives of those politicians supporting the open data movement. Without such a smoking gun, we must infer from examples of politically-backed open data initiatives. While not suggesting that the following is a comprehensive survey, these brief examples will give the flavour of what some politicians wish to see from greater transparency through more open government data:

- The United Kingdom Department of Education (2011), through the Secretary of State Michael Gove, recently highlighted spending data for government-supported schools published through its website and noted that it wanted to “encourage parents and the wider public to look at the data and to compare the spending and performance of schools in their local area.”
- Another example from the United Kingdom is the expanded availability of crime-related data, coupled with mapping software, which encourages citizens to investigate the security of their neighbourhood and draw inferences about the performance of their local police services. Released on February 1 2011, and promoted by the U.K. Home Secretary Theresa May, the *Police API* (<http://policeapi.rkh.co.uk>) lets users retrieve police incident data to the neighbourhood level in all 43 English and Welsh police forces and build “crime maps”. The U.K. Policing Minister, Nick Herbert, said of the motive for the crime mapping initiative: “We are giving people the information and power

to hold their local forces to account and ensure that crime in their neighbourhood is driven down.” The Home Secretary also voiced the hope that citizens would “challenge [the police] about how issues are being dealt with.” (Bear, 2011)

- YouCut is an initiative of the Republican Party majority elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in November 2010 which seeks citizens’ support in cutting federal spending. The “YouCut Citizen Review of the National Science Foundation (NSF)” initiative specifically asks citizens to identify grants that represent “questionable use of taxpayer dollars”. Users are directed to the National Science Foundation research grant database (an example of open data) and instructed to “look for questionable grants” using “keywords, such as: success, culture, media, games, social norm, lawyers, museum, leisure, stimulus, etc.” The legislators plan to publish a report outlining the grants identified by the site’s users (Day, 2010).

Kamensky (2010) argues that the Obama administration is conducting a government reform initiative that he dubs a “stealth revolution”, and that this is partly driven by the President’s directive on “Transparency and Open Government” (United States, The White House, 2009). The implication is that this revolution is largely centred on the “radical transparency in data” that the administration hopes will have the effect of galvanizing public support for the President’s ambitious reform agenda.

Conclusion

The argument presented here is not the first skeptical view of open data; a number of views questioning the prevailing enthusiasm for open data have begun to emerge (e.g., Bannister and Connolly, 2010; Ginsberg, 2011; Gurnstein, 2011; Kaplan, 2011). But what is perhaps more challenging is attempting to disentangle the relationship involving a possible effort to revive some aspect of NPM using some of the same tools from DEG—systems which are seen to be in opposition (Dunleavy et al., 2006). On the face of it, the benefits conferred in category #3 would appear to be a key part of movement towards digital-era governance (DEG) and thus away from NPM. However, this paper presents

an argument that one aspect of open data—transparency and accountability—may be motivated by, and serve to help revive, the NPM agenda. A combination of DEG tools and NPM motivations is by no means impossible: “Another scenario might see administrative and political elites implementing conflicting NPM and DEG directions simultaneously but unselfconsciously, cross-cutting each other in counterproductive ways so as to create chiefly a policy mess” (Dunleavy et al., 2006, p.488).

Declaring a clear victor in the ongoing battle between NPM motives and DEG tools will likely require several more years of experience with both (Dunleavy and Margetts, 2010). In considering this uncertain transition, I am reminded of the evolution in thinking experienced by the late Douglas Hartle on the relationship amongst information, expertise (in that particular case, as embodied in the Office of the Auditor General (OAG)) and democratic decision making, as retold by Dobell (1999). Based on that reading, we might suspect that Hartle may have supported the idea of Web 2.0-enabled open data: “I would prefer to trust the partially informed many to the well informed few”; though, to be fair, Hartle was referring to Parliamentarians as “the many”, which is at a slightly smaller scale than are accommodated in the social web. Dobell, however, notes Hartle’s transformation on this issue:

Interestingly, Hartle later reversed himself on this position ... far from being an instrument to promote the open parliamentary and public debate he sought, the OAG had come to act as an autonomous special interest on its own, with a mission to impose on the government of the day the conservative criteria of generally accepted accounting principles that were thought somehow to confer authoritative insight into political judgments. (1999, p. 92).

Hartle initially supported the capacity brought by the likes of an OAG, but reversed that support when it was seen that mathematical rigidity and a particular lens had usurped democratic deliberation. Likewise, we may believe ourselves to be governing in the digital era, and may wish to enlist the many eyes (Raymond, 2000) of Web 2.0-enabled public scrutiny, but find ourselves wrestling with some not-quite-dead NPM motives. And regardless of most #opendata advocates’ noble motives, a revival of NPM by stealth raises the

possibility of unintended policy consequences and potential future policy catastrophes.

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