

What's Next for Open Government?

BY DANIEL CASTRO | MARCH 3, 2010

On President Obama's first day in office, he released a memo calling for "an unprecedented level of openness in Government" and increased "transparency, public participation, and collaboration." As instructed by that memo, the Office of the Management and Budget (OMB) released an "Open Government Directive" on December 8, 2009 outlining the major steps for government agencies including: publishing government information online, improving the quality of government information, creating and institutionalizing a culture of open government, and creating a policy framework to enable open government.

Without a doubt, the Open Government Directive has led to more transparency in government than ever before in our nation's history. The sheer volume of data now available to citizens is unprecedented and the variety of government blogs on the Internet give average citizens more insights into the inner workings of their government than ever before. But whether the Open Government Directive has created a more participatory or collaborative government has yet to be determined. Certainly, the availability of new online tools has encouraged certain citizens to participate more in government, but has the impact been substantive or inconsequential? It is probably too soon to tell whether government itself has been transformed by these initiatives. However, already we can identify strengths and weaknesses of the current

Open Government Directive, and if this initiative is to be effective we should address these shortcomings early on so that such efforts do not get a reputation for ineffectiveness.

TRANSPARENCY

Transparency is the first of three key pillars of the Open Government Directive. Transparency allows citizens to learn what the government is doing and it is important as transparency is linked to accountability and citizen trust in government. The market research firm Foresee Results found in a 2009 survey of over 36,000 visitors to federal websites that "citizens who believe a site is highly transparent are 46 percent more likely to trust the overall government, 49 percent more likely to use the site as a primary resource and 37 percent more likely to return to the site."¹

Data.gov is one of the most important transparency efforts the Obama Administration's open-government initiatives. Launched May 21, 2009, in 7 months it has grown from 47 datasets to more than 118,000 datasets with everything from reprints of the Federal Register to a list of active mines and mineral processing facilities in the United States. Data provided on this website is available in open, machine-readable formats. While much of this data is not new—many of these data sets were previously available on specific agency websites—centralizing

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access to these datasets has made it easier to find and use this data. In addition, the Open Government Directive required agencies to publish three “high-value datasets” that were previously not available online in an open format within 45 days. For example, the Department of Agriculture released the USDA National Nutrient Database and the Department of the Interior released the database of open volunteer opportunities with the federal government. For each dataset, Internet users can rate the usefulness of the data and submit comments regarding the dataset. Internet users can also submit requests for specific datasets through the website.

Other important transparency efforts include the websites to track spending of federal stimulus dollars (recovery.gov), to track total federal spending (USASpending.gov), and to track federal spending on information technology (IT.USASpending.gov). These websites provide dashboard-style interfaces that let citizens interact with key data and find out where their tax dollars are going. For example, recovery.gov uses geo-coded data for all spending so that visitors can enter their zip codes and see what stimulus money has gone to their community.

These datasets have already been put to use not only on government-sponsored websites, but also on third-party websites that have built tools around this data. For example, the website recovery.org provides a private-sector alternative for the public to access stimulus spending data. The Sunlight Foundation hosts a searchable database of White House visitor logs with links to different public databases so the public can learn about the individuals on the list. Sometimes private-sector efforts overlap. For example, three different private-sector initiatives have made the Federal Register more usable: the Center for Information Technology at Princeton University created FedThread.org, a website that allows users to attach comments to the publication; the website Public.Resource.org provides a search tool for the data; and GovPulse.org allows citizens to use visualization tools to search the Federal Register for relevant information based on geography or topic.² While competition between these different efforts may spur innovation, where possible, efforts should be coordinated so that they can reach a critical mass and avoid balkanization.

Transparency has been the biggest success of the Open Government Directive, yet one of the next steps should be to put more transparency in the transparency process. For example, one of the limitations of data.gov is that citizens cannot view a list of that datasets other users have requested. Neither do citizens have a good insight on which datasets are forthcoming and which datasets, if any, will not be made available. Agencies should be required to create a catalogue of all agency-owned datasets so that citizens can better judge progress on releasing important data. In addition, usage statistics should be made available for datasets and government websites. Usage data would not only serve to highlight the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of different datasets and websites, it could also help others find interesting government information based on which downloads are most popular.

Data quality is also important. Although websites like data.gov provide tools for users to rate the quality of datasets, agencies responsible for maintaining datasets should take on more responsibility for noting any data quality issues. For example, agencies should make clear any known limitations of datasets such as poor survey response rates, grossly inaccurate data or outdated information. Similarly, online tools, such as expert forums, should be provided so that user communities can assist each other with identifying problems in datasets, rather than the current system which only allows online users to report errors to the agency.

One issue with data quality is the timeliness of the data. For example, in September 2009, the White House agreed to release records of all visitors starting in September, with certain restrictions and exceptions. Some restrictions are logical—limiting the release of data related to national security and personal data, such as social security numbers and dates of birth—however, other restrictions are more controversial. For example, records will not be released immediately; instead they will be released on a monthly basis after 90 to 120 days. Neither will records be released immediately if they are related to “sensitive meetings,” such as visits by potential Supreme Court nominees.³ These restrictions may be legitimate but should serve as a reminder that the success of government transparency efforts depend not only on technology but also on policy.

Finally, most transparency efforts to date are to increase transparency about the decisions already made by government; the next step is to create more transparency in the decision-making process itself. Over the past year citizens and journalists have called on policymakers to open up decision making processes from the debate on health care reform to negotiations on the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA). While some government activity likely requires limited secrecy to be effective, the general trend should be towards more openness. Technology has the power to open up decision making because the cost of sharing draft documents and proposals is negligible in an online world. Some of these efforts have been supported by the Obama Administration. For example, the Administration pledged to post all legislation online for public comment for 5 days before signing—a promise that has not yet been consistently kept.⁴

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Participation is the second core value of the Open Government Directive. The purpose of increasing participation in government is to help identify the needs of citizens and to tap the expertise of citizens in government decision making. The Obama Administration has used many tools to encourage public participation, from hosting an online town hall meeting on YouTube after the State of the Union to collecting comments on various government blogs. GSA has also partnered with IdeaScale, an online crowd-sourcing platform that lets users submit and vote on proposals for improving an organization. GSA has made this tool available to all federal agencies so that they can use it to collect ideas from the public on how to better fulfill their mission.

While the opportunities for participation have been impressive, in general the response rate has been lackluster. Whether this reflects a lack of sufficient marketing, unfamiliarity or newness of the tools, general apathy by the populace, or some other factor, is unclear. However, while civic engagement in the United States waxes and wanes over time, a substantial number of citizens generally do engage with their government. But the strongest incentive to use a communication tool is not how easy it is to use, but rather how effective the tool is at getting across a message. Therefore we should likely see a strong uptick in citizens using online tools for public participation if government demonstrates that it is listening. It is not enough sim-

ply to create online forms that allow citizens to submit and rank ideas and questions. This is one reason why e-government tools that encourage participation can work so well at the local level—local government officials can be more directly engaged with their citizens. For example, Newark, New Jersey mayor Cory Booker is able to use Twitter to personally respond to requests for help from citizens. But the difference in scale between a city and a nation is substantial, and it is neither practical nor desirable to have federal employees read all of the electronic communication they receive. Instead, digital tools should be used to automate this process where possible to extract meaningful knowledge out of this mass of electronic data.

To some degree this reflects a general problem with the federal government—it is not a lack of good ideas which has burdened our government, it is a failure to pick the right proposals and execute these ideas effectively. More public participation does not necessarily solve this problem. For example, in October 2009 the White House held the GreenGov Challenge where it asked federal employees to submit ideas on how government could be more environmentally-friendly. While participation in this effort was high—over 14,000 federal employees voted and submitted over 5,000 ideas—many of the most popular proposals were for ideas already known to government officials, such as using compact fluorescent light bulbs instead of incandescent light bulbs or using water-saving toilets in federal bathrooms. Unfortunately, the GreenGov challenge reflects a trend in many of these projects: while many of the ideas submitted via online tools for public participation are compelling, few of them are truly novel. One reason for the limited effectiveness of these initiatives is that the average person often does not have the specialized knowledge necessary to suggest meaningful reforms. Another reason is that individuals already have many mediums for proposing their ideas, such as writing a blog post or emailing their member of Congress. Moreover the Administration has done little to show how the ideas submitted through these tools are being evaluated and which, if any, will be implemented. There are of course some noticeable exceptions. For example, the White House created the SAVE Award to recognize ideas submitted by federal employees to increase government efficiency and noted that the winning idea would be included in the FY 2011 budget.⁵

This administration has embraced the use of technology for making government more open, but it is still learning how to make the technology more effective. Currently online forums provide an opportunity for tech-savvy, politically-motivated interest groups to advance their agenda disproportionately to the size of their membership. As a result, groups promoting the legal use of marijuana or the Obama “birther” movement, end up getting more attention than they might get in an offline forum. Technologists are still trying to solve these types of problems so that all voices can be heard. Large-scale online crowd-sourcing projects like Wikipedia work well for the dispassionate masses, but not as well for the passionate mob—the loudest voice is not always the one we should be listening to. One open question is how to make participatory tools that let the best, not just the loudest, ideas be heard.

Even with these limitations, these types of online forums still encourage civic participation and debate on policy proposals and encourage more public awareness and support for policy proposals. Providing online forums also allows more people to participate in the political process. Online civic engagement, such as submitting questions to the President on YouTube, provides an opportunity for political participation by various groups, such as home-bound senior citizens, busy parents, and full-time workers, who might otherwise be unable to attend political events. Yet most government agencies are still novices at using technology for encouraging participation and collaboration with citizens. Even the widely used public comment process at agencies, such as the FCC, has been found to be not particularly helpful for generating new ideas and improving policy.⁶ To make the best use of online tools for public participation the Administration will need to develop best practices to share with federal agencies on how to use these tools most effectively.

COLLABORATION

The third value of the Open Government Directive is collaboration. Collaboration is supposed to make government more effective by encouraging partnerships between federal government agencies and with state and local government and the private sector. The Obama Administration has encouraged government agencies to use technology to improve collaboration and use methods such as prizes and competitions to encourage outsiders to participate. For example, the Department of Health and Human Services launched

a Flu Prevention public service announcement (PSA) contest where individuals competed for a \$2,500 prize. Over 50 thousand votes were cast to pick the winning video which, to date, has been watched on YouTube 230,000 times.⁷ Similarly, the Department of Labor held a “Tools for America’s Job Seekers” challenge in which over 16,000 individuals reviewed and rated over 600 job search and career advancement tools in categories such as general job boards, niche tools, career tools, career exploration tools, and web 2.0. The results were compiled into a website, Careeronestop.org, which showcases the top tools in each category.⁸ While these types of tools have not been applied extensively, they do seem to have been applied effectively. To help advertise these initiatives, the government should consider partnering with groups in the private sector, such as popular websites and search engines, to draw attention to these projects.

Government agencies also still need to collaborate better to coordinate how they share certain data. For example, the Notification and Federal Employee Antidiscrimination and Retaliation (No FEAR) Act requires federal agencies to post to their website summary statistics of equal employment opportunity complaints every quarter. Yet even though every agency must report this data, virtually every agency reports the data in a different format, making comparisons between agencies unnecessarily difficult. Agencies should also jointly develop certain data privacy policies, such as creating a common framework for de-identifying data.

CONCLUSION

Effective use of IT has brought a new level of transparency, participation and collaboration to federal government in the United States. Government is more open today than it was one year ago. Moreover, the Obama Administration has aggressively applied Internet tools to increase transparency, public participation, and collaboration in government. While more can be done to improve these tools, the same can be said for most other Internet applications available today. In fact, it is this spirit of innovation that is most compelling about the tools and data released to date. While the Open Government Directive has yet to create radical transformations in government, its most important contribution may be a new culture of openness in government that embraces technology.

Endnotes

1. Aliya Sternstein, “Study links online transparency efforts, trust in government,” NextGov, February 16, 2010.
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4. “Allow five days of public comment before signing bills - Obama promise No. 234,” PolitiFact, May 26, 2009, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/promises/promise/234/allow-five-days-of-public-comment-before-signing-b/>.
5. “The President’s SAVE Award,” *The White House*, n.d , <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/save/SaveAwardHomePage/>.
6. Stuart Benjamin and Arti Rai, *Structuring U.S. Innovation Policy: Creating a White House Office of Innovation Policy* (Washington, DC: The Information Technology & Innovation Foundation, June 24, 2009), <http://www.itif.org/dev/publications/structuring-us-innovation-policy-creating-white-house-office-innovation-policy>.
7. As of February 22, 2010, the video has 232,302 views. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_gwUdmPl0bU.
8. “Tools for America’s Job Seekers Challenge!,” *U.S. Department of Labor*, n.d , <http://www.dol.gov/challenge/>.