David Cameron's Transparency Revolution?

Ben Worthy

Institution: Birkbeck College, University of London

Email: b.worthy@bbk.ac.uk

Abstract

This article examines the impact of the UK Government's Transparency agenda, focusing on the publication of spending data at local government level. It measures the democratic impact in terms of creating transparency and accountability, public participation and everyday information. The study uses a survey of local authorities, interviews and FOI requests to build a picture of use and impact.

It argues that the spending has led to some accountability, though from those already monitoring government rather than citizens. It has not led to increased participation, as it lacks the narrative or accountability instruments to fully use it. Nor has it created a new stream of information to underpin citizen choice, though new innovations offer this possibility.

The evidence points to third party innovations as the key. They can contextualise and 'localise' information and may also provide the comparison to the first step in more effective accountability.

The superficially simple and neutral reforms conceal complex political dynamics. The very design lends itself to certain framing effects, further compounded by assumptions and blurred concepts and a lack of accountability instruments to enforce problems raised by the data.

Research points to the immense potential of the internet to transform political action, knowledge and structures (Nam 2012: Tolbert and Mossberger 2012: Chadwick et al 2010). Yet barriers remain. Analysis of the UK's new Open Data reforms draws out the varied political dynamics that underlie the superficially 'neutral' technological changes.

Open Data

Open Data concerns 're-use' of information, combining the power of technology and the knowledge provided by data (Interview). It means publishing 'government data in a reusable form' (Huijboon and Van den Broek 2011, 5-6; 1).

Open Data research is in its infancy with 'little systematic and structured research' often focusing on concepts or systems designs (Janssen et al 2012, 262: Davies and Bawa 2012). Academics have identified a range of ambitious political, economic and social objectives for the reforms, with Millard listing more than 20, from reduced bureaucracy

to increased equality and justice (Rowley 2010; Millard 2008; Huijboon and Van den Broek 2011).

This article focuses on the 'democratic' and 'political' aims. A number of works have explored the design and politics of reform (Tolbert and Mossberger 2006; Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes 2010). Here Open Data links to a whole range of other 'information' based reforms, from online in experiments in deliberation, financial transparency and e-government to FOI, that are increasingly merging (Ganapati and Reddick 2012, 116). This 'computer mediated transparency' provides a framework to understand the potential and barriers for Open Data (Curtin and Meijer 2006: Grimmelikhaujsen and Welch 2012).

The Potential of Open Data

The flexibility of information technology may mean its potential appears unlimited. Benefits cluster into political and social, economic, and operational and technical areas (Janssen et al 2012, 266: Robinson et al 2009). In order to better explore the reforms, the article examines 3 identified democratic/political aims: increased transparency and accountability, transparency and participation and transparency and informing.

Transparency and Accountability

The combination of new technology and data may render authorities more transparent and accountable, opening up more information and making scrutiny easier and quicker. Using McGubbins and Schwartz's famous distinction, data and the spin-off innovations could work as either 'police patrol' or 'fire alarm mechanism' (1984, 166). This could take numerous forms. Open Data may enable 'truth based advocacy', where the creation of certain facts will create 'pressure for change', or 'social monitoring', where the 'eyes and ears of citizens' are used to 'spot public problems' (Fung et al 2012, 11-15). The innovative twist is that the public themselves can become the monitor as part of what Keane (2009) calls 'Monitory democracy', whereby an eclectic mix of 'extra-parliamentary…power-monitoring and power-controlling devices' from courts to social media act as 'watchdog' and 'barking dog'(xxvii).

Bauhr and Grimes (2013) found some successful examples of such 'monitoring' but emphasised it worked only in certain situations. ICTs generally have not had a dramatic impact on public accountability' but do make 'benchmarking easier' (Vincente et al 2010, 16). FOI may offer some comparison: as an accountability mechanism it works best alongside other tools as part of a wider campaign when used, for example, by NGOs or journalists (Worthy 2010: Worthy et al 2011).

The danger is that such monitoring will create an 'illusion of openness' (Nam 2012, 91). The 'monitory' approach may be shaped both by the technology itself and pre-existing 'negative patterns' of reporting and use (Fung and Weil 2010: Flinders 2012). Fung and Weil express concern that, for example, so-called stimulus trackers such as the

Recovery.gov, 'focus on costs' rather than 'commensurate public benefits', leading to 'more stories of government waste, corruption and failure' rather than the hoped for 'political' improvements (2010, 107). FOI similarly may reinforce negative characteristics, highlighting scandal or 'distrustful' information (Bauhr and Grimes 2013).

Participation

A second strand of research has centred upon the potential of ICTs to empower and widen democratic participation. Ease of access and availability 'lowers the barriers' to involving the public. Open Data can help drive 'high threshold participation', such as online deliberation, and more 'low threshold', less interactive, activities such as e-petitions or data portals (see Elstub and 2013: Chadwick et al 2010, 19).

Early research pointed to disappointing results (Chadwick et al 2010). However more recent studies indicate a small but significant effect (Boulianne 2009: Nam 2012). Online activity in the US has been linked to turnout, campaign contributions and attendance at meetings (Tolbert and Mossberger 2012, 202). Garrett et al argue that 'broad patterns leave no doubt that new communicative capabilities are catalysts (and, in some cases, enablers) for change in political behaviour' (2012, 218). The question is then who the new participants are, and their motivations.

Informing

A final potential, more quotidian but nonetheless essential aim is the idea that ICTs and data can supply a range of information on services, activities and spending that allow the public to better understand political activity and make choices. Research on Open Data has often focused on 'such data that is relatively safe to publicize' (Janssen et al 2012, 260).

In the US and UK online activity is linked to increased knowledge of politics, whether intended or in some cases 'accidental' (Tolbert and Mossberger 2012, 205). However, the exact influence of such knowledge remains uncertain (see below).

Barriers

While the potential is clear, a number of barriers present themselves. These include technological, political and conceptual.

Technology

The first barrier concerns technology and its design. Discussion of ICTs is often underpinned by a technological determinism and an 'air of inevitability' (**Gould et al 2010, 185**). Yet path dependency may mean that 'opening of data will reinforce existing structures' (Janssen et al 2012, 261). Cultures and pre-existing patterns can shape or blunt impact. For example, Vincente et al's (2010) study of local EU websites found that ICTs 'tend to reflect present service delivery patterns and not transform '(15-16).

Evidence for FOI transforming cultures, for good or ill, is limited (Worthy 2010). Different tools differ in their effect and structures shape impact. As technology evolves, the picture becomes more complex with technology displaying flexibility and multi-granularity (Chadwick et al 2010).

Politics

The political dynamics of ICT reforms are relatively under researched (Chadwick 2011). Open Data also 'assumes the readiness of public agencies for an opening process' that 'welcomes opposing views' and 'assumes that government is to give up control' (Janssen et al 2012, 261). However, the tendency across all 'information' initiatives is for politicians to be enthusiastic about disclosing 'politically useful' information that reflects well on them (Vincente et al 2010, 10).Government can also selectively emphasise or spin information (Heald 2012, 30).

Detailed studies of innovations are lacking (Tolbert and Mossberger 2012). However, a study of the Mayor of Gangnam-gu in South Korea (Ahn and Breteschneider 2011), of an anoymised city in the US by Chadwick (2011) and a survey of US state level information officers indicate the complex political dynamics underneath (Ganapati and Reddick 2012). In Korea the political context in Gangnam-gu led to the newly elected mayor innovating with e-democracy to gain 'public support' leverage in battles with the bureaucracy and opposition (Ahn and Breteschneider 2011). By contrast, in the US 'techcity' a combination of scant resources, political skepticism and poor policy choices led to failure in highly propitious environment (Chadwick 2011). A survey of information officers across the US found a combination of budgetary and technological barriers leading to increased transparency but not increased participation (**Ganapati and Reddick 2012**). There may be a further political dimension, as some argue that the superficial 'neutrality' of technological change hides a range of ideological positions and objectives (Longo 2011).

Assumptions

Finally, a series of assumptions are built into discussion that shape the debate, outcomes and perception of how or if the reforms are working. At the centre of most discussion of ICTs is a liberal-individualist view of the citizen, whereby 'information transmission' allows individuals to 'examine political positions and register choices' (Dahlberg 2011, 858-59).

However, it is not clear if citizens need 'full information' or use 'yardstick measures' or shortcuts' (James 2011, 401). Moreover, information is rarely interpreted neutrally and even 'non political' information is 'filtered' by pre-existing 'orientations' or 'predispositions' (James 2011, 401-403: Van De Walle and Ryzin 2011, 1438).

Nor is it to clear how those receiving the information then behave. Across numerous countries it is not clear whether or how voters are influenced by available information

(Bauhr and Grimes 2013, 7). A study at local government level in the UK found, for example, that local voters punished poor performance but failed to reward those that performed well (Boyne et al 2007). The danger is that leaders of the data reforms may hold undue expectations and their consequent disillusion may further hinder change, or stop them observing other benefits.

A final conceptual problem is the 'deeply ambiguous' idea of Open Data itself (Yu and Harlan 2012 181). It combines the 'technology of machine readability and the philosophy of participation' and 'blurr(es) the distinction between the technology of Open Data and the politics of Open Government' (202: 181). Theory points in contradictory directions: as Janssen et al (2012) pointed out 'systems theory suggests that open data equates to less control and accountability over data' while 'institutional theory suggest that publicizing data will reinforce existing structures' (280). Moreover, Open Data cannot work alone: it requires cultural change and new instruments to enforce accountability or involvement (Janssen et al 2012, 281).

UK and Open Data

In line with developments elsewhere, the new UK 'transparency Agenda' holds a range economic, democratic and social aims:

> The Government believes that we need to throw open the doors of public bodies, to enable the public to hold politicians and public bodies to account… to deliver better value for money [and to]bring significant economic benefits by enabling businesses and non-profit organisations to build innovative applications and websites (Coalition Programme 2010).

The UK's coalition government, inspired by US innovations, has promised a 'transparency revolution' to create 'an effective Open Data ecosystem' (Cabinet Office 2012, 12). David Cameron claims online publication and Open Data initiatives will promote 'efficiency', 'save money' and 'help to re-build trust in our politics' (Cameron 2010). The reforms are also central to the coalition government's vision for reforming public services and devolving power: 'it is only by publishing data on how public services do their jobs that we can wrest power out of the hands of highly paid officials and give it back to the people' (Cabinet Office 2011, 5). Politicians in the UK were inspired by the US to use data with the positive aim of stimulating economic growth and the negative aim of preventing, via increased openness, scandals such as the 2009 MPs' expenses happening again (Guardian 2013). A recent review listed the benefits as a wide mix of technological, social and political from 'transparency, accountability' to 'improved efficiency, increased data quality, creation of social value, increased participation, increased economic value, improved communication, open innovation, and data linkage' (Shakespeare 2013, 7).

The reforms include online publication of all central government spending over £25,000 and treasury spending data (called COINs now OSCAR), all local government spending

over £500, contracts, officials' salaries, organograms and organisation charts, as well as the development of a central data portal, data.gov.uk. The reforms are moving to provide data on the 'performance of public services' and other innovations such as online crime maps, health data and emerging experimental platforms (Cabinet Office 2012, 5: Shakespeare 2013, 7).

Given the sheer breadth of aims and range of initiatives, one emerging issue is the lack of clarity over the exact aims (LGA 2012). Interviewees spoke of how government emphasis shifts between the 'democratic' aspects, using data to improve public understanding and participation, to the 'economic' objectives, creating re-use and economic growth. This is likely to be further complicated by the competing economic aims of the EU Public Sector Information agenda (Van Eechoud et al 2012).

Some of the aims are also hedged with uncertainty. The NAO felt that the economic aims were based on 'highly uncertain assumptions' and a number of interviewees felt similarly that, while the potential was clearly there, economic aims may be difficult to realise (2012).

Looking only at the 'democratic' aims, the reforms mix 'high threshold' experiments in deliberation with low-threshold transparency mechanisms and applications or online petitions. The agenda also mixes ideas of 'post-bureaucratic' politics and 'crowd sourcing' with more traditional 'open government' ideas of transparency and accountability (Moss and Coleman 2013).

The Impact

There has been little analysis of the reforms. The UK Public Accounts Committee (2012) highlighted concerns over how data was inconsistent, 'raw' and 'very difficult to interpret'. NAO (2012) found varying levels of enthusiasm from the public and public bodies. The UK government described adoption by departments and institutions as 'inconsistent' and 'haphazard' (Cabinet Office 2011a, 14). Moss and Coleman (2013) argued that overall the results of the Open Data experiments have been 'disappointing', despite 'isolated examples of success' because successive governments have failed to create a 'clear and coherent strategy for using the internet to support democratic citizenship' (1). Most have lacked 'meaningful opportunities to engage' and have been based on ill-suited and only adopted 'sporadically' (Moss and Coleman 2013, 14).

The publication of the COINs Treasury data was widely hailed at the time but seen as little used and plagued by technical difficulties, a 'textbook example of how not to do it' (Guardian 7 July 2010). Media coverage, rather than being based upon a new type of citizen accountability, was traditional (Davies 2010, 33). The successful Police.uk crime map, while user friendly and popular was described as an 'explicitly political attempt to shape the terms of a debate' and pseudo transparency (O'Hara 2013: Short 2011).

The more deliberative government led crowd-sourcing experiments, such as *Spending Challenge* and *Your Freedom* attracted attention but were limited by abuse and a lack of interaction (Moss and Coleman 2013, 11-12). The government's e-petitions initiative has had huge success but represents an 'opportunity missed' in failing to engage, offering signposts to documents or 'one way'(Moss and Coleman 2013, 11-12).

More successful have been various third part offshoots, with interactive websites such as 'Where Does My Money Go?' that visualises taxes, and a range of 'non-political' sites from price comparison to school or local area assessors (Access Info Europe 2010, 31-32). MySociety's TheyWorkForYou remains a benchmark as 'a simple' and easy and 'intuitive searchable database' of Parliamentarians and Parliament that has been widely copied. It attracts 200-300,000 users per month, a proportion of who claim to have been previously unengaged (Escher 2011). Similar innovations include sites such as Openly Local, which allows users to compare and examine spending data by 163 local authorities. There are also a range of local government experiments including the Communities Hub run by DCLG and numerous attempts to 'join' up data at individual local authority level (LGA 2012).

These third party initiatives combine the two features that hold the key to success: 'micro-public' small scale exercises that encourage 'informal' use form civil society (Moss and Coleman 2013, 14-15). Chadwick argues that information must be 'granular', with 'flexibility' to 'disaggregate into tasks of varying magnitude' and to allow for 'informational exuberance' to encourage formal and informal participation (3-4).

The Three Transparencies of Open Data

While transparency is a single 'universal' good, certain sub-types of 'associated' but 'distinct' forms of transparency exist within it (Hood 2010: Heald 2012: Meijer 2013: Grimmelikhaujsen and Welch 2012).

Open Data illustrates this nuances within this sub-typology. Parts of the agenda concern opening up decision-making and processes, while others focus on transparency around outcomes or real time openness (Grimmelikhaujsen 2012: Heald 2012). The agenda also mixes classic transparency from the 'outside inwards' (public to public body) as well as, potentially, upwards transparency (central government to local) whereby 'higher political activity can view the activity of subordinate bodies' (Heald 2012, 40). It also merges macro 'mapping at high levels of aggregation' to localised, if not street level, 'micro-level' openness (Heald 2012, 41).

In order to better examine transparency, this article examines three 'democratic' aims linked to transparency emphasised by the UK government: accountability, participation and informing. Accountability transparency refers to the use of Open Data to hold authorities to account for both their political and financial performance. This may be a 'retrospective' 'outcome' transparency that may work at the 'macro' or 'micro-level', possibly driven by Armchair Auditors (Heald 2012).

The second is participative transparency. Here, information stimulates increased participation. This is also likely to be localised or micro, though the UK 2009 MPs' expenses scandal may represent how disclosure can stimulate participation across a political system.

The third is the low level day-to-day idea of transparency as a flow of important information on services, events or operations needed to judge performance, often working at a 'micro-level' that may be outcome, process or 'real time' (Heald 2012).

An important distinction is between the direct and indirect impact. One interviewee pointed out that Open Data is, at its core, about re-use rather than access (Interview). Evidence from the UK and elsewhere points towards innovations developed by others, rather than raw data, playing a key role in driving the three transparencies.

Research and Methods

The research focuses on local government, particularly the publication of all spending over £500. It is based on a survey of local authorities, FOI requests to selected authorities, media analysis and interviews with practitioners, innovators and users. It also draws on other studies by the National Audit Office (2012) and the Local Government Association (2012) and academic assessment such as Halonen (2012).

All research is on-going and all findings are provisional. The survey currently has 74 responses representing around 20% of local authorities across England. The FOI requests are also on-going with responses from 50 authorities. The data below needs to be read with these limitations in mind. There is also some inconsistency among responses, between for example hits or visits.

Local Government

One of the flagship Open Data reforms of the new government was commitment for all local government bodies in England (called 'Councils') to publish monthly their spending over £500 by January 2011. As of September 2012 it appears all 353 local authorities in England were publishing monthly details (LGA 2012). This was enshrined in a Code of Practice on local government transparency in 2012 that also included commitments to publish salaries, front line service data and organograms and procurement and contracts (DCLG 2011: LGA 2012).

This would have a range of effects:

> Financial disclosure will act as a trigger enabling local taxpayers to see how councils are using public money, shine a spotlight on waste, establish greater accountability and efficiency, open up new markets and improve access for small and local business and the voluntary sector.

It would also 'revolutionize local government. Local people should be able to hold politicians and public bodies to account…. The swift and simple changes will unleash an army of armchair auditors'(DCLG 2012).

The democratic and enabling 'flavour' of the commitments in the UK were also closely related to wider changes. Local government in Britain is subject to stringent political and financial control (John 2013). Coalition government reforms since 2010 sought to reverse this centralising tendency, under the labels of 'localism'(political empowerment) and Big Society (civic activism) (Lowndes and Pratchett 2012). The reforms include giving authorities greater financial independence and political autonomy and creating new mechanisms for local referenda and community budgeting (Game and Wilson 2011).

Local government should present a favourable environment for such Open Data experiments. First, local government is closest level to the public and one with which they have most interaction (Mossberger 2013, 2). Second, it is frequently at the forefront of openness and participation experiments (Worthy 2013: Game and Wilson 2011).Finally, the spending information potentially fits with the 'granular' and small-scale approach associated with successful online democracy experiments (Davidson and Elstub 2013: Chadwick et al 2012).

In order to investigate the impact and the three transparencies, it is important to establish who is using the data, what they are interested in and what impact it is having.

Who is using the data?

FOI requests to date show variability in the number of visits (which were also recorded differently). Below are a few examples, chosen simply to illustrate the variety.

Council type	**Number of pageviews Jan-Dec 2012**
district	528
city	450
district	437
district	35
district	41
district	636

In the survey, 60% of those asked described use of spending data as 'low' or 'very low' with another 30% not knowing. The highest use was 5357 pageviews in a 24 month period (a County or regional level Council) and the lowest 210 pageviews in a 26 month period (a District or sub-regional level Council). The emerging picture of low use is supported by other research (Halonen 2012: LGA 2012).

This can be compared with visits to other sites (note visits and page views are different and the table is indicative only)[i]

Site	Visits per month
Police.uk	**540609**
Data.gov.uk	**161101**
TheyWorkForYou	**200-300,000**
WhatDoTheyKnow	**100-200,000**

(source: Escher 2011: Police.uk 2011: Data.gov.uk 2013)

Explaining why interest appears low for the spending data is complex. However, survey respondents and interviewees offered a number of explanations. First, the way in which information was displayed is problematic-typically as a series of invoices, arranged in columns detailing the amount, body paid and the directorate (departments) in the authority who paid the money. As one put it 'a long list of every invoice over £500 is meaningless to most people'. The sites in the table above are different. For example, *Police.uk* is an interactive crime map holding street level information. *TheyWorkForYou* offers an easy, user friendly way of understanding the activities of individual MPs or Peers (Escher 2011).

Second, the spending data may not fit with habits: 'People prefer to send an email rather than look for the information themselves'. They may lack both the 'skills and time to analyse the data'.

Third, as with all forms of participation, the motivation of the public is likely to be the key barrier. As one respondent put it 'I assume that most people are not the slightest bit interested in spending their spare time poring over this type of material'. A number felt the lack of interest 'reflects the general public interest (or lack of interest) in local government'.

However, the low number of views does not indicate failure. Firstly, information is not simply gained by direct use. Indeed, most interviewees were of the view that users were much more likely to use innovations and applications. Tom Steinberg, founder of mySociety, expressed concern at the focus on use numbers across the Open Data reforms, claiming it was not about achieving a 'well trafficked' site but one that 'the right people' visit who then build services 'used by millions of people' (Steinberg 2011).

Second, a half century of communications theory points towards so-called 'opinion formers' playing a key role in disseminating information, as most people find out information second hand (Chadwick et al 2010). Use by the media and hyper local sites are also likely to disseminate the information widely.

Users of the Data

Officials were asked which group were the primary users of the data published by local authorities (a number picked more than one).

Primary Users	Number
Public	24
Media	30
Business	31
NGOs	5
Other[1]	29

The public were intended to be the beneficiaries of the data but were not often named as the biggest group of 'primary' users. It is unclear who they were: research into use of FOI at local level indicates a core of political activists and wider, less committed group of curious, often seeking micro or non-political information (Worthy et al 2011).

Given the controversy over FOI use by journalists, one possibility was that the new data would be similarly used by the media to hold authorities to account. Authorities reported a 'flurry' of interest from journalists but one that often died down. A search of regional newspapers found 148 articles specifically using the term 'spending over £500' between May 2010 and August 2012 (though it is possible many journalists using the data did not mention the source). The spending data was used to question authorities, focusing on odd spending at a low level. Newspapers also urged the public to use the data and berated authorities that were slow or 'lagging' behind in publication. A selection of newspapers reported it more heavily where the spending data was causing particular controversy. A few national newspapers, particularly the Daily Telegraph, used the spending data to highlight use of Council credit cards across the country (Daily Telegraph 2011)

NGOs heavily use FOI, often as part of wider campaigns alongside other instruments such as attending meetings, writing to councillors etc. A number of survey respondents pointed to use by local groups. High profile campaigns in the London borough of Barnet sat alongside smaller more focused uses by community groups over particular salaries or contracts (Interviews)

The biggest user group was business, pointing towards the economic rather than democratic aims. Businesses are also big users of FOI at local level, from small 'one person' companies to multi-nationals (Worthy et al 2011). A study of data.gov.uk found a wide use by businesses and social entrepreneurs alongside IT innovators (Davies 2010).

However, it is likely the lines between each of these bodies are blurred. A member of the public may be part of a group or an NGO (Davies 2010). Even a business may use the

[1] A number of respondents in the 'other' category said had no way of knowing who was using the data. A number choose more than one 'primary user'.

data to create an application used by others, serving democratic as well as economic ends. Hyper local sites, that combine activism with the attributes of a local press, indicate the fluidity of such use.

What information are they interested in?

Research from FOI points towards a strong interest in 'micro-political' or 'non-political' use of 'local' information. Research from elsewhere indicates a small number of high profile cases covering a great deal of quotidian and locally focused 'information gathering' (White 2007).

The types of information appeared divided between macro and micro level. High level information concerned Council Tax and Business Rates and Credit balances on NNDR accounts. Low-level or 'micro-political' matters included Public Health Funeral data, car parking data, Senior Staff Salary Data, Planning Applications data.

This could mean that varied patterns 'disperse' the democratic impact of the reforms. On the other hand it could point to divergent 'macro' and 'micro' transparencies co-existing: pressures from a 'low level' monitoring of daily work and high level scrutiny of Council wide spending: a 'fire alarm' and everyday testing (Heald 2012).

What impact is it having?

Halonen (2012) surveyed 112 local authorities, around a third of all local authorities in England, six months into the reform. The survey found that 38 per cent felt it had increased transparency, 25 per cent accountability and 13 per cent trust. Only 3 per cent felt it increased participation or social and commercial value (6).

Measuring any behaviour change is difficult, especially as Open Data is so new. Councils felt that the real benefits are likely to arrive in the future, when joined up data and innovations can offer targeted information (LGA 2012).

First, one possible effect is improved behaviour, as 'anticipated reactions' drive professionalising of systems as a result of being 'watched' (Pratt 2006). Some interviewees felt publishing spending data had professionalised spending and led to increased awareness. The exact effects would be dependent on how much the data is being used (Heald 2012).

Second, internally, a few authorities have recorded improved information flows and a greater understanding internally of previously complex budget processes (Worthy et al 2011). 8% of authorities identified increased 'internal' accountability as officials and politicians used the data to monitor activity from within. The majority did not feel it did so as other more useful sources were available.

Accountability transparency

More than a third of the authorities surveyed identified some increased accountability. The accountability that emerges is an eclectic mix of groups and bodies already formally or informally 'monitoring' the government, rather than citizens. The use stems from a mixture of 'monitory' bodies: journalists, NGOs and the public, with a variety of hybrid 'hyper local' sites. Accountability was sporadic and unpredictable, driven by particular circumstances or issues being pursued. The topics are often focused and 'local'.

There is no sign of an 'army' of auditors. In June 2011 the Minister for local government praised the action of a group of bloggers in holding to account a flagship Conservative authority over its contractual procedures, part of a wider battle over the contracting out services which later involved judicial review (Guardian 8 July 2011). Other online armchair auditors have established themselves in the North of England and Isle of Wight. One describing themselves as the 'reluctant armchair auditor' felt the data was 'not yet' of good enough quality or accompanied by sufficient context to be useful (Guardian 24 November 2011). A number of these sites, with the notable exception of the Isle of Wight, appear to have been inactive for some time.

In contrast to the idea of an 'army', the auditor is very much atypical. An auditor requires a comparatively rare combination of time, skills and interest. Given the sparse and isolated presentation of the data, this would include IT and statistical literacy and a good knowledge of local government finance (Interview). The background of the auditor appears very particular: a professional interest or expertise, a pre-existing activist base (such as an NGO) or a small network of engaged people (Interview).

The high profile case of Barnett also illustrates the fact that auditors often appear in specific circumstances, often in an 'accountability vacuum' when formal mechanism have failed or there is controversy. As with FOI, they rely on a range of mechanisms. In Barnett users employed Open Data, FOI requests and Judicial Review. The superficially 'simple' audit process is complicated by auditors not knowing what mechanisms to use once they have the information (E-democracy 24 November 2010). For accountability to function requires the information and the mechanisms by which to do enforce some form of response (Weale 2011). The spending data at present provides only the former.

The obstacles to 'Armchair Auditing' reflects the general difficulty of 'crowd-sourcing', which can be skewered by biases due to political or profession influence and is reliant on 'a tiny subset of the crowd' (Clark and Logan 2011, 31; 26). Such 'fragile' work is often 'inconsistent', 'delicate' and 'likely to implode' unless closely watched and assisted (26). The idea indicates one of the misunderstandings about data - it is not 'power' by itself: it requires narrative and explanation and, most importantly, like FOI, it needs to work with other tools to bring about accountability (Gray 2012).

Flinders (2012) points out the emphasis, within a hostile media environment brings risks of negative bias: 'the *politics* of accountability generally ensures that they are focused on the allocation of blame' (602). A number of interviewees felt that the raw spending information was designed to make local government appear profligate and

wasteful, at time of deep spending cuts by central government (Interviews). As with the US spending initiatives or EU financial transparency, the presentation frames the discussion in particular ways (Fung and Weil 2010: Meijer 2006).

Participatory transparency

Most municipalities worldwide, despite a trend towards publishing performance data, have low levels of public participation (Scott 2006; Holzer et al 2008).

Aside from the campaign in Barnet, there was no evidence of the spending data stimulating participation. Less than 10% of authorities identified any increase in participation. The first limitation was the information itself. Local participation is driven by controversy such as the closure of local amenities but the spending data alone failed to explain sufficiently context that could drive such events (Interview).

Second, while the publication of spending data is strongly connected to localism and participatory budgeting, actual experiments at local level have been limited and controlled (Moss and Coleman 2013). The information thus stands alone. This reflects a similar experience in the US, with local open data reforms driving transparency but not participation, simply because the mechanisms are not in place and, possibly, awareness is low (Ganapati and Reddick 2012, 120).

Third limitation is historic low levels of participation. Despite two decades of reforms involvement in local government remains low. Levels of interest appear generally very low (Fox 2012). DCLG (2010) surveys found declining public interest in being involved in local decision-making. Indeed, leading local government scholars have questioned whether there ever was a golden age of public involvement (Game and Wilson 2011).

This lack of participation, Mossberger argues, raises questions as to 'what citizens want' (2013, 20). Many more tools and, indeed, a shift in culture may be needed to create the new 'ecology' (Cornford et al 2013).

Low level democratic transparency

There was yet no sign of information entering into a wider discourse. Although use by the media was in evidence, it does not compare to use of, for example, FOI information (Worthy 2010: Worthy et al 2011). The hybrid hyper local sites also offered a means of disseminating stories locally.

It may also be connected to where the interest of the public lies. Interviewees pointed out that general 'engagement' with local government concerned 'problems' or daily matters rather than spending. One Metropolitan Borough Council publishes the number of visits per month to various parts of its website. These are the findings for January 2012:

Topic of page	Visits per month

Planning	3349
Bin collections	3694
Council Tax	2009
Council Chamber	1708
Transparency	126
Procurement	88

(Source Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council)

However, this data does not simply illustrate a truism of public interest. It also may point to how linking 'transparency' data to local amenities offers a way of attracting more interesting to spending data.

Interviewees felt applications would play a key part. Above all else the data needs to be used 'found, interpreted and processed' as 'open data has no value in itself, it is only valued when it is used' (Moss and Coleman 2013, 22). Citizens must not only access data but also 'interpret and understand the meaning' (2013, 8). A number envisaged easy to use interfaces that could offer 'localised' information of use and interest or trace spending from source to street-level. Local authorities have indicated their willingness to do this, though are concerned at lack of resources (LGA 2012).

Technological

The first set of barriers are technological. Survey respondents and interviewees highlighted the problem of being tied in for long periods to certain IT systems and software. Related to this is the design itself. A number of interviewees pointed out how spending data lends itself to consideration of 'waste' and 'spending' rather than understanding theresults. Linked data would demonstrate a far more nuanced understanding of how money was spent and, most importantly, its effect (Interview).

Political

Chadwick (2011) emphasises how the 'political' dimension is ignored. There are several political pitfalls. First, local government in the UK itself is weak and reliant on central government for finance: one interview felt that the lack of interest was a reflection of local governments' wider lack of importance or influence. The context of severe budget cuts has undoubtedly worsened central-local relations. Bekkers and Homburg (2007) describe 'the battle of the back offices' as the 'Achilles heel' of E-government reforms as 'the lack of a common vision or sense of urgency prevents cooperation' (377). Chadwick showed how some politicians were risk averse and supportive of innovations that brought clear benefits, while legal representatives keen to ensure safeguards in place

(2011). Within authorities culture and skills may have prevented the full use of the information (Yiu 2012).

Authorities appear to display a wide variety of attitudes from enthusiastic embrace, particularly by those already innovating, to reluctance and minimal compliance: 'a burden/chore that has to be carried out'. A similar variety of response and action was seen in a study of US urban innovations (Mossberger 2013). Piotrowski (2010) and Welch (2012) found that transparency varied not only between bodies, but internally from department to department within bodies, due to culture, context and leadership .

The politics of the reform was complicated by suspicion. Some felt the Coalition government, following Heald's (2012) idea of 'upwards transparency', intended the spending data to be a 'political' tool to help control local authorities. At a time of deep public spending cuts, it was also designed at a low level to portray authorities as 'reckless' spenders who were 'wasting' money.

Longo (2011) also points out that, despite ICTs' air of neutrality, the reforms have a 'political agenda' (42-43). Open Data may be a 'Trojan horse' for privatisation by offering information, and ammunition on public sector performance, to private providers without a reciprocal obligation (Longo 2011). Others were concerned that conflating 'Open Data' with Open Government acted as a smokescreen, offering chosen information 'gifted' by the government while eroding information rights (Interview).

The final political obstacle came from central government's lack of clarity. As the Shakespeare review pointed out, the multiple aims may contradict each other and lead to different areas of government 'pushing' different aims: 'There are many committees, boards, overseers and champions of data; but no easily understood, easily accessed, influential mechanism for making things happen' (Shakespeare 2013, 12-13). This meant a lack of understanding at local level over who Open Data was intended for and concern that there was no clear strategy behind it (LGA 2012).

This vagueness is compounded by politicians waning enthusiasm. Successive governments have paid 'lip service' to ICT change (Gill and Coleman 2013, 1). In a parallel with the US reforms, where the Chief Technical Officer resigned, the Coalition government has seen several senior advisors leave including the key data innovator Rohan Silva (Guardian 2013).

The failure of data.gov in the US may serve as a lesson, weakened by a vicious cycle of a lack of co-operation from departments, eager to preserve current data for use in spending battles, and a lack of public use and interest:

> Federal agencies will never "free" precious information assets that define their political status and bargaining power vis-à-vis other agencies. As Open Data continues to pressure agencies to "free" data, most agencies have adopted a passive–aggressive stance to the program… indexing a minimal quantity of

> mostly useless data while locking more valuable datasets inside closed database "gardens" (Peled 2011, 7).

Conceptual problems

The spending data reveals that some of the assumptions behind Open Data are misplaced. The release of data, particularly relatively raw, does enable accountability if it is not 'joined' with narrative or accompanied with tools. It does not automatically drive involvement or understanding.

David Cameron held up the MPs' expenses scandal in UK as an exemplar of the power of information release, yet the scandal was not citizen led nor was it simple (Cameron 2010). It took three highly skilled journalists four years to authorise release, via the High Courts, and even then it was released via a leak (Hazell et al 2012). The exact effect on MPs is unclear. More interestingly, it appears to have had little effect on voting at the General Election the year after, and the public seemed to feel it was a 'confirmation' of their expectations of politicians rather than a revelation (Pattie and Johnston 2012: Hansard Society 2010).

Much may depend on how government sees its citizens as, often the subject of 'competing interpretations' (Coleman 2012, 391). Coleman points out how many government's 'default position' is to see citizens as 'information lite' or disinterested leads to low level participatory 'push button' activities to 'transmit messages' and receive 'simplistic responses' (387). The 'incomplete evolution' of ICTs means reforms remain, for the time being, bound up in 'the agenda, logic and language of the state' rather than creating 'democratic space' for 'sharing experience; and building new relations' (391:387).

Future

Open data is in its infancy. The thoughts as to future trajectories were influenced by both the politics and technological dynamics, though with a senses of optimism towards the third part innovations.

Some of those surveyed and interviewed saw it as a 'false start' or a 'a failed attempt to increase public involvement'. One speculated that it will be 'similar to the Publication Scheme' under FOI in 'that no one really uses or even asks about'. Others felt that wider structural changes and privatisation would undermine the changes: 'Government will have shrunk substantially and outsourced providers will not be publishing open data to the same extent'

Most felt that the data needed to be linked, contextualised and localised with 'more focus on local community data'. Innovations such as Openly Local and others made information 'not only accessible to the public but co-produced with the public'. It will then be 'hugely different due to greater development and adoption of data visualisation tools'. Other research supports local government enthusiasm for this (LGA 2012).

Interviewees pointed out that Open Data holds tremendous opportunities for policy-making. Joined up data could significantly alter how policy is made and resources targeted. From small scale issues e.g. saving money through prescriptions to targeting homelessness or health resources, it can have a transformative impact.

Conclusion

The publication of local government spending has led to some accountability, though from those already monitoring government rather than citizen driven initiatives. It has not led to increased participation nor has it yet fully become a stream of information underpinning choice.

A distinction needs to be made between the direct impact and indirect. The overwhelming thrust of interviewees and survey pointed to this being the key area. Contextualising or, in this case, 'localising' and linking of information will offer the ease, flexibility and background to enable and encourage public use. It may also provide the comparison to the first step in more effective accountability.

While the potential remains, the superficially simple and neutral reforms conceal complex political dynamics, hidden agendas that will shape the effects. In the case of the local spending data, the very design is itself political and lends itself to certain framing effects, even before examining the context into which it is placed.

This may be further compounded by assumptions and blurred concepts that may cause leaders to see failure or be blind to success. On a practical level Open Data must lock into other political mechanisms and conceptually needs to be embraced for its flexibility and power to join up and move information flows in unexpected directions.

Bibliography

Access Info Europe. 2010. *Beyond Access: Open Government Data and the Right to Re-use (draft for consultation)*. http://www.access-info.org/documents/documents/Beyond_Access_10_Aug_2010_consultationn.pdf

Ahn, M. J., & Bretschneider, S. (2011). 'Politics of E-Government: E-Government and the Political Control of Bureaucracy'. *Public Administration Review*, *71*(3), 414-424.

Andersen, K. N. , H. Henriksen, R. Medaglia, J.N. Danziger, M.K. Sannarnes, Møyfrid K. and M. Enemærke. (2010). 'Fads and Facts of E-Government: A Review of Impacts of E-government (2003-2009)'. *International Journal of Public Administration* 33 (11) 564-79

Bannister, F. and Connolly, R. 2011. 'Trust and Transformational Government: A Proposed Framework for Research' *Government Information Quarterly* 28: 137–147

Bauhr, M., & Grimes, M. (2013). 'Indignation or Resignation: The Implications of Transparency for Societal Accountability'. *Governance*. (online publication)

Bekkers, V., & Homburg, V. (2007). 'The myths of e-government: Looking beyond the assumptions of a new and better government'. *The Information Society*, *23*(5), 373-382.

Boulianne, S. 2009. 'Does Internet Use Affect Engagement? A Meta-Analysis of Research'. *Political Communication*, 26 (2) 193 - 211

Cabinet Office. (2011). *Open Public Services White Paper* (Cm 8145) London: Stationary Office.

Cabinet Office. (2011a). *Making Open Data Real: A Public Consultation*. London: Stationary Office.

Cameron, D. 'PM's Podcast on Transparency', 29 May 2010

Chadwick, A. (2010). 'Recent shifts in the relationship between the Internet and democratic engagement in Britain and the United States: granularity, informational exuberance, and political learning' in *Digital media and political engagement worldwide: A comparative study*, 39-55.

Coleman, S. (Ed.). (2012). *Connecting democracy: online consultation and the flow of political communication*. MIT Press.

Cornford, J., Wilson, R., Baines, S., & Richardson, R. (2013). 'Local governance in the new information ecology: the challenge of building interpretative communities'. *Public Money & Management*, *33*(3), 201-208.

Curtin, D., & Meijer, A. J. (2006). 'Does transparency strengthen legitimacy?'*Information polity*, *11*(2), 109-122.

Daily Telegraph (2011)'Council Spending Over £500' http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/council-spending/

Data.gov.uk http://data.gov.uk/blog/site-usage

Davidson, S., & Elstub, S. (2013). 'Deliberative and Participatory Democracy in the UK'. *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations* (online preview)

Davies, T. G., & Bawa, Z. A. (2012). The promises and perils of open government data (OGD). *The Journal of Community Informatics*, *8*(2).

Davies, Tim. (2010) "Open data, democracy and public sector reform." *A look at open government data use from data. gov. uk. Über: http://practicalparticipation. co. uk/odi/report/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/How-is-open-governmentdata-being-used-in-practice. pdf*.

Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) (2012) 'New era of transparency will bring about a revolution in town hall openness and accountability'

https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-era-of-transparency-will-bring-about-a-revolution-in-town-hall-openness-and-accountability--2

DCLG. (2011). *Consultation on Code of Recommended Practice for Local Authorities on Data Transparency*. London: DCLG

DCLG. 2010. *A Plain English Guide to the Localism Bill.* London: DCLG

DCLG. 2010a. 2008-2009. *Citizenship Report: Empowering Communities Topic Report* London: DCLG

E-democracy 'Accountability: the Problem with Armchair Auditors', 24 November 2010

Escher, T. (2011) *TheyWorkForYou.com: Analysis of Users and Usage for UK Citizens Online Democracy*. London: mySociety / UK Citizens Online Democracy.

Flinders, M. (2011). 'Daring to be a Daniel The Pathology of Politicized Accountability in a Monitory Democracy'. *Administration & Society*, *43*(5), 595-619.

Fox, R. (2012). Disgruntled, Disillusioned and Disengaged: Public Attitudes to Politics in Britain Today. *Parliamentary Affairs*, *65*(4), 877-887.

Fung, A., Russon Gilman, H., & Shkabatur, J. (2013). 'Six Models for the Internet+ Politics'. *International Studies Review*, *15*(1), 30-47.

Fung, Archon and Weil, David. 2010. 'Open government and Open society' in D. Lathrap and L. Ruma (Eds.). *Open Government: Collaboration, Transparency, and Participation*. Cambridge: O'Reilly, pp. 105-114.

Garrett, R. K., Bimber, B., de Zuniga, H. G., Heinderyckx, F., Kelly, J., & Smith, M. (2012). 'New ICTs and the study of political communication'. *International Journal of Communication*, *6*, 214-231.

Goldfinch, S., R. Gauld R. and S. Horsburgh. 2010. 'Do They Want it? Do They Use it? The 'Demand-Side' of E-government in Australia and New Zealand'. *Government Information Quarterly* 27 177–186

Grimmelikhuijsen, S. G., & Welch, E. W. (2012). 'Developing and Testing a Theoretical Framework for Computer-Mediated Transparency of Local Governments'. *Public Administration Review*, *72*(4), 562-571.

Guardian, 'Meet the man who turned David Cameron onto open data', 30 April 2013

Guardian, 'Mrs. Angry: How To Be An Armchair Auditor' 8 July 2011

Guardian, 'Armchair Audit: Sense and Nonsense', 24 November 2010

Gray, Jonathan (2012) 'What Data Can and Cannot Do' http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/may/31/data-journalism-focused-critical

Halonen (2012) *Being Open About Data* http://www.finnish-institute.org.uk/images/stories/pdf2012/being%20open%20about%20data.pdf

Hansard Society. 2010. *What's Trust Got to Do with It?* London: Hansard Society.

Hazell, R., Bourke, G., & Worthy, B. (2012). 'OPEN HOUSE? FREEDOM OF INFORMATION AND ITS IMPACT ON THE UK PARLIAMENT'. *Public Administration*, *90*(4), 901-921.

Heald, David. (2012) 'Why is transparency about public expenditure so elusive?' *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 78.1 (2012): 30-49.

Holzer, M., A. Manoharan, R. Shick and G. Stowers. (2008). *U.S. States E-governance Survey*. National Center for Public Performance: Rutgers University, Newark

Hood, Christopher. 2010. 'Accountability and Transparency: Siamese Twins, Matching Parts, Awkward Couple?' *West European Politics* 33: 989 - 1009.

HM Government (2010) *Coalition Programme For Government* https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/78977/coalition_programme_for_government.pdf

Huijboon and Van den Broek Huijboom, N. , Van Den Broek, T. (2011). 'Open Data: An International Comparison of Strategies'. *European Journal of ePractice* 12, 5-6; 1

James, Oliver.2011. 'Performance Measures and Democracy: Information Effects on Citizens in Field and Laboratory Experiments', *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* vol. 21, no. 3, 2011, 399-418

Janssen,M., Charalabidis, Y. & A. Zuiderwijk (2012). 'Benefits, Adoption Barriers and Myths of Open Data and Open Government'. *Information Systems Management (ISM),* vol. 29, no.4, pp. 258-268.

John, P. (2013). 'The Last Creature Left in the Swamp: The Persistence and Resilience Of English Local Government'. *Available at SSRN*.

Keane, J. (2009). *The life and death of democracy*. WW Norton & Company.

Local Government Association (2012) *LGA Transparency Survey* http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=bfad418d-1be8-43c8-bb9a-40faf3d41b82&groupId=10171

Longo, J. (2011). 'Open Data: Digital-Era Governance Thoroughbred or New Public Management Trojan Horse?' *Public Policy and Governance Review* 2 (2): 38-52

Lowndes, V., & Pratchett, L. (2012). 'Local governance under the Coalition government: austerity, localism and the 'Big Society''. *Local government studies*, *38*(1), 21-40.

McCubbins, M. D., & Schwartz, T. (1984). 'Congressional oversight overlooked: Police patrols versus fire alarms'. *American Journal of Political Science*, 165-179.

Meijer, A. (2013). 'Understanding the Complex Dynamics of Transparency'.*Public Administration Review* (online preview)

Millard, J. 2008. 'E-government Measurement for Policy Makers'. European Journal of ePractice, 4: 19-33

Moss, G., & Coleman, S. (2013). 'Deliberative Manoeuvres in the Digital Darkness: e-Democracy Policy in the UK'. *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*. (online preview)

Mossberger, K. (2013). 'Connecting Citizens and Local Governments? Social Media and Interactivity in Major US Cities'. http://www.union.wisc.edu/pmra2013/Paper%20Submissions/New/Connecting%20Citizens%20and%20Local%20Governments%20Social%20Media%20and%20Interactivity%20in%20Major%20US%20Cities.pdf

Mossberger, K., & TOLBERT, C. I. (2012). 'How Politics Online is Changing Electoral Participation'. *The Oxford Handbook of American Elections and Political Behavior*, 200.

Nam, T. (2012). 'Dual effects of the internet on political activism: Reinforcing and mobilizing'. *Government Information Quarterly*, *29*, S90-S97.

O'Hara, K. (2012). Data quality, government data and the open data infosphere. http://eprints.soton.ac.uk/340045/1/ohara_data_quality_AISB12.pdf

Pattie, C., & Johnston, R. (2012). 'The electoral impact of the UK 2009 MPs' expenses scandal'. *Political Studies*, *60*(4), 730-750.

Peled, Alon. 'When transparency and collaboration collide: The USA open data program'. *Journal of the American society for information science and technology* 62.11 (2011): 2085-2094.

Piotrowksi, S. J. (2010). 'The Operationalization of Municipal Transparency: Primary Administrative Functions and Intervening Factors' *Transparencia Y Privacidad* 1 (1), 1-31

Police.uk (2013) 'Police.uk Two Years on' http://policeuk.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/Police.uk_two_years_on.pdf

Pratt (2006) ' The More Closely We Are Watched, the Better We Behave?' in Hood, C., & Heald, D. (2006). *Transparency: The key to better governance?* (No. 135). Oxford University Press.

Public Accounts Committee (PAC).(2012). *Implementing the Transparency Agenda* (HC 102). London: TSO

Reddick, C., & Ganapati, S. (2011). 'Open government achievement and satisfaction in US federal agencies: survey evidence for the three pillars'. *Journal of E-Governance*, *34*(4), 193-202.

Robinson, D. G., Yu, H., Zeller, W.P. and Felten, E. W. 2009. 'Government Data and the Invisible Hand'. *Yale Journal of Law and Technology*, 11 160 http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1138083

Rowley, J. (2011). 'e-Government stakeholders—Who are they and what do they want?'. *International journal of Information management*, *31*(1), 53-62.

Scott, J.K. 2006. 'E-the People: Do Municipal Government Websites Support Public Involvement?' *Public Administration Review* 66 (3): 341–353

Shakespeare (2013) *An Independent Review of Public Sector Information* (London TSO)

Short, A. (2011). 'Police.uk Official Crime Maps-there should be a law against it', 1 February 2011

Steinberg, T. (2011). 'Asking the Wrong Questions about Data.gov', 04 April 2011

Van de Walle, S., & Van Ryzin, G. G. (2011). The order of Questions in A Survey on Citizen Satisfaction with Public Services: Lessons from A Split Ballot Experiment. *Public Administration*,*89*(4), 1436-1450.

Vicente, P., L. Torres and S. Royo. 2010. 'Is E-government Leading to More Accountable and Transparent Local Government?' *Financial Accountability and Management*, 26 (1), 0267-4424

Weale, A. (2011). 'New modes of governance, political accountability and public reason'. *Government and opposition*, *46*(1), 58-80.

Welch, E. W. (2012). 'The relationship between transparent and participative government: A study of local governments in the United States'. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, *78*(1), 93-115.

White, N. (2007). *Free and Frank: Making the Official Information Act Work Better.* Wellington: Institute of Policy Studies.

Wilson, D. J., & Game, C. (2011). *Local Government in the United Kingdom.* Macmillan: London

Worthy, B., Hazell, R., Amos, J. and Bourke, G. (2011). *Town Hall Transparency? The Impact of FOI on Local Government in England.* London: Constitution Unit.

Worthy, B. (2010). ‘More open but not more trusted? The effect of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 on the United Kingdom central government’. *Governance*, *23*(4), 561-582.

Yiu, Chris (2012) *The Big Data Opportunity*. London: Policy Exchange.

Yu, Harlan, and David Robinson.(2012) "The New Ambiguity of 'Open Government'."*Princeton CITP/Yale ISP Working Paper*.