

5 Open Government Trends

By Joseph Marks

Open government used to be a relatively simple concept. It was about meetings and documents. They either were open to the public or they weren't. With the growth of the federal government and the explosion of new data sources, from emails passed between agency officials to thousands of satellite and sensor feeds, things have grown more complicated.

The basic question of whether a document is available to the public is just the beginning of the transparency conversation. Open government advocates want to know whether the document is online, whether it's in a reasonable place, and whether it's in a machine-readable format such as XML or a proprietary form such as PDF.

Some agencies are proactive about disclosure, releasing machine-updated data sets that citizens and organizations can stream directly onto their own websites, as well as keeping public catalogs of material they've released under the Freedom of Information Act. Others are slower to adapt.

Here are five trends in open government:



INFORMATION INDUSTRIES

The Obama administration's flagship open government initiative is Data.gov, a trove of more than 445,000 raw and geospatial data sets about everything from coal production to broadband Internet penetration at U.S. elementary schools. As of June, the administration had launched 13 "data communities" on the site, focused on areas such as energy, education, ethics and oceans.

One of the project's major ambitions is to see companies, nonprofits and entrepreneurs use the data to build Web services and mobile applications, such as real estate apps that rate neighborhoods based on flooding history and broadband

capacity. Federal technology leaders say the site could spawn whole new industries similar to those built on government-gathered weather and Global Positioning System data.



Some critics complain, though, that the open data movement has shifted the transparency conversation too far from core questions about accountability. While the government has posted hundreds of thousands of new data sets online in the past

few years, its success with traditional open government metrics has been more limited—a 6 percent increase in fully responsive FOIA replies.

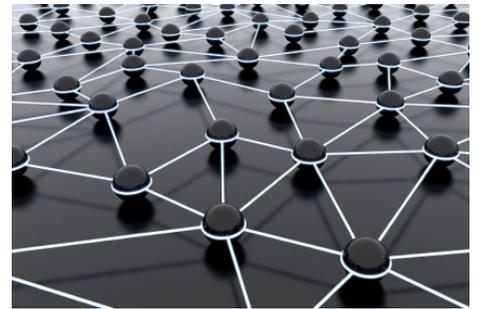
STREAMING DATA

Another component of the open data movement is application programming interfaces, or APIs. These are digital tools that allow information from one server to be automatically streamed to another, such as the Twitter tickers that are becoming prevalent on public and private sector websites.

In his recently released government digital strategy, federal Chief Information Officer Steven VanRoekel called on agencies to make APIs

the "new default" to present raw government data to the public rather than—or in addition to—presenting processed information in platform-specific forms, such as static Web pages or PDF files.

VanRoekel's office planned to issue governmentwide policies for streaming data from APIs by August and require all new federal IT systems to follow those policies by May 2013, according to the strategy.



INFORMATION REQUESTS

Technology also is being deployed to make traditional open government processes more effective and less labor-intensive.

The Environmental Protection Agency, the Commerce Department, and the National Archives and Records Administration plan to launch an online portal in September to track FOIA requests. The aim is to keep a public record of how each request travels through an agency and whether it is forwarded to another participating agency or outside the system. Other agencies may participate later.



The module will publicly post all requests and response records so new requesters don't have to seek out the same documents, according to John Moses, one of the project's leaders. After the initial launch, designers can add a directory to help citizens determine the best place to submit their request based on the paths of previous FOIAs.

Some third-party analyses have shown the FOIA module could save more than \$200 million over five years if adopted governmentwide. Constructing the system will cost about \$1.3 million.

BETTER RESPONSE

The Office of Government Information Services, which opened its doors in 2009, mediates disputes between requesters and the agencies processing those requests, something like a FOIA ombudsman.

OGIS, which is located in the National Archives, can't compel agencies to respond to FOIA requests, but staffers say their most useful service is acting as a go-between. They help agencies determine what exactly a requester is after and help requesters phrase what they want in a format that agencies can respond to.

During the two fiscal years that ended in September 2011, OGIS opened 764 cases, three-fourths of which did not rise to the level of an actual dispute, according to the agency's annual report.



OGIS hasn't fared as well with its second mandate: recommending policy changes to Congress and the president that would make FOIA processing more efficient and transparent.

Agency officials put together a slate of recommendations, which sat at the Office of Management and Budget awaiting approval for more than a year. At one point, the two agencies decided not to forward the recommendations to Congress because they failed to include "any substantive revisions to the disclosure requirements of FOIA," according to a letter from OGIS Director Miriam Nisbet. But officials finally reversed course and published the recommendations under pressure from Sens. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and Charles Grassley, R-Iowa.

GOING GLOBAL

Transparency initiatives haven't been limited to the United States.

The Open Government Partnership, launched in September 2011, is an association of 55 national governments focused on making their operations more transparent and on sharing best practices.

Colombia, for example, has committed to publishing information from government agencies in plain language that the majority of its citizens can understand. South African commitments focus heavily on the effective delivery

of government services, including a Know Your Service Rights and Responsibilities public outreach campaign.

U.S. plans include launching an open source version of the Data.gov platform in partnership with India.

Transparency advocates generally have applauded the Open Government Partnership as a "race to the top" in government transparency, but some have expressed concern that the partnership's inclusivity could lead to some fuzzy commitments and limited impact.



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