

## OPEN GOVERNMENT: PROMISES, ASSUMPTIONS, CHALLENGES

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There was a time when “black is beautiful” became a popular slogan for celebrating black people’s antidiscrimination fight. Later on, other values became desirable: “small is beautiful,” “slow is beautiful,” and now, even though no one seems to have coined the term yet, “open is beautiful.” In the interactions between governments and citizens, it appears that openness, transparency and other virtues associated with clarity, have become pre-eminent over secrecy, closure and obscurity. The idea of openness emerges as a new panacea for improving public management and, at the same time, promoting the transformation of the state into a citizen-centred government, thus consolidating the deliberative and participatory aspects of democracy.

In this article I reflect upon the expectations generated by the availability of technologies that lend support to this new exchange pattern between state and society, the assumptions underlying its implementation and the challenges that should be confronted and overcome if its promises are to be effectively realized.

The subject has been approached from three different perspectives that have not found yet a common ground of analysis. First the literature on computerized tools that support open government, particularly Web 2.0 applications. Second, the works on the role of civil society in public management, citizen participation, deliberative democracy, and other related themes. And third, the more traditional literature on the organization and functioning of public bureaucracy, its role in the implementation of public policies and its institutional capacity. The dialogue among these different research fields is still weak. The following paragraphs aim at partly bridging this gap.

### ***Assumptions of open government***

Open government is not a new technological development; it is a true philosophy about how to govern and what should be the roles of governments and citizens in public management. Its implicit assumptions may be summarized as follows: (1) nowadays, technology permits a fluid, two-way communication and interaction between governments and the citizenry; (2) governments must open these channels of dialogue and interaction with the citizens so as to benefit from their potential contribution in the process of policy choice, in the co-production of public goods and services, and in the monitoring, control and evaluation of its performance; and (3) citizens should take advantage of these new participatory channels, by actively engaging in the performance of their potential roles (as political decision-makers, producers and comptrollers).

However, these assumptions seem too premature and unrealistic. No doubt, technological advancement has historically been an important source of cultural change. Most technological applications are rapidly adopted by markets and users without any need of compulsion. But open government, is about **opening** the government's black box and inducing civil servants to **listen** to the citizens, **respond** to their proposals, **accept them** as co-producers and admit that they should be **accountable to them**, besides **responding** to their critiques and observations. These are totally different rules in the government-citizen game. And even though new technologies may support these various forms of interaction, political incumbents and permanent civil servants may not be willing to function on the bases of these new rules, unless the uppermost echelons of the government are ready to do away with ancestral structures and decision making mechanisms which, for various reasons, very few would be willing to modify.

### ***Information constraints***

Under open government, data should be complete, timely, accessible for the largest number of users and purposes, electronically stored and free of license. These requirements may be excessive when compared to the actual capacity of response by governments. It is not simply a problem of overcoming the systematic and deliberate reticence of public servants to deliver information to the public, but of designing appropriate mechanisms to process enormous volumes of data. The U.S. National Archives are unable to process, storage or catalogue a mass of information that grows continuously.

But even if governments were successful at creating effective systems for delivering information to every potential requestor, the problem of overload would be transferred to the users. With growing globalization, an increasing proportion of the world population has become an active producer and consumer of data. Free and almost unrestricted access has created the risk of overload, in view of the speed, volume, and lack of knowledge about the validity of its content and the possibility of manipulation. As in the case of water, one glass may be enough; a flood may be a calamity.

### ***What about the citizens?***

On the citizens' side, the philosophy of open government assumes that once the channels are open, the citizens will flow in, ready to participate and exert the roles that have been potentially and rhetorically attributed to them. Is it possible to imagine this recreation of the Athenian Agora within a present-day virtual setting? Or, as was the case in ancient Greece, only a small bunch of sophisticated orators and demagogues would engage in a dialogue to discuss and decide the political future of the polis? As Amartya Sen has clearly stated, (1) participation of civil society in the design, implementation and evaluation of public policies is unconceivable unless society is empowered; (2) empowerment implies that citizens are familiar with their individual and collective rights, know how to obtain guarantees for exerting such rights and possess the capacity to analyze the pertinent information; and (3) even when empowered, citizens may not place a great value upon political participation or have a strong desire to engage in it.

Hence, the assumptions from the civil society side seem to disregard the deep social, economic, educational, and cultural inequalities of the population, the existing digital divide among social classes, the variable agency capacity of the citizens, the high level of political disaffection exhibited by many societies, and the natural trend towards free riding of the majority of citizens, who do not possess slaves that leave them free time to assist and deliberate at the virtual forum.

Citizen participation requires much more than an invitation from the government to participate. There should be a reason, which does not depend solely on the existence of communication channels facilitated by the government. It usually takes place when a social group or sector is threatened by a public policy entailing some kind of impairment. Citizens, by nature, are not political actors. There should be a strong cause or reason for them to mobilize: an economic interest, a deeply seated value or a legitimate right that have been threatened. This is the very foundation of collective action.

### ***Final remarks***

Three paradoxes may sum up my argument. First, governments tend to exhibit a double standard by proclaiming rhetorically their willingness to facilitate citizens with open access to their data repositories, while their agencies continue to adhere to secrecy, concealment and a scarcely informed decision-making style. Second, whereas computerized technologies offer ever speedier and versatile communication and information tools, human capacity to process the volumes of data obtained through the use of these technologies is much more difficult. And third, even though most citizens welcome participation of their fellow citizens in public management, they are either unable to act in this capacity or unwilling to do it individually, as free riding is the most common attitude. If this is so, the assumption on which open government is based loses a natural link in this potential chain that would relate the government and the citizenry.

In brief, technology may cause cultural change in the presence of strong political will within the state and the civil society. At the public sector level, a radical change in the prevailing bureaucratic culture and practice may probably be needed before the various sources of resistance are eliminated or reduced, thus paving the road for open government.