Open Government Data Practices: The Example of Civic Hacking

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Open Government Data

Governments throughout Europe (and indeed all over the world) have begun to open their data repositories to the public. Such initiatives are based on legislation such as the Freedom of Information Act (FoIA) or Transparency Act (TA) but also on the assumption that opening government data is an "important and growing economic significance." (Neele Krons, 2011). Further, government bodies have come to see "their" data as a means to provide value-added services to citizens. Generally open data is defined as data "that can be freely used, re-used and redistributed by anyone." (Open Data Handbook, 2012). Yet open data advocates, policy makers, journalists and other stakeholders disagree on which formats actually qualify as open government data (e.g. whether data needs to be machine readable or not).

The figure below provides an international overview of the provision of open government data per country and type of data. Such overviews exist as well for country and regional level.

![Image Credit: Chattanooga Public Library](http://www.opendatanow.com/2013/11/new/engagement-tool.html)

**Availability of Government Data**

http://studio.ahk.org/gov-

**Methodology & Empirical Work**

The research project runs from September 2014 to August 2017. The fieldwork for the research is of qualitative nature, an ethnographic approach. The initial pilot study consists of the active participation in the two-weekly meetings of the CodeForGermany collective in Hamburg. Every other Monday coders, designers, journalists meet to make use of the open government data provided by Hamburg’s Open Data portal.

Because of the international character of the open government movement, I am planning to extend the fieldlפק in a second phase to different European countries and participate in events from a range of different organisations. It is also planned to conduct 2 studies of public authorities, ‘their’ open data and its impact on administration.

It is anticipated to conduct focus groups with civic hacking teams to encourage its members to jointly reflect on their co-design practice. In addition semi-structured interviews with individual participants (e.g. hackers, civil servants, open data advocates) are foreseen. These might be conducted as a follow-up of an event and do not necessarily have to be face-to-face. Interviews and focus groups will be voice recorded. Where appropriate a team’s activity are video recorded and photographs taken.

**Civic Hacking**

'Civic hackers' are anybody who is willing to collaborate with others to create, build, and invent open source solutions using publicly-released data, code and technology to solve challenges relevant to their neighbourhoods, cities or states (HackForChange 2013).

Civic hacking initiatives (such as ‘Code for America’ or ‘Code for Germany’) provide a means to exploit the potential of open government data without posing significant financial threats to public administrations. They bring together social entrepreneurs, computer programmers, designers, civil servants, journalists, activists and others. In many major cities collectives of civic hackers have formed that meet on a regular basis to work on open data projects.

**Motivation**

While civic hacking is becoming increasingly popular, research on the ways in which it performs and produces ‘open publics’, its links to administrations and decision-makers as well as its potential to a more transparent and participatory government is sparse and non-existent. The research project attempts to address this gap and develop an understanding of civic hacking as situated co-design practice and public engagement tool that creates new public spaces.

**Research Questions**

1) How have open government practices developed historically?

A review of open data practices enables the research project to give an account of the changing sociotechnical assemblages of open government data, associated claims such as increased transparency or accountability, and ever changing technologies. Civic hacking is understood as the latest in a series of open data practices and provides an interesting field for studying contemporary entanglements of the social, political and technical.

2) How do information systems, government data, policies, open data advocates, NGOs, social workers, civil servants, system developers, code, journalists, apps (and many more) come together and intra-act in order to achieve social benefits through technological tools?

Increasingly are social benefits meant to be accomplished with technological tools. How are different sociotechnical actors assembled and reconfigured in order to do so?

3) How are open government data intra-actively produced and performed through civic hacking?

Open government data has become a buzzword (along with big data) that increasingly seeks the attention of social scientists (e.g. Kitchin 2014). These concepts overlap where large public government datasets (e.g. GPS, census, healthcare) are made available to the public; other, smaller public data sets from state, local and federal governments may be ‘open’ but not ‘big’ (Gurin 2013).

The research project contributes to scholarly efforts that aim to understand [big] (open) data and its enactments within heterogeneous assemblages of people, practices, objects, Information Technologies, infrastructures, mobile devices, policies and many more.

4) What subject and object-positions of the ‘open public’ and an ‘open administration’/‘open government’ are being produced through civic hacking and how are they differently enacted through ‘open data’?

Barry (2001) argues that ‘the citizen of a technological society is expected to have a certain knowledge of technology, and to make choices on the basis of this knowledge’ (p.29). The research project aims to understand how—based on differing imaginaries and different material assemblages of data, code, services, mobile technologies, and individuals—different subject- and object-positions of ‘informed citizens’ and ‘open publics’ as users of open data are produced. In addition the project develops an understanding of how civic hacking enacts ‘open data’ and ‘open government’.

**Literature**


Kitchin, Rob. 2014. The Data Revolution: Big Data, Open Data, Data Infrastructures and Their Consequences. SAGE.