

Open Government Data (white paper)

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Contents

Acknowledgements.....	3
Back ground and context	3
Why Open Access to government data?.....	4
Open Data and International trends.....	4
Case studies	5
1: Data.gov.au (Australia)	5
2: Data.vic.gov.au (Victoria, Australia).....	6
3: Data.gov.uk (UK)	7
4: G Cloud (UK).....	7
5: Standards Hub, (UK).....	8
6: Open Government Platform (USA)	8
7: OpenSecrets.org: Centre for Responsible Politics (USA)	8
Conclusion: Trends and future implications	9
Key gaps	9
Is data better?.....	9
References	11

What is Government 2.0?

“Government 2.0 involves direct citizen engagement in conversations about government services and public policy through open access to public sector information and new Internet based technologies. It also encapsulates a way of working that is underpinned by collaboration, openness and engagement”¹

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Back ground and context

The Political Issues Analysis System (PIAS) project—in which this white-paper is a sub-set—sought to investigate how citizens in Melbourne, Australia used the Internet to seek political information about key political issues. It also sought to understand how citizens contacted and interacted with their elected representative in relation to these issues. Through workshops, case studies, and the development and testing of a prototype, the research uncovered some notable trends in terms of engagement with important aspects of the formal political system online.

The PIAS project principally focussed upon citizen information use through investigating their interaction with party web-sites and the policy documents they made available. However, the participants in our study largely found 1), the sites difficult to use 2), the information hard to navigate and compare with other policies and 3), the written policies unreliable and unclear. After building and testing a prototype, one of the key recommendations from the study emphasized that the policy-positions published by democratic political parties should be made available in a ‘machine readable’ form so that they can be automatically aggregated into other systems to enable citizens to compare the policy positions of the parties. Also, strict metadata publishing standards and frameworks should be utilised by the parties when publishing policy documents so that the information aggregated is of a high-standard allowing it be re-utilised effectively.

¹ Government 2.0 Action Plan, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Victoria <http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/index.php/news-publications/innovation/gov-20-action-plan> (accessed 19 September, 2014).

This White Paper compliments the PIAS project and examines in more detail the availability of what could be termed 'democratic data' and will be of use to others attempting to engage with government data and the issues that surround it. ²

Why Open Access to government data?

Much of the impetus behind the drive for Open Access to government data stems from a push for greater transparency to the functions of government. However, in the case of Victoria, for instance, much of the data being released within the Gov 2.0 agenda tends to be of an administrative nature and of little democratic potential. Whilst the Parliament of Victoria does make an enormous amount of useful material available to the public on its website; it is not made available in a technically sophisticated, machine readable way to take full advantage of the potential of the Internet. Bills are only available in .pdf or word format and the most important document about the workings of government, Hansard, is only available as .pdf (although it is possible to do a full-text search of Hansard from 1991 onwards). If these important documents were available in a machine readable form, they could be utilised by application developers to re-use this information in innovative ways.

The Open Access movement is a push to make data both machine readable and interoperable so that it may be linked together and leveraged for all sorts of purposes. This may be for new business opportunities, medical research, or new areas of social research. However, doing this is no easy task as multiple data sources require linking and matching across diverse and complex systems. The first step is to expose data in a standardised way so that it may be located and read. The Victorian public sector has a policy framework specifically designed to achieve these tasks titled the Victorian Public Sector Action Plan. The two key points of the VPS Government 2.0 Action Plan that is key to this report are:

1. *Participation: Engaging communities and citizen through using Government 2.0 initiatives to put citizens at the centre and provide opportunities for co-design, co-production and co-delivery.*
2. *Transparency: Opening up government through making government more open and transparent through the release of public sector data and information³*

Making 'democratic' data available in this way can only help to "deepen democratic processes" and promote a strong and healthy democracy. ⁴

Open Data and International trends

International trends in terms of making insignificant sources and amounts of 'democratic data' available to the public do not differ markedly from Victoria. But some countries and Australian states do release a little more 'democratic data' resulting in some innovative new applications and services (see: case studies below).

² For the purposes here, "democratic data" is described as: 1) Hansard: making the working of government available in new ways, 2) Transparency: newer forms of transparency through 'data', and 3) Policy: enhance and extend the policy making process through online open consultation

³ Government 2.0 Action Plan, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Victoria <http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/index.php/news-publications/innovation/gov-20-action-plan> (accessed 19 September, 2014).

⁴ Ibid.

There is also an internationally trend to exposes parliamentary information with citizen produced information to promote of a two-way dialogue between political representatives and the public. This approach that utilises communication tools and services that largely already exist (such as Google, Twitter, Facebook etc.), has not been fully utilised nor really understood in a political sense (by the public, civil society, pressure groups, associations nor by elected representatives). Rather than building a completely new platform, as has been the case with a number of somewhat underutilised government initiatives, some newer projects take advantage of largely existing and heavily used social network platforms and provide tools and services to augment their existing capacity for informing and communicating government policy processes. The large EU funded WeGov project and other projects in the US and Europe are indicative of this movement.⁵

However, the Victorian Government's own Government 2.0 action plan; particularly its priority area of 'engaging communities and citizens' and 'opening up government data to promote greater transparency' does appear to be moving in this direction.⁶ As the Victorian Government 2.0 Action Plan states:

Research has found that usage of social media and social networking sites has increased with 45% of Australians reporting regular use, up from 38% in 2008. This growth is across all age groups although there are differences in patterns and type of use between age groups. For example, older Australians are now responsible for expanding the reach of online social networking, indicating that Web 2.0 is not just a Gen Y phenomenon. There has also been a significant increase in use of the Internet to interact with government and a corresponding reduction in traditional methods of communication, such as by mail or in-person.⁷

There is a need to make available and 'socialise' government data and provide tools and methods to encourage the relationship between government and polity; particularly in terms of the re-use and 'socialisation' of government data to promote strong democracy in a medium long touted for its democratic potential.

Case studies

The following case studies reveal the present trends in the provision of government 'democratic data'.

1: Data.gov.au (Australia)

Whilst **data.gov.au** makes available a great deal of data from the Australian government and its agencies, both state and Federal, there is very little data that could be described as 'democratic data'. Again, for the sake of this report, democratic data is described as data that may empower citizens to make informed voting decisions based upon the policy position of a particular Member of Parliament, the workings of and influences upon Parliament, or a political party's policy platform and factors which influence their policies.

⁵ WeGov Project, Seventh Framework Programme, EU, <http://www.wegov-project.eu/> (accessed 19 September, 2014).

⁶ Government 2.0 Action Plan, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Victoria <http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/index.php/news-publications/innovation/gov-20-action-plan> (accessed 19 September, 2014).

⁷ Ibid.

A survey of the 1120 datasets available on **data.gov.au** in 2013 reveals only a hand-full could be described as ‘democratic’ data. This does not appear to support the Federal Government’s own Declaration of Open Government that states:

The Australian Government now declares that, in order to promote greater participation in Australia’s democracy, it is committed to open government based on a culture of engagement, built on better access to and use of government held information, and sustained by the innovative use of technology.⁸

Data.gov.au was created as a response to the recommendations of the Report of the Government 2.0 Taskforce and is only at a very early stage of gestation.⁹ The term ‘Open Government’ should primarily focus upon the political aspects of Government, rather than the administrative aspects of governance that is of far less democratic value to the public.¹⁰

2: Data.vic.gov.au (Victoria, Australia)

Data.vic.gov.au is the State version of the Federal Government’s **Data.gov.au** and makes available the data from the working of Victorian State Government agencies. As with the Federal version of the site, the aim is to make data available so that it is easy to find within a machine readable form so that it may be re-used.¹¹

A policy framework that the data was made available through was called the Public Sector Information Release Framework (PSIRF). The Framework was a series of activities and policy guidance that allowed the Public Sector to recognise, categorise and release data of public benefit. Activities within this Victorian Public Sector have also included ‘hack days’ where participants were given access to government data and tools within a competition scenario so that they could build new applications to glean new insights from the data. The first Victorian Public Sector Hack Day was held on 7 April, 2010 with projects listed on their website such as:

- **“Your Victoria, Your Budget** - an online postcode-searchable directory of government infrastructure spending [equal first place]
- **Carbon Net** - an online service to match carbon emitters with potential carbon sinks - including search by postcode and a range of carbon emission/savings calculation tools [honourable mention]
- **Bloody Oath** - an improved search system for legislation”

Again, much of the data released by the Victorian Public Sector may be of administrative value, but there is very little ‘democratic data’ and although some is available, the data that records the workings of parliament is not as easily re-usable and is not published in machine readable form.

⁸ Declaration of Open Government, Department of Finance, Australian Government, <http://www.finance.gov.au/e-government/strategy-and-governance/gov2/declaration-of-open-government.html> (accessed 19 September, 2014)

⁹ Government Response to the Report of the Government 2.0 Taskforce, Department of Finance, Australian Government <http://www.finance.gov.au/publications/govresponse20report/index.html> (accessed 19 September, 2014).

¹⁰ Good examples of ‘democratic data’ are data sets that are provided by external sources to the Department of Premier and Cabinet that reveal the name of the lobbyists and their organisations.

¹¹ Data.vic.gov.au, (Victoria, Australia), Department of State Development, Business, and Innovation, Victorian State Government.

3: Data.gov.uk (UK)

The UK has long been at the fore front of the Open Data movement and has many government agencies, programs, and initiatives aimed at making government data more readily available. However, much of the movement is imbued with somewhat utopian democratic ideals that although commendable, may not actualise in practice. In the Forward to a recent UK Government White Paper titled 'Open Data White Paper: Unleashing the Potential' the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General, the Rt Hon. Francis Maude stated that:

Data is the 21st Century's raw material. It's value is in holding governments to account; in driving choice and improvements in public services; and in inspiring innovation and enterprise that spurs social and economic growth. In the last 20 years the world has opened up and citizens across the globe are proclaiming their right to data; this White Paper sets out how we intend to use that energy to unlock the potential of Open Data and for the first time the technology exists to make the demand for greater openness irresistible.¹²

A survey of the data made available reveals that although there are many more datasets available than in Australia; a total of 8669, there are not many that could be described as democratic or 'holding government to account'. Apart from data such as whom Ministers are meeting and from what industries, very little has democratic potential. Plus the UK Audit of Political Engagement produced by the Hansard Society does not indicate that political engagement is actually increasing in Britain, despite the best efforts to make more information freely available online and elsewhere.¹³

4: G Cloud (UK)¹⁴

The G-Cloud Program is an initiative in the UK to deliver cloud-based services to government departments. Cloud computing is a term used to describe both hardware and software computing capacities that are delivered as a service over the Internet or through other computing networks. It provides data storage and computation facilities for users that are beyond the user's desktop.

Only eligible government organisations such as schools and government agencies are allowed to purchase the services from G Cloud; usually provided by commercial third party providers. These services include innovative software as Policy Lifecycle Management: a Policy Lifecycle Management (PLM) toolset that delivers a strategic planning tool for use by policy and strategic planning teams.¹⁵

The G-Cloud program combines the capacities of the Government Procurement Service portal and what is termed a 'Government eMarketplace'. This allows the UK public sector to access centrally negotiated prices for commercial software and services. The G-Cloud Program provides over 1700 services of which the data produced may be of high political value such as access to MP expenses or

¹² Open Data White Paper: Unleashing the Potential, Francis Maude, Cabinet Office, UK Government http://data.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Open_data_White_Paper.pdf (2012).

¹³ Some innovative Apps have been developed by third parties for use on mobile devices including: **Gov You: Your Freedom Data** that makes public ideas on civil liberties, regulations and laws. Another **UK Climate Projections** provides data on how the UK's climate could change in the 21st century responding to greenhouse emissions. And another **expendituremap** makes available public expenditure data by UK region using such categories as services, defence, public order, and transport <http://data.gov.uk/apps> (accessed 19 September, 2014).

¹⁴ G Cloud (UK) (Digital Marketplace), <https://digitalmarketplace.service.gov.uk>, UK Government.

¹⁵ This software is provided by an Australian based company called Objective Corporation (available for three thousand pounds). <http://www.objective.com/> (accessed 19 September, 2014)

strategic policy development. Again, the G-Cloud service is in its infancy but it is an interesting model not only of the procurement of government ICT services but for the issues relating to the availability of data. This data should be open and available for broader democratic purposes and not restricted by third-party suppliers and licensing arrangements.

5: Standards Hub, (UK)¹⁶

The Standards Hub is project from the UK with the aim to prioritise and adopt ‘open standards’ in government (an ‘open standard’ is generally a standard within the public sphere that is royalty free). Open standards provide an ‘infrastructural framework’ in which third-party innovations may flourish; vital in the context of open government data as this means that data may be collected, disseminated, and used across all government departments and agencies and beyond.

The Standards Hub website acts as a ‘front door’ in which government employees and members of the public can get involved in the standards process. This assures that the technical standards set by government are done so in an open and transparent manner; vital is the democratic potential of this data if it is to be utilised through new third-party services.

6: Open Government Platform (USA)¹⁷

The Open Government Platform is a pioneering new joint-venture project from India and the United States. It makes government data, tools and processes available to developers, researchers, and the media to promote informed and better decisions through access to quality information.

The data available on the Open Government Platform comes from Data.gov and provides an automated way for government agencies to publish data. Community spaces are also available, around topics of national importance, and developers are able to develop new applications within the platform's architecture. Users may share insights from the platform on popular social-software applications such as Twitter and Facebook and also have access to publically available APIs (Application Programming Interfaces).

The teams working on the project are from Data.gov in the U.S. and the National Informatics Centre in India. Although in its infancy, this project shows great promise of things to come.

7: OpenSecrets.org: Centre for Responsible Politics (USA)¹⁸

The Centre for Responsible Politics is a research group based in Washington in the United States that investigates money in US politics and its effects upon the political process. The organisation principally collects data about federal campaign contributions and lobbying and offers analysis based on this data. Data is gathered and curated from US Federal agencies such as the Federal Election Commission and the Internal Revenue Service. The organisation provides access to its data through downloads and publically available APIs that may be used for non-commercial use.

A number of iPhone apps have been developed using the Centre's data such as ‘Influence Tracker’ that tracks individual senators and representatives and the contributions that they have received.

¹⁶ Standards Hub, (UK), <http://standards.data.gov.uk> , Cabinet Office, UK Government. (accessed 19 September, 2014)

¹⁷ Open Government Platform (USA), <http://ogpl.gov.in> , (National Informatics Centre, Department of Electronics & IT, Government of India and Office of Citizen Services & Innovative Technologies, General Services Administration, U.S. Government) (accessed 19 September, 2014).

¹⁸ <http://www.opensecrets.org> Centre for Responsible Politics (USA) (accessed 19 September, 2014).

The centre produces strict citation guidelines insuring that the original context of the data is known and the work of the Centre is properly acknowledged. A significant innovation that reveals the great potential of 'democratic data' if it is made available, curated, and re-used in appropriate ways.

Conclusion: Trends and future implications

The increased dispersion of high-capacity broadband into domestic spaces and civic society creates the imperative that government respond appropriately through the creation of 'democratic services' and associated applications that may be used online or through other new broadband enabled convergent devices, such as smart TVs and mobile pads.

The promise of these applications is that they will contribute to civic society, to democratic participation, to a better informed citizenry and legislature, and to the transparency of democratic processes. The NBN is driving the adoption of a large number of devices and services and it is vital that 'democratic services' are developed as a part of this. 'Smart' and 'Hybrid' Television and hand-held and other devices connected to the NBN offer enormous opportunity for politics; both formal and informal. It is vital that we understand these newer forms of information politics and the 'democratic services' that are required to benefit from the platforms that are already in popular use to encourage citizen-government dialogue, and better understandings of the democratic choices available to citizens. Some of the key gap areas that this white paper discovered include:

Key gaps

- Little or no data that could be considered 'democratic data' is being made available through the Australian governments Gov 2.0 policies. Whilst this does mirror international trends to some degree, the problem appears to be more acute in Australia
- A greater focus upon data that is not purely of an administrative value should be released; the data that strengthens democracy (if this data is collected).
- There are also the dangers of 'un known benefits' of the release of some government data (ie. this could become a utopian and idealistic Libertarian goal that does not strengthen democracy)
- Data needs to be delivered with minimal copyright and in forms that it may be used by developers (including its intellectual and specialist context and not just empirical, descriptive metadata). There is always a danger of misinterpretation or 'context collapse'.

Is data better?

Modern governments have always produced a plethora of information, in many forms, for many tasks, and for many audiences. And much of this is now in digital form. However, the term 'data', deriving from Science, comes with many preconceptions about the nature and significance, and in systems as large and complex as modern governments, it is difficult to locate, understand, preserve, and analyse 'data' across agencies, departments, and democratic institutions. This may lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretation.

In a humanities context any source of data may be used as evidence towards a thesis or report that may have enormous political or other value. And governments—as well as the private sphere—are creating an enormous amount of data in their day-to-day activities and the volume promises to grow. This creates enormous challenges in terms of its volume, variety and format, and its velocity

in terms of the speed in that it is produced and how this intersects with the temporal aspects of stable, government institutions. In many ways the digital age creates as many problems for democracy as it addresses, but it is important to engage with it, to develop new applications and services, that address its democratic deficits and opportunities.

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