



One way traffic: The open data initiative project and the need for an effective demand side initiative in Ghana



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ABSTRACT

In recent years the necessity for governments to develop new public values of openness and transparency, and thereby increase their citizenries' sense of inclusiveness, and their trust in and confidence about their governments, has risen to the point of urgency. The decline of trust in governments, especially in developing countries, has been unprecedented and continuous. A new paradigm that signifies a shift to citizen-driven initiatives over and above state- and market-centric ones calls for innovative thinking that requires openness in government. The need for this new synergy notwithstanding, Open Government cannot be considered truly open unless it also enhances citizen participation and engagement. The Ghana Open Data Initiative (GODI) project strives to create an open data community that will enable government (supply side) and civil society in general (demand side) to exchange data and information. We argue that the GODI is too narrowly focused on the supply side of the project, and suggest that it should generate an even platform to improve interaction between government and citizens to ensure a balance in knowledge sharing with and among all constituencies.

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1. Introduction

In recent times the trust and confidence of citizens in their governments, and their sense of inclusion in them, has drastically dwindled, making more urgent the requirement of such governments to become more open and transparent by developing new public values and relationships. Nowhere is this unprecedented, continuous decline more evident than in developing countries. The emergence of a governance paradigm that puts citizen-driven initiatives and citizen-centred government innovation above state- and market-centric initiatives calls for innovative thinking through open government.

Growing interest in governance networks¹ and the shift towards mobile internet and smartphone methods of interaction – what is

being called Government Web 3.0² – means the time is ripe for governments to build the infrastructure for Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) and facilitate two-way communication, or G2C and vice versa. Making information exchange easier for the public may benefit governments themselves. Even with this new synergy, Open Government cannot be considered truly open until it includes active—as contrasted with limited—disclosure, thereby enhancing citizen participation. Any attempt to promote the concept of Open Government must, therefore, involve citizens and non-public sector institutions through more access to information on an open government platform guided by the core value of “greater democracy”.

Since signing on to the Global Open Government Partnership³ (GOGP), dedicated to the development of a multi-stakeholder

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¹ Governance networks have been defined by Sørensen and Torfing (2009) as “a stable articulation of mutually dependent, but operationally autonomous actors from state, market and civil society, who interact through conflict-ridden negotiations that take place within an institutionalized framework of rules, norms, shared knowledge and social imaginaries; facilitate self-regulated policy making in the shadow of hierarchy; and contribute to the production of ‘public value’ in a broad sense of problem definitions, visions, ideas, plans and concrete regulations that are deemed relevant to broad sections of the population” (236). E. Sørensen and J. Torfing (2009) “Making governance networks effective and democratic through metagovernance,” *Public Administration*, 87(2), 234–258.

² S. Spalding (2007) defines Web 3.0, as “highly specialized information silos, moderated by a cult of personality, validated by the community, and put into context with the inclusion of meta-data through widgets,” <http://howtosplitanatom.com/news/how-to-define-web-30-2/>. (Accessed 10th September, 2014).

³ The OGP is an international platform for domestic reformers committed to making their governments more open, accountable, and responsive to citizens, <http://www.opengovpartnership.org>. Its objective, according to John C. Bertot, Gorham, Jaeger, Sarin, and Choe (2014) is to “encourage accountability, transparency, and transformation of governments through, among other factors,” John C. Bertot et al. (2014) “Big data, open government and e-government: Issues, policies and recommendations,” *Information Polity*, 19(1), p.7.

governance network, Ghana recently began its own Ghana Open Data Initiative (GODI) project to create an open data community that will enable government (on the supply side) and civil society in general (on the demand side) to exchange information. The question of how to enhance openness by incorporating the demand side into the program, even with the complexity of citizen participation in governance in general, is a critical one in view of the government's aspiration to use accountability and transparency to further develop the country as a whole, especially in terms of social accountability mechanisms in the public sphere. How, then, is Ghana addressing these demand side requirements? How will the initiative ensure any noteworthy interaction between government and citizens in such a way that the perspectives of citizens will influence decisions?

We argue that the GOGI overemphasizes the supply side of the project, and does not, despite its surrounding rhetoric, make a level platform for significant interaction between government and citizen. This is not surprising because of the limitations on existing ICT infrastructure, and because the infrastructural basis of the GOGI concept — if, indeed, there is one — is too weak and narrow to bring citizens into the discussion.

We focus on the demand side because, as argued by [Gauld, Goldfinch, and Horsburgh \(2010\)](#), when it comes to ICT (and, for that matter, e-government), far too few studies have been done, with a particularly notable lack of refereed, rigorous, and independent academic studies beyond a government and consultant “grey” literature of mixed quality. Second, according to [Evans and Campos \(2012\)](#),

[M]uch of the work in open government, both in its implementation and research, has emphasized data and the information and communications technologies supporting their access, interoperability, and usability. This data-driven focus has not been proven to significantly increase citizen understanding of the complexities of issues and policies or their participation in relevant policy deliberations (172; see also [Kim, 2013](#)).

The “supply side of data” refers to making better and, in some cases, more public sector information available, and making it more accessible — what might loosely be termed supply-side considerations. The other dimension comprises the demand-side considerations of better using and re-using public sector information, which might be accomplished through mitigating consumer aversion to using public sector information, improving data exploitation techniques, changing cultures, and improving data analysis skills (which, in turn, can improve competitiveness). The supply side issues deal with the policy and legal frameworks, and data existing within the government and infrastructure (including standards), while the demand side concerns such things as citizen engagement mechanisms and existing demand for government data among user communities (such as developers, the media, and government agencies). In this case, demand refers to public views of and interactions with government through electronic channels ([Gauld et al., 2010](#)). From an empirical perspective, therefore, the approach being adopted in Ghana has left a gap that needs to be filled.

The objective of this paper is twofold. First is to understand the GOGI project, including the various developments designed to increase the openness (transparency and accountability) of government, as well as the effectiveness of service delivery by and citizen participation in, governance, with the further aim of making suggestions that will enable policy makers to reexamine the approach in the development of the project. The second is to contribute to the literature on open government, especially pertaining to developing countries, in the hope that other countries may learn from the Ghanaian experience. We hope to draw the attention of governments in these countries to the need to pay to the demand side of government the same kind of attention that they are already giving to the supply side. Failure to do so, we believe, will reduce the whole open government idea to nothing more than a mirage.

The paper is structured as follows. Following this introduction is a discussion on the methodological approach used in obtaining information for the paper. Next, we review the literature on open data and open government, focusing on its meaning, requirements, and challenges, and the criticisms directed towards it in modern public sector governance. A look at the development and implementation of the Ghanaian open data initiative comes next. We then analyse the problems associated with the program, and the need for a demand side initiative to encourage its successful development and implementation. The paper concludes with a number of suggestions for future research.

2. Methodological approach

This research is qualitative in nature, and was undertaken mainly through the documentary analysis or method ([Prior, 2008](#)). Development of open data is in its infancy, and few, particularly public servants, have some ideas as to its future success. Documentary analysis is “a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents — both printed and electronic (computer-based and internet-transmitted) material” ([Bowen, 2009: 27](#)). [Payne and Payne \(2004: 60\)](#) define it as “the techniques used to categorise, investigate, interpret and identify the limitations of physical sources, most commonly written documents, whether in the private or public domain (personal papers, commercial records, or state archives, communications or legislation).” Two main types of documents are used in documentary analysis. These are primary and secondary documents ([Bailey, 1994](#)). The first deal with eye-witness accounts of people who experienced the particular event or the behaviour we want to study, whereas secondary documents are ones that have been produced by people who were not present at the scene, but who received eye-witness accounts to compile the documents, or have read eye-witness accounts ([Bailey, 1994: 294](#)).

[Bailey \(1994\)](#) has identified a number of disadvantages of documentary analysis. These include inaccessibility of subjects, nonreactivity, longitudinal analysis, inadequate sample size, spontaneity, confession, relatively low cost, and high quality. Some scholars have nevertheless identified a number of problems with the use of documentary analysis in research ([Bailey, 1994](#); [Mogalakwe, 2006](#); [Platt, 1981a, 1981b](#)). [Platt \(1981a\)](#) lists some as follows: difficulty establishing the authenticity of a document; unavailability of relevant documents; problems of sampling; questionable reliability of a document; and difficulty drawing inferences from a document about matters other than concerning the truth of its factual assertions (33). In short, the main problem with this approach is about triangulation, which concerns the verification of the contents of a document ([Bergman, 2008](#); [Jick, 1979](#)).

Despite these concerns we deemed documentary analysis appropriate because of the underdeveloped nature of the subject and, second, because Ghana is currently in the process of developing its open data system, so that reliance on government documents is the best way to understand what is being done ([Atkinson & Coffey, 2011](#); [Prior, 2011](#)). Furthermore, the research is exploratory,⁴ also necessitating the review of such documents in order to ascertain what is being done. The findings (discussion and analysis) in the paper relied primarily on these documents, which have been produced by the central government and its agencies that deal with this topic ([Prior, 2011](#)). For instance, such issues as the building of the Open Data Community; short and long term government initiatives; the relationships between the government and the private-for-profit and non-profit sectors, economic growth, transparency, and accountability ideas; as well as attempts to bridge the digital divide emerged from these documents. They include policy documents and pronouncements, as well as various reports, such as the annual

⁴ [Victor Jupp \(2006\)](#) defines exploratory research as “a methodological approach that is primarily concerned with discovery and with generating or building theory.” *The SAGE Dictionary of Social Research Methods*, London: Sage.

For more on exploratory research, see [Robert A. Stebbins \(2001\) Exploratory Research in the Social Sciences](#), London: Sage.

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