



The strategic importance of information policy for the contemporary neoliberal state: The case of Open Government Data in the United Kingdom



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ABSTRACT

The article analyses the role of Open Government Data policy as part of the broader public policy agenda of the UK government. A thematic analysis of interview, observational and policy documentation is presented which suggests that since 2010 the Open Government Data agenda has been used strategically by the UK's centre-right coalition government to progress a range of controversial policies, which are aimed at the continuation of the neoliberal form of state through its current crisis. Specifically, the relationship between Open Government Data policy and the neoliberal objectives of the marketisation of public services and privatisation of public assets, the leveraging of financial markets and the pharmaceutical industry, and the embedding of OGD into a broader agenda aimed at rebuilding trust in political elites are analysed. These findings are examined in relation to Braman's (2006, 2011) arguments regarding the strategic implementation of information policy by Governments in the exercising of state power, and the development of the 'informational state'.

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1. Introduction

Information policy has been claimed as a key tool in the exercise of state power that has increased in significance substantially over the last 30–40 years, resulting in the development of an “informational state” (Braman, 2006). This periodisation aligns with the era of neoliberalisation, the political economic model that is currently in crisis. This suggests that information policy could be a potentially important site of power and struggle in the response to current political and economic crises. In the UK, it is widely recognised that a “very active period of scrutiny within the government of the UK's national information policy” began around 2007 (Saxby, 2011, p. 1), the same year as the first indications of economic crisis developed. Whilst this increase in information policy activity was not the direct outcome of the evolving economic crisis, the interrelations between the development of information policy and political responses to the crises during this period should be explored.

The aim of this article is to begin to analyse in what ways information policy has played a strategic role in the response of the UK's centre-right coalition (Conservative–Liberal) government to the current political economic crisis since coming to power in 2010, and to relate these findings to Braman's (2006) claim regarding the development of an “informational state.” Focusing specifically on the case of the Open Government Data (OGD) policy initiative in the United Kingdom, the

article analyses the development of OGD policy by the UK Government during the period 2010–2013 as it responded to deepening crises and engaged in efforts to push ahead with a neoliberal agenda. Drawing primarily on analysis of policy documentation and interviews with UK policy makers and OGD advocates, and a theoretical framework rooted in critical political economy, the article analyses the intersection of OGD policy with major public policy initiatives of the current government: the Transparency Agenda, the Open Public Services Agenda, the privatisation of key public assets, and the economic growth strategy.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. The first section outlines the research methods used to generate the empirical data on which the arguments are based. The second section introduces the analytical framework for exploring this data, with an exploration of key trends within the development of the UK's neoliberal state relevant to the OGD policy initiative. This section also makes the case for the importance of information systems and policy to the process of neoliberalisation. The third section introduces the concept of Open Government Data, and provides a brief overview of the UK's OGD initiative, including the legislative framework that it exists within. The fourth section outlines the findings of the research, presenting a thematic analysis of the political economic agenda that the UK government are developing through the opening up of government data. The article concludes by arguing the case for the strategic importance of information policy for the neoliberal state based on the UK government's response to recent political and economic crises, yet questions the framing of these observations solely in terms of the development of an “informational state” (Braman, 2006).

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2. Research methods

The arguments made in this article are based on research undertaken during a larger research project on the politics of Open Government Data in the United Kingdom. Data were collected via in depth interviews with UK based civil society OGD advocates (11 interviews – 4 ‘core’ advocates who had at some point undertaken an official role advising the UK government on Open Data or Public Sector Information; the rest ‘peripheral’ advocates), senior civil servants with policy responsibility for OGD (4 interviews), local government officials working on OGD projects (5 interviews) and one interview with a representative of the corporate public sector information re-use industry. This interview data was complemented by a series of observations of 5 local, 5 national and 3 international OGD events; a content analysis of the open-government@okfn.org mailing list which has a strong presence of UK based OGD advocates; a policy analysis of all UK national government OGD related policy documentation and advice published between 2009 and 2012; and a review of published policy documentation and research on the re-use of public sector information in the UK and Europe. The data collected aimed to gain understanding of the development of the OGD initiative, including the ideas and activities of advocates, and how the state-based actors engaged with the phenomenon and responded to the ideas put forward by OGD advocates.

A thematic analysis was undertaken of the collected data and the following themes were identified from interviews, observations and mailing list content analysis:

- Developing an OGD community
- Developing an OGD technical and information infrastructure
- Building alliances between civil society, state and industry
- Ideational constructs of civil society OGD advocates
Social and economic ends; Democratic participation; Political crises; Public sector governance; Promoting innovation; Equality in economic production
- Ideational constructs of OGD advocates in the state and industry
Trust in politicians and the state; Citizen participation and engagement; Citizen-consumer choice; PSI Re-use market liberalisation

The thematic analysis of OGD policy documentation also identified the following themes:

- Public services marketisation (Open Public Services)
- Economic growth
- Transparency

This article reports on a subsection of this larger research project, specifically the adoption of OGD policy by the UK’s centre-right coalition government during the period May 2010–2013. Thus, the analysis is focused thematically on the ideational constructs of OGD advocates in the UK state, and themes emerging in UK national government OGD policy documentation.

Due to the sensitive political nature of some of the discussions all interviews were carried out on the condition of interviewees’ anonymity. Interview data referred to in the body of the article is therefore cited with reference to the category of interviewee (e.g., Peripheral Civil Society), rather than individual names or identifiers.

3. Neoliberalism and information policy

As leading British political economists [Hay and Payne \(2013\)](#) recently stressed, “political economy analysis is contentious stuff. We don’t ever stand on especially firm ground. We make judgements, and then see how events unfold, adjusting our thinking as we go” (p. 5). In light of this understanding of the critical political economy approach that is adopted in this article, an analytical framework, grounded primarily in research by British political economists, will be outlined in order to explicitly underline the approach to the analysis of key themes emerging in the empirical data.

The era of neoliberalisation is widely understood to have developed during the structural crisis of the Keynesian welfare state in the 1970s as interest grew in the ideas of economists such as Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman. Within the space of a few years during the 1970s, the ideas of these neoliberal economists began to draw more widespread support as an answer to the perceived failings of the Keynesian model in institutions such as the OECD, World Bank, IMF, and the governments of the UK and USA ([Crouch, 2011, p. 15–16](#)). Whilst a variety of neoliberalisms have unfolded in different locales, and definitions of neoliberalism are therefore debated, a generally agreed criteria is a preference for market forces over other, particularly state based, forms of economic organisation and management. Nevertheless, state intervention in fashioning the conditions for this market-orientated economic model has generally been a key feature of neoliberal governance in practice ([Saad-Filho & Johnson, 2005, p. 4](#)).

[Crouch \(2011, p. 61\)](#) argues that neoliberal economists are generally interested in increasing the overall level of wealth in an economy via market forces; however they have tended to be “explicitly uninterested in the distribution of this wealth.” If questioned on the issue of wealth distribution, the general proposition has tended to be that the resulting economic growth will enhance the general level of wellbeing in society as a whole due to ‘trickle-down’ effects. Although recent years have seen international organisations place increasing emphasis on global poverty reduction and development, the same period has also witnessed an increase in global economic inequality ([Harvey, 2007, p. 17](#)). Economic inequality has also increased at the national level in neoliberal states. This trend began during the early 1980s in the UK and USA, and in many other countries from the late 1980s, as neoliberal economic policies were implemented, resulting in the incomes of the wealthiest rising at a faster rate than the poorest ([OECD, 2011](#)). The problem of economic inequality in the UK has also become more deeply entrenched during the recent economic crisis ([Randeep, 2011; Wren-Lewis, 2013](#)).

Recent research suggests that a lack of focus on redistribution has had a significant negative impact on many apparently wealthy societies in terms of both general wellbeing ([Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010](#)) and economic growth and efficiency ([Stiglitz, 2012](#)). It is clear that for many researchers in this field deepening inequality is not simply a moral issue, but one of social and economic inefficacy. This research thus suggests serious failings in the basic factors of neoliberal economic development.

Despite these weaknesses in the basic propositions, a neoliberal logic has become dominant within economic governance in the UK (and elsewhere to a greater or lesser extent) over recent decades. This process has been actualised in a variety of ways, including, but not limited to, efforts to expand the commodification of information ([May, 2006](#)), the deregulation (and, some argue, reregulation) and subsequent growth of the financial services industry ([Duménil & Lévy, 2005; Major, 2012](#)), the introduction of New Public Management practices to the public sector ([Le Grand, 2007](#)), and a hollowing out of democratic forums and increasing political power for global economic elites ([Murphy, 2000](#)). Whilst OGD, similar to other ‘open initiatives’, can be understood as a shift away from the restrictive forms of information commodification that deepened during the neoliberal era, in order to understand better the relationship between OGD and the UK’s evolving neoliberal state it is crucial to appreciate the emergence of OGD within this broader context of neoliberalisation.

The neoliberal preference for market based economies combined with competitive pressure from the US financial sector resulted in UK government policies since the 1980s until recently to deregulate the financial markets ([Hay, 2013a](#)). As [Duménil and Lévy \(2005, p. 10\)](#) observe, this led to “the dramatic growth of financial institutions” and “the implementation of new relationships between the financial and non-financial sector, to the benefit of the former.” As many British political economists have argued, the UK’s growth model during this period became increasingly dependent upon the financial sector ([Gamble,](#)

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