



# An analysis of open government portals: A perspective of transparency for accountability



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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to assess whether the current structure and organization of some of the most prominent open government portals ('data.gov' type) is adequate for supporting transparency for accountability. A set of requirements was established based on key characteristics of desired data disclosure proposed by the literature on open government and transparency assessment. These requirements were used as a framework to analyse the structure and data organization of the selected portals. Results suggest that this type of open data portal does not possess important structural and organizational elements needed to fully support ordinary citizens engaged in public accountability efforts. Examples of good practices were found in some portals and should be considered by those responsible for open government programs.

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## 1. Introduction

In the last few years, dataset (open data) portals have emerged as flagship initiatives of open government programs. One of the most prominent dataset portals, data.gov, lists a total of 44 international (country wide) open data sites,<sup>1</sup> providing clear evidence that the open government data movement has spread throughout many countries. The creation of these dataset portals aims to fulfill one of open government's major goals: to promote transparency through the publication of government data, and therefore allow for the accountability of public officials and the re-use of disclosed data with social or economic value (Linders & Wilson, 2011).

This work is focused on online transparency for accountability purposes. In the context of public administration, *accountability* is often defined as the obligation for public officials to report on the usage of public resources and answerability of government to the public to meet stated performance objectives (Armstrong, 2005; Behn, 2001; Bovens, 2007; Wong & Welch, 2004). Among the different types and dichotomies associated with the concept of accountability (Bovens, 2005, 2007; Sinclair, 1995), Bovens (2007) identifies *political accountability*, involving elected representatives, political parties, voters (citizens), and media, as the counterpart of political delegation: citizens delegate political power and responsibilities to their representatives, who, in turn, are expected to account for their actions by providing the necessary information for citizens to assess their conduct.

Traditionally, citizens and other interested stakeholders, when seeking data concerning a particular public entity or subject, had to rely on individual entities' or thematic websites. Internet-based research on transparency assessment (Gandia & Archidona, 2008; Reggi & Ricci, 2011; Rodríguez Bolívar, Caba Pérez, & López Hernández, 2007; Styles & Tennyson, 2007) also relied on this information seeking strategy which required the analysis of many different individual websites in order to gather the data required to assess the different entities' degree of transparency online. The emergence of 'data.gov' type portals would, in principle, change the way both citizens and researchers look for accountability-related data, since these portals, by definition, function as a centralized point of access to governmental data. There is no doubt that open government portals disclose and make available a huge number of datasets,<sup>2</sup> but the question remains whether the way such datasets are organized and disclosed really facilitates the task of finding the required data and helps to answer the following questions: Which public entities are not providing information? Which information is not being provided by a certain entity? Which expected time periods are missing from either a certain entity or information type? Without an appropriate structure and dataset organization, the data needed to answer these and other similar questions remain difficult to obtain and analyze, even if available in an all-encompassing open government portal.

The lack of evaluation guidelines regarding the implementation of open government principles was emphasized by Darbishire (2010), who recognized that "limited examples of monitoring of proactive

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.data.gov/opendatasites>.

<sup>2</sup> Over 90 000 datasets are available in data.gov (last visited 2/4/2014).

disclosure by official or oversight bodies” were found. Even the 2009 US Open Government Directive (OGD), perhaps the best-known open government initiative, did not provide an assessment framework of how to evaluate US agencies’ plans and, more importantly, of how to evaluate their implementation and results (Bertot, McDermott, & Smith, 2012). More recently, Huijboom and Broek (2011) noted that, from the five countries analyzed in their work, only the UK and the US have evaluated their open data policies but none of them have assessed their economic and social impacts. Harrison et al. (2012) also acknowledge the lack of frameworks and procedures to assess open government. And although some open government assessment frameworks and exercises can be found in the literature (Sandoval-Almazán, 2011; Sandoval-Almazán & Steibel, 2013), none seems to specifically adopt a “transparency for accountability” perspective or focus on ‘data.gov’ type portals (structure and organization).

Regarding the actual data being disclosed, McDermott (2010) recognized that, concerning data.gov, “no one has done an overall assessment of the data sets”. According to Harrison et al. (2012), even if the data disclosed is “both usable and of high quality”, simply making data available does not necessarily mean that government is being more transparent and accountability of public agents is facilitated. Questions arise also concerning the nature of the data being disclosed: “While such open data is to be welcomed, these datasets are hardly useful to hold government itself to account since the government owned data is mainly related to practical decisions of citizens (traffic, weather, public transportation) and/or is information about other organizations, for instance data about emissions of factories” (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012).

Data.gov is a general purpose (disclosing all kinds of data from all public agencies and entities), national portal created by the US Government which operates under the open government principles and objectives, including the promotion of transparency to support public accountability.<sup>3</sup> As such, this portal inspired the creation of similar portals around the world that adopt the ‘data.country’ address format and designation, and may therefore be considered as serving the same open government objectives. These are the ‘data.gov’ type portals that will be targeted for analysis in this paper.

The goal of this research is to contribute to an analysis of currently available ‘data.gov’ type portals and, in particular, to understand whether these dataset portals provide data in a way that in fact facilitates public accountability. This research does not focus on the data itself being disclosed, but rather on structural and organizational aspects which might influence citizens’ ability to better access and use the available data for accountability purposes. Also, although seven specific portals were analyzed, it is not the purpose of this work to individually (fully) assess them or to compare them. Rather, these seven portals were considered as ‘representative’ of ‘data.gov’ type portals (see Section 4 for a discussion on the selection process) for analysis purposes.

To guide the portal analysis process, a first effort was made to identify key data disclosure characteristics, compiled and synthesized from previous internet-based transparency assessment research and open government policy guidelines. Although some of these characteristics concern qualitative aspects of data being disclosed, they were also considered in the context of this study as inspiring the formulation of a set of structural and organizational requirements to guide the portal analysis process (second step of the research effort). Once these requirements were defined, several ‘data.gov’ type portals were selected and each one was analyzed according to the pre-established framework.

Realistically, ordinary citizens (“members of a society ... not holding office or administrative positions in government” (Roberts, 2004)) might not possess the necessary skills or willingness to directly access and analyze the information disclosed. Instead, citizens may rely on

information brokers such as journalists, NGOs or even academic researchers (Heald, 2003). Information brokers may therefore be considered as the direct users of public entities’ websites and portals. Regardless of the actual users, portals should be designed in such a way that even ordinary citizens, without specialized technical skills, may use them to find data. Therefore, the analysis was conducted from an ordinary citizens’ point of view.

Results seem to indicate that, while most ‘data.gov’ type portals do explicitly refer to transparency for accountability as one of their goals and provide a great amount of data and sophisticated functionalities, they still lack some important basic organizational structures which are deemed relevant to ease accountability processes. Therefore, those responsible for implementing open government programs should consider that simply creating a ‘data.gov’ type portal is not sufficient to support transparency for public accountability.

The next section presents a brief review of some of the most prominent data characteristics contemplated in the literature on online transparency assessment. Then, in Section 3, these characteristics will be used to derive and present a list of structural and organizational requirements to be used, in Section 5, as a framework to analyze seven open government ‘data.gov’ type portals. The criteria for selecting these portals and the overall analysis procedure are stated previously in Section 4. After presenting the analysis results, the paper ends with some final conclusions in Section 6.

## 2. Data disclosure characteristics in the literature

Previous literature on web-based transparency and open government has identified several key characteristics of data being disclosed. Such characteristics have been identified in different contexts, such as part of metrics for measuring open government performance (Lee & Kwak, 2011) or as requirements for digital governmental financial reporting (Caba Pérez, López Hernández, & Rodríguez Bolívar, 2005), and have been referred to using different expressions. The following sub-sections are the result of an effort to identify their commonalities and relations, and the goal is to provide the conceptual basis for formulation of the set of requirements to guide the analysis of open government portals.

### 2.1. Quality

In a sense, the notion that all data disclosed should have *quality* or be *intrinsically good* is self-evident. But such a concept is not easy to pinpoint in the context of open government, and the requirement for data quality may be considered as encompassing several characteristics. Its importance is illustrated by the recognition that the reputation and public trust in public agencies might be irrevocably lost if low quality data is disclosed (Lee & Kwak, 2011). But while quality is sometimes simply associated with *accuracy*, also considered an objective of transparency (Drew & Nyerges, 2004), it is not enough simply to consider intrinsically good (accurate) data as high-quality data (Dawes, 2010). Therefore, it is possible to identify in the open government literature another specific characteristic associated with it, namely *validity*: “agencies should make sure that only valid and accurate data becomes available to the public” (Lee & Kwak, 2011). *Consistency* is also associated with accuracy, and both are required characteristics to ensure data quality (Lee & Kwak, 2012), thus providing metrics for Agency Open Government (OG) Performance (Lee & Kwak, 2011). *Reliability, authenticity* or *validity* is another important aspect of data quality, as it concerns the possibility to *review* and *certify* the *compliance* of adopted procedures and disclosed data with open government policy principles and the desired characteristics of data disclosure (Caba Pérez et al., 2005; Open Government Working Group, 2007; Rodríguez Bolívar, Caba Pérez, & López Hernández, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.data.gov/open-gov/>.

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