

Open Government and Public Participation: Issues and Challenges in Creating Public Value.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This special issue includes a collection of seven papers presented at the 12th Annual Conference on Digital Government Research dg.o 2011. The papers we selected for this special issue are all closely related to the current topic of Open Government. It is true that the idea of open government is not new [1]. However, as several of the papers in this special issue point out, the idea of open government has captured a world-wide interest, partially because of the open government initiative launched by President's Obama administration, but also by the development of new technologies that increase the possibilities to access information, as well as possibilities to collaborate in innovative ways to make better use of available information [2]. However, there is an important difference between the traditional approach to open government and the current, renewed one. Meanwhile the traditional approach emphasized mainly in transparency, current approaches also involve key elements of participation, collaboration and innovation [2, 3]. In this way, governments around the world are developing partnerships to deliver information in more useful ways to the citizen, and also opening new channels to participation [4]. Moreover, these new opportunities to collaborate are requiring from governments new approaches and new models to promote collaboration [5]. In the particular case of the US, there is a general perception of progress in opening government among CIOs, but they also recognize that there has been a lot of progress in terms of transparency, but a more modest improvement in terms of advancing methods for citizen participation and collaboration among agencies [6]. In this way, a special issue providing reflections about the linkages between open government, transparency and public participation has the potential not only to increase our theoretical understanding of the

phenomenon, but also of providing further hypotheses to be explored and specific guidance for practitioners managing open government initiatives around the world.

In a sense, the collection of papers presented in this special issue hold among them a theory or a series of hypotheses related to the main issues and challenges to create open government programs with an impact in the creation of public value (see Figure 1). Although many data sets have become public in the last years, just a fraction of them have created value for the public. That is to say, making data more transparent, and opening spaces for collaboration and public participation (the pillars of open government) is not valuable by itself, but only when it creates public value. According to Harrison and her colleagues, such value creation can happen in different domains (economic, political, social, strategic, quality of life or ideological). Moreover, it is needed an intentional planning of the specific actions and processes that need to be included in each specific open government initiative to create such value. On the other hand, the ways in which transparency, participation and collaboration take place can also take several forms. For example, Spaiser points out seven different forms of electronic political participation. Such forms of e-Participation may be as basic as searching for information related to specific policy issues to become more educated on them, but can involve more active positions such as creating content, participating in discussions, coordinating such discussions or campaigning for specific political causes. On the other hand, Munson and his colleagues describe how technologies can provide different forms of transparency and accessibility to public records, which in fact can have an impact on the public perception of the creation of value and even influence their future actions in some specific domains.

Additionally, the specific characteristics in which transparency, participation and collaboration are promoted depend on both technical and social characteristics of each open government initiative. Technical characteristics include, as some of the papers in the special issue suggest, levels of personalization or usability. Bridges et al. conduct an experiment where usability of federal websites, in conjunction with citizens searching behaviors have a determinant role in participation activities. Chun and Cho argue that the citizen participation tools should include technical functionalities to access the policy lifecycle data, called policy provenance data, to make the entire process of policy decision making by government transparent to citizens, and data analytic tools for personal decision support, to make citizen-to-citizen interaction in deliberation more meaningful. The policy transparency and interaction features can create the value of shared governance and partnership in policy decision making. This higher form of public participation can create a more effective democracy and more trust in government.

Colineau and her colleagues, on the other hand, show ways in which public administrations can tailor information to make it easy to understand and more effective in communicating a message to citizens. As pointed out by Scherer and Wimmer, technical characteristics are a function of approaches to system implementation, suggesting that existing approaches to enterprise architecture planning may impact in a positive way the success of open government system implementations. Harrison and her colleagues also stress the importance of carefully thinking and

planning such projects in order to make sure that the proper value mechanisms are in place during system implementation.

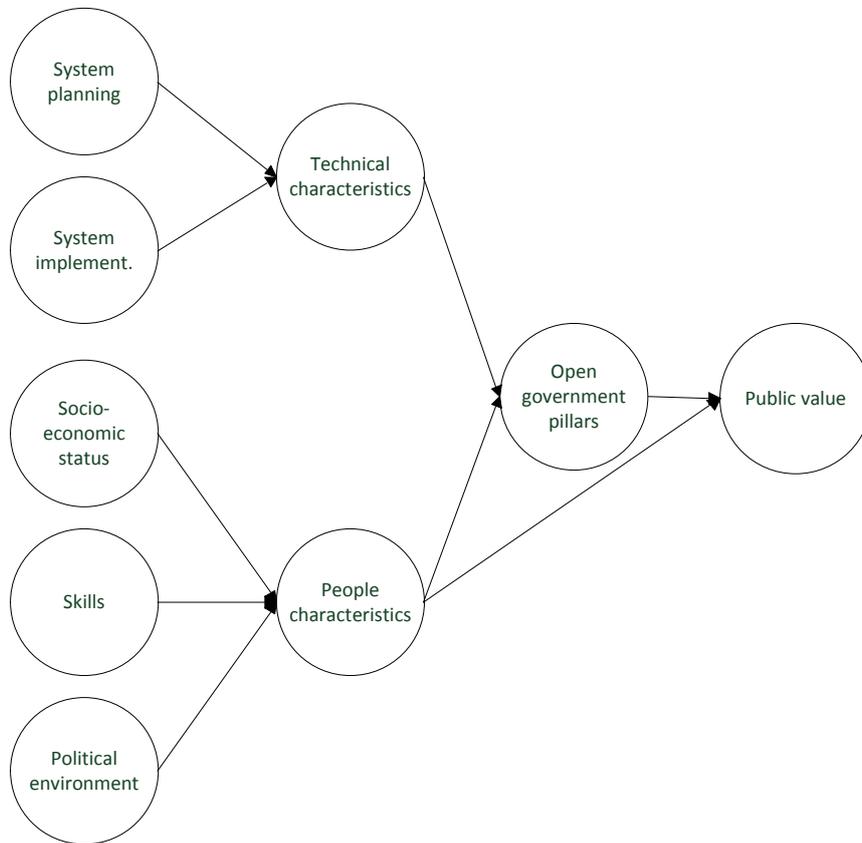


Figure 1. A Theory of Open Government and Public Value Creation from the Special Issue Perspective

Finally, papers in the special issue point out the importance of people characteristics in the success of open government activities as well as on the creation of public value. Bridges and his colleagues, for example, identify ways in which knowledge about government structure or search skills influence the ability of participate through federal government websites. On the other hand, Spaiser explores the effects of personal characteristics of young adults on their electronic participation.

In this way, we believe that the current set of papers presented in this special issue constitute a valuable contribution to the understanding of open government, public participation, and key issues and challenges to promote public value. In the following paragraphs, we briefly describe each of the papers in this special issue.

2. PAPERS IN THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The special issue first paper places the current open government movement in the US in the context of the evolution of presidential digital government initiatives. Harrison and her colleagues describe such evolution on three stages, from an emphasis on performance (Clinton administration), moving to information sharing among agencies (Bush administration) and finally emphasizing to open information and decision making. Moreover, they argue that the open government movement closes the gap between digital government (usually more concerned about management) and digital democracy (usually more concerned with political participation). However, the main invitation of the paper is to take a critical position and to consider that open government is not a good thing by itself, but needs to be assessed in terms of public value that is created by each initiative. The paper proposes a framework to help managers to do such an analysis.

Opening records to the public is not a new endeavor. In fact, as Munson and his colleagues point out, records related to political campaign donations and real state records have been in the public domain for a while. However, new technologies such as the Internet provide new opportunities to access public records. For instance, donations and real state records are now easily searchable over the Internet. In their paper, Munson et al. explored the perceptions of US citizens towards such new opportunities. Among their findings, they discovered that most citizens understand and agree on the importance of keeping this records open. However, citizens are less comfortable when records are made available and easily searchable over the Internet. Offering more specific information and allowing it to be accessed by US citizens from far away or non-US citizens increases the level of discomfort among survey respondents. Survey respondents suggest that it may be considered to reduce the amount of public information or restrict access to these Internet applications. They also suggest the need of conducting programs to educate and create awareness about these data to the public, and some of them declared that this applications may impact their future behavior. New technologies and new opportunities of accessing public records constitute new opportunities to rethink traditional trade-offs between conflicting values such as privacy and transparency.

Opening public records, as well as opportunities to participate, are only relevant when the public has access to these tools and opportunities. In her paper, Spaiser explores the possible existence of a divide in electronic participation between German and minority groups of young adults in Germany. Interestingly, minority groups, mainly Turkish and Arabs living in Germany, are more active in terms of electronic political participation, from searching and consulting information to become more aware of political issues to the coordination of political activities on-line and campaigning. Using statistical analysis, she also found out that different factors are important to understand the dissimilarities between these two groups. In the case of German young adults, socio-economic status is closely related to discontentment. Then, discontentment and the political environment or milieus where they live are the most important factors explaining their political participation. In the case of the Turkish and Arab young adults, socio-economic status also plays a role, but in this case its impact is on the skills to use the Internet to participate. In turn, skills and

grievance (related mainly to discrimination) are the main factors promoting participation for this second group of young adults.

Chun and Cho use the case of the Cyber Policy Forum of the Seoul Metropolitan Government in Korea to show the initial efforts in creating an e-forum for public participation and the challenges in attracting and sustaining public participation in the e-forum. Although government officials' perceptions and international recognition suggest a success case, participation level is limited to opinion gathering without much interaction or feedback by the government. In other words, the internal policy decision making process remains a black box to the citizens. The authors suggest that the transparency of the policy decision making process is desirable, to achieve a new level of public participation. They propose opening the black box through sharing policy provenance data and through creating decision tools to support G2C and C2C interaction during public participation. These technical characteristics may contribute to increased public engagement and participation, to create a true sense of democracy, where citizens are considered as the co-decision makers, creating a shared governance democracy.

Scherer and Wimmer contribute to the special issue by discussing the importance that plays the planning and implementation of public participation systems on system success. They start their exploration by defining the policy life cycle, as well as two frequently used enterprise architecture frameworks, the Open Group Architecture Framework (TOGAF) and the Zachman architecture framework. After mapping the two enterprise architecture frameworks into the policy life cycle, they propose a reference framework to guide the implementation of electronic participation projects. The proposed framework includes four interrelated components: a procedural reference mode, the inclusion of main stakeholder viewpoints, the creation of a library with requirements and reference models, and the development of a domain meta-model.

The development of social media has been perceived both by scholars and practitioners as spaces where the public can easily participate and get in touch with their government officials and representatives. Bridges and his colleagues explore this fact by observing searching behaviors of university students looking for the right place to communicate with government in relation to 4 different scenarios. Surprisingly, only 30% of the subjects involved in the experiment completed successfully their task. They found that searching behaviors play a key role in completing this tasks and communicating with a government agency. Main problems during the search behavior were the lack of knowledge of government structures (what is the relevant agency for a given problem), static search patterns (using a limited set of generic search terms), search engine bias (using one main provider), and the prominence of government sites in the competition (usually not the first hits on the searching results). Moreover, they also found that, among the subjects of their study, there is no connection between social media sites and participation. That is to say, almost none of them followed social media pages as a channel to communicate the problems in the scenarios.

The last paper in this special issue deals again with new possibilities facilitated by the existence of new technologies. In this case, Colineau and her colleagues explore the possibilities of creating

tailored government documents, providing users with personalized information. They developed a prototype system to create such tailored documents in an automatic way, taking advantages of ontologies and meta-data to create mail-merge-like processes of text units. Although creating a technical prototype was the main objective of the project, the authors also describe a highly social process necessary to identify and classify information units and themes to create the technical system.

3. REFERENCES

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