Open(ing) government

There’s a lot of chatter about open government, but not a lot of clarity around what the concept means and what it accomplishes in practical terms.

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The digital landscape is changing people’s expectations of government. It is driving new demands for transparency, creating new forms of engagement and allowing citizens, businesses and other institutions to reimage how they might participate in policy development processes.

In 2012, the government of Canada signed on to the international Open Government Partnership to respond to these expectations. Ontario has recently joined as well, and well over 50 other jurisdictions in Canada have open government teams or websites running.

The partnership’s vision is “that more governments become sustainably more transparent, more accountable, and more responsive to their own citizens, with the ultimate goal of improving the quality of governance, as well as the quality of services that citizens receive.”
And yet, a few years into articulating that vision (much longer for some), we’re often still a little vague on what it means—and especially what it means for citizens.

**What is open government?**

For starters, open government is not a thing. It’s a broad category of ideas and is different for different people, in different countries, at different times. Worldwide, it can include principles and projects like these:

- access to information laws
- open data (making government data available free online)
- citizen engagement in policy-making
- improved media relations
- petitions to the elected government
- cameras, transcripts and websites for legislatures
- open science and open access to journal articles
- anti-corruption laws
- whistleblower protection
- use of, and contribution to, open source software
- open source logic in government (for instance, allowing third parties to redesign entry points into government information and services)
- spending disclosure
- business registries
- collaboration between governments and external organizations
partnerships between governments and the private and social good sectors

The concept is constantly evolving over time as public demand and the government’s responsiveness changes. Jurisdictions can choose to define and set the scope of open government however they like—though stakeholders may vocally and publicly disagree.

Here’s a short, generalized version: *Open government is a commitment to making data and information about government operations and decisions accessible to citizens, and to creating opportunities for people to engage in public decisions that interest or impact them.*

What does that definition look like in practice? Here’s the range of views, from most to least cynical:

*Openwashing*: open government is lipstick on a pig; all hat, no cattle. It’s more of a brand and a marketing campaign than it is action or change.

*A banner to rally behind*: open government puts a name to a set of activities and changes (some of which may have been long since under way), and in doing so it creates community and standards. It provides an easier way of talking about open data, citizen engagement and transparency, which allows links into other parts of the government agenda.

*A period of acceleration*: open government builds on a country’s existing baseline of transparency and citizen engagement, adds data (such as datasets) and information (such as policy analysis, publications or reports) and helps countries raise the bar across government.

*Fundamental transformation*: open government is a radically different way of doing government, and a fundamentally different relationship between citizens and their government. It means that all stakeholders are working
with the same information as government to embed citizen participation in public decisions.

For me, the “period of acceleration” view is a reasonable lens. (You can read a long explanation of that concept on Samara’s site). Seen this way, open government is a relative concept. Unless you want to get into extremes (“no information, open never” versus “all information, open always”), a country’s goals for openness are typically framed in reference points that are, to be honest, arbitrary. That is, “open government” tends to mean “more open than we were before.” For example, compared with global standards, Canada is a leader in access to information laws. However, because we brought in our first laws in 1984, we’re demanding a higher standard for ourselves now.

With a working (if amorphous) concept in place, the next article in this series will turn to how governments in Canada are doing at delivering on open government.

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