Open government objectives and participation motivations

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ABSTRACT

Open government aims, among others, at improving engagement of citizens in public sector activities. To realize this potential, we need to understand citizens' motivations to engage in the many different variants of open government. This article identifies motivations for open government participation from the free/libre open source software (FLOSS) and crowdsourcing literature. The literature gives two dimensions of open government aims: innovation objectives (high or low) and managerial level (political versus administrative). The results of our survey with 168 participants revealed different motivations for participation in open government projects related to three objectives of open government projects: collaborative democracy, citizen sourcing, and citizen ideation & innovation. We found indications that socio-economic characteristics of citizens do not influence the willingness to participate in open government projects—contrary to findings in other forms of government participation—and therefore open government opens a great potential for enlarged citizen engagement. Our survey also indicates that open government projects with lower ambitions result in more participation than more ambitious projects, which implies that considerable steps need to be taken to realize the full potential of open government.

1. Introduction

Meijer, Curtin, and Hillebrandt (2012) define the openness of government as "…. the extent to which citizens can monitor and influence government processes through access to government information and access to decision-making arenas" (p. 13). This indicates two dimensions of open government: vision or transparency by access to information, and voice or participation by access to decision-making arenas (Curtin & Mendes, 2011; Meijer et al., 2012). Effective participation without access to information is difficult. Although participation itself is a precondition for gaining more access to information, access to information does not necessarily contribute to higher levels of participation. In a follow up on popular trends related to crowdsourcing, some authors and politicians have narrowed "open government" to the idea of collaboration of the public sector with the crowd (Lathrop & Ruma, 2010; Obama, 2009). Those cheerleading open government, for example US president Obama, claim that open government "will strengthen our democracy and promote efficiency and effectiveness" (Obama, 2009). This is closely related to a normative belief that more participation in public decisions is the realization of important democratic values (Macintosh, 2008). Although this argument may be subject to debate, any debate about the contributions of open government to democratic processes needs a more refined view by distinguishing aims and the representative-democracy values of participation in open government.

Advocates of the open government approach argue that with the new possibilities of online communication, citizens can more actively engage in democratic decision-making and public administration than ever before (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006; Hilgers, 2012; Lathrop & Ruma, 2010). New Internet platforms make it easier for citizens to articulate their opinions and interact with the public administration and political representatives. Furthermore, these platforms could also increase the acceptance of political decisions, because citizens can better comprehend who and how many people support a decision (Meijer et al., 2012). Open government initiatives also can increase public trust and decrease the disillusionment with politics (Berman, 1997; Heckmann, 2011). The use of open government initiatives also may improve the implementation and outcome of policies (McDermott, 2010). Improved outcomes can consist of higher administrative service levels or completely new approaches for large social problems like climate warming or unemployment.

Critical views on open government argue that citizens or customers do not have the knowledge or the expertise to contribute in a meaningful way (Keen, 2007). Openness also can decrease trust (O'Neill, 2002) and make decision-making process less efficient (Prat, 2005). However, Tetlock (2005) argued that in most cases experts do not predict the future better than ordinary people. Poetz and Schreier (2012) showed that ideas from open innovation platforms are as valuable as ideas from professionals. They found that ideas from customers are more innovative than from professionals, although the ideas from professionals

were more feasible. Similar results were provided by Kristensson, Gustafsson, and Archer (2004). Meijer et al. (2012), however, state after an extensive literature review that many techno-optimistic articles exist that argue for the positive value of technology for open government, but that the assertions of this kind of work are not yet found to be valid in empirical studies. Currently not that many open government projects exist and are evaluated. This means that open government is still a new idea in its exploration stage.

The aim of this study, therefore, is twofold. First, we analyze if open government projects with different purposes motivate citizens differently for open government initiatives. With a better understanding of the motivation of participants, open government projects could be developed and implemented more effectively (Leimeister, Huber, Bretschneider, & Krcmar, 2009). This again might lead to the attraction of more participants which will foster better outcomes (Hilgers, 2012). Nonetheless, despite substantial research on engaging in Free/Libre Open Source Software (FLOSS) projects and private sector open innovation projects, relatively little is known why citizens engage in open government projects. A key question thus is what motivations influence the decision to participate in open government projects. Second, we study whether certain groups of society feel that they have a better access to decision processes via open government. When specific groups would be overrepresented, this may have negative implications for representative democracy values of such projects. More useful would even be if people with poor access to decision processes would feel better equipped to participate in open government.

In this study, we first define open government aims. Next, the literature about motivation to participate in other fields of online collaboration, like FLOSS, will be used to derive the most common explanations for the motivation of citizens to participate in open government projects. By means of a convenience sample we study if these motivations could be similar for different types of open government projects. Finally, we discuss to what extent the ambitions and potentials of open government can be reached and what is needed to achieve its full potential.

2. Open government ambitions

Heckmann (2011) states that: "Open government is about improving transparency and thereby accountability in all public affairs" and thus can improve the opportunities of citizens to influence political decisions. A possible precondition for this is "open data", which refers to the idea that government data should be freely accessible (Lathrop & Ruma, 2010). Open data, however, does not cover the interaction of the public sector with its citizens, only the provision of further information is meant by open data.

We focus in this study on the participation opportunities enabled by open government. Open government participation has been discussed under different names often indicating different objectives. Often used labels are for instance "citizensourcing" (Lukensmeyer & Torres, 2008), "eDemocracy", "eParticipation", "eGovernment" (Collins, 2009; OECD, 2003), "Collaborative Public Management" (McGuire, 2006), "Citizen Engagement" (OECD, 2004), "Wiki government" (Noveck, 2009) or "government 2.0" (O'Reilly, 2009). In relation to this plethora of labels, O'Reilly states, "*Much like its predecessor, Web 2.0, 'government 2.0' is a chameleon, a white rabbit term, that seems to be used by people to mean whatever they want it to mean*" (O'Reilly, 2005).

All these labels have in common that they focus on online interaction between the government and citizens. Hilgers (2012) more precisely defines open government as the act of integrating external knowledge into the political-administrative process (Hilgers, 2012; Noveck, 2009; Lathrop & Ruma, 2010). In this view, open government focuses on the collaboration between citizens and the government, but the decision makers remain the same as in a representative democracy. By contrast, in a direct democracy the power to decide switches to the citizens (Altman, 2011). Hence, most literature sees open government as a complement or an improvement for representative democracy, not as an alternative (Lathrop & Ruma, 2010).

According to Hilgers (2012) open government participation can have three goals: Citizen ideation and innovation, citizen sourcing, and collaborative democracy. This differentiation, in our perception, is based on two dimensions: 1) the degree of innovation expected from the results of participation, and 2) the domain (political or administrative) of participation. These two dimensions logically would imply a fourth goal for open government: Constituency support. Table 1 gives the dimensions, goals and an example for open government, which are further described below.

Citizen ideation & innovation aim at gathering external knowledge, mostly from citizens, to improve achievements of the public administration. One example is the platform "challenge.gov", where governmental institutions can post problems and expect possible solutions from citizens. As studies about open innovation portals demonstrate, this kind of knowledge acquisition can be highly beneficial (Haefliger, Monteiro, Foray, & Von Krogh, 2011). Their successes may be partially explained by their ability to overcome "local search bias" (Hilgers & Ihl, 2010) and thus avoid that individuals or enterprises only use knowledge sources they are already familiar with. Jeppesen and Lakhani (2010) have shown, that the best answers were often provided by people, who were not closely related to the field the question originated from. If more in depth research is required, open innovation platforms appear to be less promising.

Citizen sourcing aims at citizen support in daily public administrative tasks but do not imply that an innovative or new idea results. Typical for this category are complaint systems like "fixmystreet.com" that allows people to inform the road maintenance depot about potholes and other road maintenance tasks. This saves the institution manpower, provides more information about the infrastructure, and may deliver a faster response to the posted issue. Another example is "peertopatent.org". On this platform citizens have the possibility to review pending patent applications. The reviewer can inform the U.S. patent office if the patent application contains already patented or published knowledge (peertopatent.org, 2013). A third example is "Texas border watch", which is a live camera view of the Mexican border that requests citizens to report smuggling or illegal border crossings to the local authorities. In a one year pilot about 221.000 registered users reported over 8.000 criminal offenses by Texas border watch (Hilgers, 2012).

Collaborative democracy bundles open government initiatives for political decision processes (Hilgers, 2012). Collaborative democracy looks for answers to normative questions for future developments of the society. Examples of collaborative democracy initiatives are "participatory budgeting" projects, like "Buergerhaushalt.org" which listed 70 participatory budgets in Germany for the year 2012 (buergerhaushalt.org, 2013). In these proceedings citizens can make suggestions about the assets in the upcoming financial year. A second example of collaborative democracy is "Aufbruch Bayern", where citizens were encouraged to report projects in the fields of family, education and innovation, which were believed to be beneficial for the future of Bavaria. The project with the most positive feedback in each category from the community received a financial funding from the state government of Bavaria.

As a final variant of open government participation, which combines the political domain with low levels of innovation, one can recognize digital communications and interactions between politicians and their constituents with the purpose of receiving support and developing stronger ties between them. Politicians' and parties' websites, blogs and micro blogs facilitate these types of open government participation. This is obviously useful for strengthening the position of politicians but is less effective in increasing citizens' influence on politicians (Hercheui, 2009), and therefore we exclude it here from our study on how open