

Open and Transparent Government: Lessons from America

One of the first things Barack Obama did as U.S. president was to sign a memorandum on transparent government. “My administration is committed to creating an unprecedented level of openness in government”, he declared. “We will work together to ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration”¹. During his first year in office, President Obama launched a range of initiatives to deliver on this commitment. Some were well received, others less so. This point of view analyses the most important initiatives and highlights a number of lessons other governments can learn from the U.S. experience.

President Obama justified his commitment to transparent government in terms of democracy, efficiency and effectiveness. His argument was that transparency gives citizens greater insight into what their representatives and institutions are doing and provides them with the information they need to hold public bodies to account. Increased openness is also intended to increase the incentive for public institutions and public servants to perform to the highest standards, while also allowing citizens to contribute more to the achievement of public goals.

These multiple benefits suggest that transparent government is a broad and complex topic. Helpfully, the Obama administration recognises this by breaking the agenda up into three components: transparency, public participation and collaboration.

Transparency

Obama’s fiscal stimulus package was a natural test-bed for his commitment to transparency. The legislation containing the fiscal stimulus package set up a Board whose purpose was not just to hold recipients accountable for how funds were used, but to establish and maintain “a user-friendly, public-facing website to foster greater accountability and transparency” in relation to stimulus funding. The chosen vehicle was <http://www.recovery.gov/>.

This high-profile initiative had a significant impact in encouraging a wide range of public sector agencies not only to make more information available about spending plans², but also to involve citizens more in spending (and saving) decisions. For example, the State of Virginia’s created a site³ where citizens could put forward ideas for funding (receiving more than 9,000 project proposals in a four-week period), while the city of Santa Cruz gave citizens the chance to suggest, rate and comment on saving proposals via the uservice tool⁴.

Delivering the objectives of recovery.gov was more difficult. Although the stimulus package was intended to have a rapid impact, the process of allocation and implementation took time and it was only in September - six months after the legislation was enacted - that a significant amount of data became available. Interestingly, the official recovery.gov site was at least initially

¹ http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/TransparencyandOpenGovernment/

² For example, Pennsylvania http://www.recovery.pa.gov/portal/server.pt/community/recovery_pa_gov/5994, and New York <http://www.recovery.ny.gov/>.

³ <http://stimulus.virginia.gov/>

⁴ <http://budget.santacruzcityca.gov/how-you-can-help>

outperformed by a private sector site, Recovery.org⁵, which was started by Onvia, a Seattle-based company that compiles bid solicitations from all levels of government to sell to vendors and contractors for a subscription fee. In May 2009, a Washington Post article noted that “a visitor looking for what's going on in, say, Virginia can find nearly 150 specific stimulus projects that have been posted for bids in that state, whereas a visitor to Recovery.gov's Virginia page sees only the general program-by-program allocations”⁶.



Recovery.gov also faced some criticism in terms of its usability. While the site contains visual tools such as clickable maps, the scope for data analysis and assessment was at least initially fairly limited. For example, while you can easily identify which projects have been undertaken by which federal agency in which state, it is harder to determine which private sector contractor is has been the biggest beneficiary or to compare different private sector companies in terms of their success in securing funds. One problem is that, like most countries, the U.S. has several layers of government and pulling together data clearly and consistently across the different tiers is a huge challenge, particularly when the systems and culture to deliver this outcome have not yet been established. Another problem arises from sub-contracting, since transparency into the

⁵ <http://www.recovery.org/home.aspx>

⁶ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/05/20/AR2009052003535.html>

details of how money is being used (e.g. details of all private sector beneficiaries and the services they are providing) may end at the point that a large contract is awarded.

It is too early to assess the full impact of recovery.gov, however, it is likely that this project will change expectations both about how much financial data is made available and how this is done. The difficulties the project has faced illustrate the scale of the challenge involved and the need to develop a consistent approach (and standards) across organisations and across the different tiers of government if an accurate, easy-to-analyse picture is to be available to citizens.

One area where this initiative has been relatively weak to date is engagement with citizens. [Recovery.gov](http://recovery.gov) was intended not just to tell citizens how their money was being spent, but to mobilise them in the task of making sure that the money was spent in the best possible way. Accordingly, the site provides information for potential whistleblowers and highlights electronic and phone hotlines where citizens can report fraud, waste or abuse. It also encourages citizens to analyse data as it becomes available and to share their analyses with the Board. It is unclear, however, how the Board expects the public to respond to this or quite how and where this engagement is likely to go.

This raises the issue of the best place for citizen discussion. Should all the debate take place on a government-designed and administered site or is the government's job to put the data out there, allow citizens to analyse and debate it and then listen and respond to the outputs this generates? Initiatives such as Stimuluswatch.org⁷ illustrate the attractions of independent sites (more agile, genuinely bottom-up); the drawback of such initiatives, however, is that the debate is potentially fragmented and without a clear and effective link to government processes may not attract sufficient (or broad enough) citizen interest.

[Recovery.gov](http://recovery.gov) focuses on data (and particularly financial data), but clearly the transparency agenda is much broader than this – it's about understanding how public organisations work and in particular how decisions are made. The Obama administration has made some steps in this direction, but so far these have been isolated steps. For example, it has agreed to release information on visitors to the White House⁸. However, this came as part of a deal with a not-for-profit organization that had successfully started a legal case, arguing that the US Secret Service had an obligation to release the logs under Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation. Campaigners argued that the Obama administration solution - voluntary release of information according to rules set by the White House - was an inferior outcome to acceptance by the White House that these logs were covered by the FOI legislation.

Another interesting move by the Obama administration was the decision to impose strict transparency requirements in relation to stimulus spending⁹. Any comments by registered lobbyists on particular projects, applications or applicants had to be in writing and, once received, the relevant public sector organisation had to post them publically on its [recovery](http://recovery.gov)

⁷ <http://www.stimuluswatch.org/>

⁸ http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Statement-from-the-President-on-the-First-Time-Disclosure-Policy-for-White-House-Visitor-Logs/.

⁹ http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Memorandum-for-the-Heads-of-Executive-Departments-and-Agencies-3-20-09/

website within three business days. Registered lobbyists were allowed to communicate orally with public officials on general issues, but the official with whom they communicated was obliged to contemporaneously or immediately thereafter document in writing: (i) the date and time of the contact; (ii) the names of the registered lobbyists and the official(s) between whom the contact took place; and (iii) a short description of the substance of the communication. This document then had to be posted publicly by the executive department or agency on its recovery website within 3 business days of the communication.

This example demonstrates the administration's interest in broadening the transparency agenda to include public sector decision-making processes and input into them. However, they have not yet articulated a comprehensive vision for how public decision-making could be made more transparent. Unsurprisingly, their efforts have not met the expectations of the most passionate campaigners. This is how Washington journalist Dan Froomkin put it:

"Imagine a White House Web site where the home page isn't just a static collection of transcripts and press releases, but a window into the roiling intellectual foment of the West Wing. Imagine a White House Web site where staffers maintain blogs in which they write about who they are and what they are working on; where some meetings are streamed in live video; where the president's daily calendar is posted online; where major policy proposals have public collaborative workspaces, or wikis; where progress towards campaign promises is tracked on a daily basis; and where anyone can sign up for customized updates by e-mail, text message, RSS feed, Twitter, or the social network of their choice.

And that's just for starters. Because the Internet doesn't look kindly on information that just flows one way. To live up to their promises, the president and his staff are going to have to do more than just talk – they're going to have to listen, and respond. So imagine a Web site where the president regularly answers questions sent in by citizens; where ordinary people can vote up or down items they want brought to the president's attention; and where Americans from across the political spectrum engage in honest debate."¹⁰

This vision ignores the burden in terms of time and effort that this amount of transparency would impose on the White House (or any other public organization). Furthermore, it is important to recognize that all organizations need some confidential space for internal discussion. However, this comment does highlight the pressure for more transparency in this area and, as the Obama administration's limited steps have illustrated, there is plenty of scope for government action both in relation to the context of decision-making (who met whom, what inputs were received etc) and in relation to the decision process itself (what were the key stages in the decision process, what criteria were used to make decisions etc).

Transparency Lessons Learnt

- Driving the transparency agenda requires a firm commitment from the top and ideally should be expressed in a measure that places a clear obligation on all public sector organisations. President Obama did this via an executive memorandum, but expressing it in a legal or quasi-legal obligation might be even more effective;
- The commitment to transparency could be strengthened by a robust challenge process so citizens can highlight cases where they think public sector organisations are not being sufficiently transparent. Initially, such challenges could be dealt with by the organisation

¹⁰ <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/white-house-watch/obamas-not-so-open-government.html>

concerned, but ultimately citizens could be given the right to appeal to a “transparency czar”, functioning in a similar way to existing data protection commissioners;

- The task of making the policy process and its context more transparent is only beginning to be explored, but it is likely to involve a combination of guidelines and government promotion of good practice examples (just as the Obama administration is promoting open innovation in general via its open government innovation gallery¹¹).

Public Participation

Mass participation was a hallmark of the Obama campaign and even before his inauguration Barack Obama sought to apply the techniques he had used in his campaign to the transition process. His change.gov portal¹² offered a range of participation opportunities:

- *The Citizen’s Briefing Book* – this initiative gave citizens the chance to put their top concerns on the incoming president’s agenda and let others comment on and vote on the different suggestions;
- *Join the Discussion* – this was a blog where members of Obama’s transition team gave their perspective on an issue and asked for feedback;
- *Your Seat at the Table* – this part of the site gave information on who was meeting with the transition team and allowed individuals and organisations to comment on the meetings or provide information relevant to them;
- *Open for Questions* – this allowed citizens to submit questions to the team and vote on them with the top questions receiving video answers from transition team members;
- *It’s your America* – this initiative asked citizens to submit stories about their experiences (good or bad) and suggest ideas on how to make things better.

These opportunities generated a strong response. One hundred and twenty five thousand people participated in the Citizen’s Briefing Book with 44,000 ideas being put forward and 1.4 million votes being cast¹³. Similarly, in the first round of Open for Questions 20,000 participants submitted 10,000 questions and cast 1,000,000 votes. In the second round that increased to 103,512 people, who submitted 76,031 questions and cast 4,713,083 votes¹⁴.

But these experiments were not an unmixed success. Any opportunity to participate risks being gamed by individuals or groups strongly committed to a particular cause. For example, in the Citizen’s Briefing Book the most popular idea by a significant margin was legalising marijuana. Furthermore, while a considerable number of people participated, they would not appear to be very representative. As one assessment noted, “since the top-rated education idea was “age-appropriate sex education” and the highest-rank health proposal was in support of medical

¹¹ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/open/innovations/>

¹² <http://change.gov/>

¹³ http://www.publicagenda.org/files/pdf/PA_CAPE_Paper3_Promising_Mech2.pdf. This useful paper from Public Agenda’s Centre for Advances in Public Engagement (CAPE) looks at a variety of “promising practices in online engagement” including some of the Obama transition team initiatives and makes many excellent points that are reflected in the discussion above.

¹⁴ http://change.gov/newsroom/entry/open_for_questions_round_2_response/

marijuana, it's fair to suspect that conservatives were not heavily represented in the participation base"¹⁵. Perhaps the biggest issue is assessing what difference all this activity made. This is crucial: unless the activity is clearly impactful, it is hard to see how it can be sustainable. The election of Barack Obama was an historic event that touched a large number of people, but what chance is there of sustaining people's willingness to commit time and energy to participation if six months later it is hard to say if all of this input had any impact?

These initiatives also ran into a number of more technical issues. Where citizens could both submit ideas and vote on them, these two activities typically took place over the same time period. This makes sense in terms of maximising participation, since anyone attracted to the site can either submit an idea or vote or both. The drawback is that ideas that are submitted early have an unfair advantage ("early submission bias"). Once an idea gets votes, it gains visibility and kudos from being "popular" and so has more chance of continuing to stay on top. Similarly, without moderation similar or related ideas can split support between them; and yet active moderation can easily look like an attempt to manipulate the result. Where the focus was discussion rather than voting, the lack of moderation meant some comments were off-topic or inappropriate, potentially discouraging people from getting involved. However, given the scale of participation sought, active moderation would have been resource-intensive and would have slowed down the discussion and detracted from the citizen's experience (for example, if input did not appear immediately after submission). This argues for the use of community moderation in this type of exercise. This approach was not used on the change.gov projects, although it has been used in later Obama administration initiatives¹⁶.

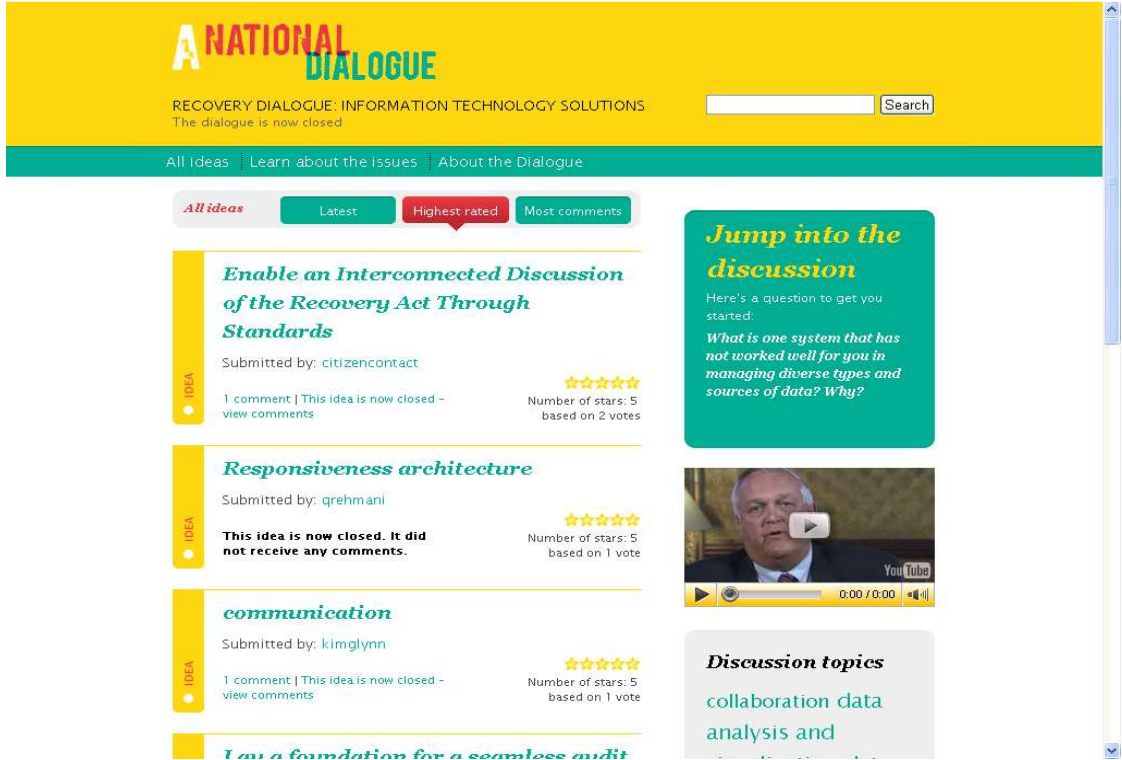
These projects also raised the issue as to who should be allowed to participate and on what basis. Where a government is looking for good ideas, it seems natural to let anyone make a contribution. However, once voting is introduced (which suggests it matters how much support an idea has), not knowing who is voting may become an issue – maybe a small number of people are voting many times or maybe a significant number of people voting live outside the relevant jurisdiction. The decision by the Obama transition team to ignore these issues is understandable. On the other hand, the results were in no way binding – the fact that legalising marijuana did so well has not turned this proposal into an administration priority. On the other hand, doing anything about these issues is very difficult and would have discouraged the mass participation they were aiming for.

A related issue is whether anonymous contributions should be allowed. Again, this maximises potential participation, but it may increase the number of inappropriate comments and can allow so-called "sock puppeting", people seeking to generate an illusion of support for their views by backing it in a string of separate contributions apparently by different people. For the advocates of transparency, this can also be a matter of principle: if the aim is open public debate, how can this be achieved with tools that allow anonymity?

¹⁵ http://www.publicagenda.org/files/pdf/PA_CAPE_Paper3_Promising_Mech2.pdf pg 5

¹⁶ One use of this technique is on the Office of Science and Technology Policy blog, where readers can flag off message comments and so get them removed from discussions on a particular blog. <http://blog.ostp.gov/flagged-comments/2009-06-04/>.

After his inauguration President Obama continued to explore the scope for attracting input from those outside government. For example, the administration recognised that it needed help in designing recovery.gov and at the end of April 2009 launched a national online dialogue on the ideas, tools and approaches needed to make recovery.gov successful¹⁷. The dialogue, which was organised by the National Administration for Public Administration, took place on a simple, easy-to-use platform where people could suggest, comment on and rate ideas on this issue. The platform incorporated a variety of RSS streams and some interesting capabilities such as the ability to “watch” other registered participants (i.e. to be notified when they made a new contribution on the site). As ideas came in, these were listed on the home page in three ways – latest ideas, most rated ideas and most commented ideas.



Offering multiple views in this way can help counter the early submission bias we mentioned earlier¹⁸ and highlighted the most commented ideas is an interesting approach. Unfortunately, in this case it seems to have generated some gaming, since the two most commented ideas were products submitted by the creators of the products with supportive comments that may or may not be by neutral observers. Also top of the most rated ideas list are some ideas that received full marks but only from one person; an improvement might be to have some kind of formula combining average rating with a weighting for the number of people who rated it. The best way to combine these two factors is a matter of judgement, but an idea that was highly rated by a large number of people should probably be given more weight than one that was highly rated by a handful of people even if the average rating is slightly higher in the latter case.

¹⁷ <http://www.thenationaldialogue.org/>

¹⁸ See pg X.

The most significant initiative the Obama administration has launched in the participation area related to open government itself and had three stages. Phase One was a brainstorm undertaken using the ideascale tool¹⁹; Phase Two was a discussion on the Office of Science and Technology Policy blog²⁰; and Phase Three involved collaborative drafting, using the mixedink tool²¹. Again, these initiatives got a significant response, but considerably less than that achieved by the change.gov projects. The Brainstorm phase elicited more than 900 ideas and 33,000 votes. The Discussion phase attracted more than 1,000 comments in response to 16 topics and the Drafting phase produced 305 drafts by 375 authors with 2, 256 people voting on those drafts²². The reduced participation (relative to change.gov) reflects the fact that this was a longer, more complicated exercise than any of the transition projects and that it was intended to feed directly into the policy-making process.

Interestingly, there was some criticism of the process itself in one of the collaboratively drafted documents. It suggested that it is:

“unwise to attempt to develop policy proposals on a complicated subject such as e-rulemaking through the equivalent of policy sound-bites as afforded by this wiki experiment. Doing so often reduces important subjects into rhetorical commentary, particularly when a thoughtful report on policy solutions already exists. An alternative approach would be to post the ABA recommendations in order to seek comments using new media as a vehicle. This may produce more thoughtful reaction and commentary to considered recommendations, thereby advancing policy directions for e-rulemaking.”²³

This may in part be a criticism of the mixed-ink tool, but it also suggests some frustration with an unstructured debate. While it is important for governments to open out policy debates, there is still a need to take some responsibility for structuring and organising them. In particular, there is a need to highlight hard choices and trade-offs. So far, only a fairly limited number of tools have been tested for doing this and it will be interesting to see what additions to them (if any) the Obama administration experiments with over the next few years.

Building deeper engagements around more advanced tools would help counter the criticism that efforts to date have generated only superficial engagement. There is, of course, a trade-off here too; deeper citizen engagement will require more time and effort from participants and therefore a lower number of participants is to be expected. It might be possible to get large numbers of people to rate in order of preference a 100 million increase in taxes, a 100 million cut in public services, and a combined 50 million increase in taxes and 50 million cut in services, but far fewer are likely to get involved in discussing the details of what might each of these packages of changes might involve.

Another important issue is linking specific initiatives into a longer term process. Large-scale participation is a worthy goal, but the aim should be a long term relationship rather than one-off bursts of activity. Governments should look to build into their initiatives opportunities for citizens

¹⁹ <http://www.ideascale.com/>

²⁰ <http://blog.ostp.gov/category/opengov/page/2/>

²¹ <http://www.mixedink.com/main.php>

²² <http://blog.ostp.gov/category/opengov/>

²³ <http://mixedink.com/OpenGov/ERulemaking>

to sign up to be kept in touch with developments in a particular area. This could happen in a number of ways. For example, those involved in the initial exercise might be invited to keep in touch with next steps via a mailing list or an online forum (with RSS feeds) or a government blog that allowed the debate to continue via comments on blog posts²⁴.

As these comments suggest, crowd-sourcing ideas is only one of the benefits of public participation, indeed, it is not necessarily the most valuable. After all, it would be naïve to think that all governments need to do is to ask enough people and then eventually someone will propose a magic solution to the particular dilemma they face. A fuller list of potential benefits of public participation in policy-making might include:

- Ideas policymakers had missed or not considered;
- Clearer insight into public views on priorities and tradeoffs;
- Clearer insight into how people might react to a policy change, i.e. whether people are likely to respond in the way expected to new incentives/deterrents;
- Clearer insight into what the real-world impact of the policy changes might be;
- Suggested design improvements to the policy package to counter impacts that policymakers had missed or under-estimated.

These aspects of participation are more likely to come to the fore in relation to more specific areas of policy than the strategic issues dealt with at the White House level. However, if the drive to participation is to have a real impact, it does need to move beyond an open appeal for ideas and comments.

To be effective, participation exercises will also need to be located more clearly within the policy process itself. For example, a simple framework might be:

- Stage One: Defining the Problem - what is the case for policy action?
- Stage Two: Generating Ideas on Solutions - what are the best policy actions to deliver the objectives identified in stage one?
- Stage Three: Assessing Priorities and Trade-offs – how can the best policy actions identified in stage two best be combined in a package, given resource constraints, the way different potential actions interact and the impact of action in his area on other policy objectives?
- Stage Four: Getting Implementation Right: what is the best way of implementing the particular package of policy actions that has been chosen as the way forward?

This kind of framework could help policy makers decide what type of public participation exercise to organise (since different approaches make sense at different stages), while also helping citizens understand where a particular exercise stood in the policy process and exactly what sort of input was being sought from them. Adopting this kind of approach might also

²⁴ One good example of this from the United Kingdom is the Digital Britain Forum which was set up after the publication of the Digital Britain report in June 2009 and continues the discussion in an active and sometimes surprisingly frank manner. See <http://digitalbritainforum.org.uk/>

encourage policymakers to be more upfront about what was up for discussion and what was not, e.g. in stage one objectives would be up for discussion, but not in later stages.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of President Obama's efforts to involve the public in the policy process relate to the issue of representativeness. One way of minimising this issue is to combine offline and online discussions. This can work in a variety of different ways. A face-to-face consultation on a policy issue can be continued through an online dialogue or the results of an online exercise can be replayed in a face-to-face context to see whether (or to what extent) the same results emerge. It is also important to bear in mind that online participation is usually about improving the decision-making process rather than transferring decision-making power to the small percentage of citizens who can and do part. Ultimately, it is elected representatives who are accountable for the policy decisions they make, and as well as any online participation exercise, there will be many other channels that influence the decisions they make (from direct contact with constituents to representations they receive from a range of interested parties plus of course public opinion as reflected through the prism of the media).

The final but hugely significant issue in this area is the need to find realistic ways in which governments can share impact: how does a government say: "You have changed our minds – we were going to do X but we will now do Y"? One problem here is that if a government goes into a consultation with an apparently open-mind and then seeks non-aggregated input (i.e. just asks for comments and suggestions), it is almost impossible to show what impact the consultation had. A braver step would be for the government to share its analysis of a problem and its proposed solution and allow citizens to rate this analysis and solution against other possibilities. Against this background, whether and where the public participation had an impact would be much clearer, but that of course is one reason why adopting this approach would require a certain amount of bravery by the government.

Participation Lessons Learnt

- It is possible to get large number of citizens involved in the policy process and high quality contributions and detailed work can be done in this way;
- However, individual exercises need to be placed in a longer term context (where does this exercise fit in the policy process; what is the participation strategy for the whole policy process in relation to this issue) and efforts should be made to offer participants opportunities for long term engagement rather than one-off activity;
- Governments need to explore more advanced tools and techniques for getting citizen input on priorities and trade-offs;
- They also need to develop strategies for demonstrating that citizen input had an impact.

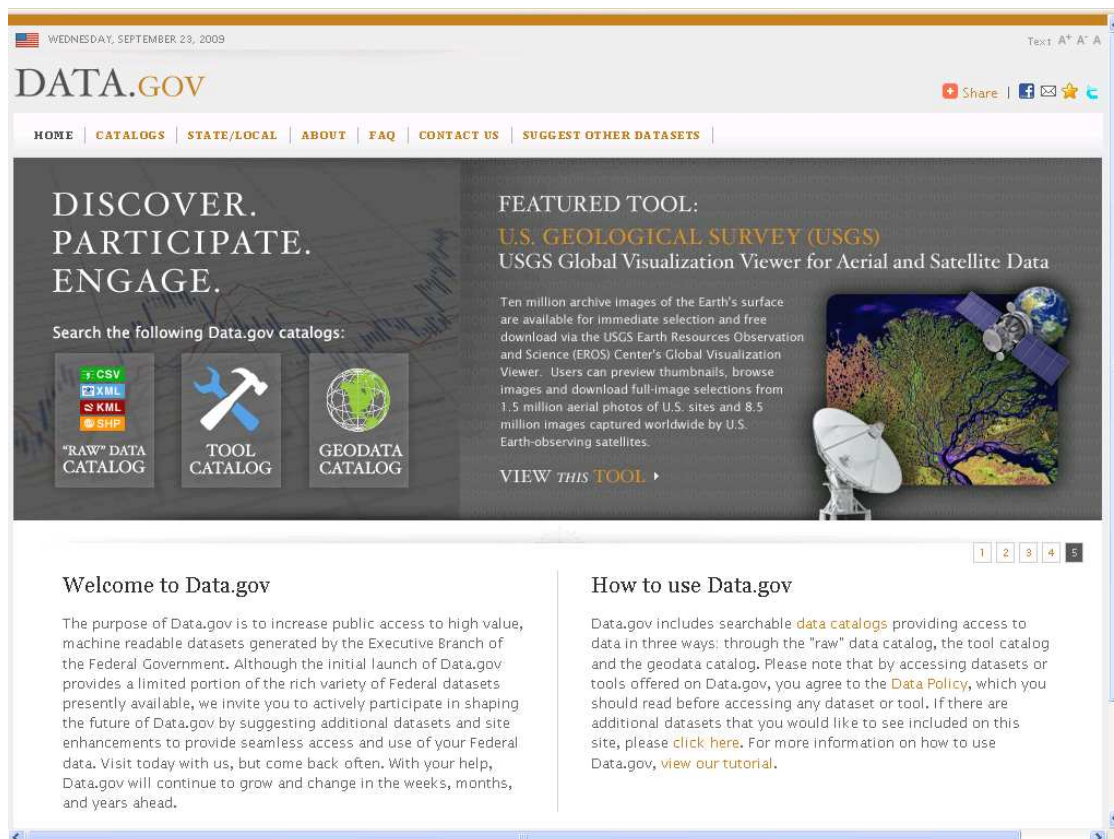
Collaboration

Vivek Kundra, the man President Obama appointed as his Chief Information Officer, built his reputation in the District of Columbia where he was instrumental in the data catalogue project that made available hundreds of datasets in a range of formats designed to encourage people

to develop applications that used them²⁵. (He also launched the Apps for Democracy competition²⁶, a trailblazer for the idea of using a competition to challenge citizens to come up with new applications using public data). Not surprisingly, replicating this achievement at the federal level was one of his top priorities.

As explained on the site itself, “the purpose of Data.gov is to increase public access to high value, machine readable datasets generated by the Executive Branch of the Federal Government. Although the initial launch of Data.gov provides a limited portion of the rich variety of Federal datasets presently available, we invite you to actively participate in shaping the future of Data.gov by suggesting additional datasets and site enhancements to provide seamless access and use of your Federal data”²⁷.

As well as offering raw data sets, the site has a tools catalogue which includes widgets, data mining and extraction tools and a geodata catalogue. Users can also rate the datasets and tools. One improvement would be greater transparency in relation to requests for additional datasets. At the moment the site includes a simple form for citizens to request new datasets, but it would be useful to publish a list of the additional datasets that have been requested and potentially allow people to endorse requests by others (or indeed to prioritise them).



²⁵ <http://data.octo.dc.gov/>

²⁶ <http://www.appsfordemocracy.org/>

²⁷ <http://www.data.gov/>

Overall, data.gov seems a clear success. The site is simple but easy to use, and there have been some great applications built using it. For example, <http://www.thisweknow.org/> is an extremely user-friendly front-end that citizens can use to explore the data in data.gov. Citizens can enter a location and get a summary of public data in relation to that area and can then drill down into the individual data sets.

This We Know: San Jose, CA What's This We Know?

San Jose, CA

- There are **116 Factories** (within 21 mi.) [tweet this](#)
- 1,078,100** pounds of **53 Pollutants** were released (within 21 mi.) [tweet this](#)
- 105 Officials** reported on **116 Factories** (within 21 mi.) [tweet this](#)
- 3,759 Violent Crimes** occurred or **4.0** per 1000 **people** (in this town) [tweet this](#)
- Demographics:** **378,345** people were **Hispanic**, **44,196** were **African American**, **426,537** were **Asian**, **862,372** were **White**, **820,925** were **Male**, and **800,384** were **Female** (in this town)
- 105,074** people are **Unemployed**, while **787,164** have **jobs** (in this county) [tweet this](#)
- There are **325,922 Home Owners** and **221,273 Renters** (in this town) [tweet this](#)
- 48%** of people **Relocated** in the past 15 years (in this town) [tweet this](#)
- 7,304** people were diagnosed with **Cancer** (in this county) [tweet this](#)
- 8 Bills** have been introduced about this location by **6 Members of Congress** since 1993 [tweet this](#)
- 10 Earmark Requests** were made by **9 Organizations** (in this town) [tweet this](#)

Tip: Click on any of the highlighted items above to explore the underlying data.
Sources: 2005 Toxics Release Inventory • 2007 Crime in the United States • US Census 2000 • Local Area Unemployment Statistics •

Population: 1,621,316
Households: 559,949
Land Area: 442.0
Water Area: 7.7

NEARBY...

- San Mateo, CA 27 mi
- Oakland, CA 38 mi
- San Francisco, CA 42 mi
- Sacramento, CA 88 mi
- Fresno, CA 123 mi

Collaboration Lessons Learnt

- Data.gov offers a good model which U.S. states and other jurisdictions are copying and developing. It is user-friendly and gives users various opportunities to influence development of the site via feedback.
- Apps competition are an obvious and popular way to build on a site of this kind, but over time citizen-created added value should come not just from new applications but also from feedback and hence improvement to the data sets themselves.
- There is scope for much more work on government-citizen collaboration to create public value, for example, through the co-production of public services. However, this is not something that has been explored in detail by the White House. Since it is a policy and decision producer rather than a service provider, it is perhaps not surprising that the main focus for its work on collaboration has been public service information and policy-making.

Conclusion

Moving forward on transparency, participation and collaboration would transform government and potentially deliver two huge benefits. First, it can help tackle the trust issue. Most developed countries have less deferential cultures than they had in the past and while this change has

many positive features, it has highlighted a gulf - and sometimes hostility - between citizens and the institutions that serve them. As well as being a bad thing in itself, this gulf reduces the effectiveness of public institutions and makes it difficult for them to tackle some of the large, complicated challenges our society faces (e.g. climate change, the changing demographic profile of our societies, etc). Transparency and participation can play a large role in changing this situation and strengthening our public institutions.

The second benefit of this agenda is particularly relevant at a time when public resources are under pressure, for it creates possibilities for everyone in society to contribute to the common good. Given the complex challenges we face, maximising the contributions to social goals is a top priority. On the one hand, in a Web 2.0 world people are not prepared to accept government decisions that are made behind closed doors and on a basis they do not understand. On the other hand, there is a huge largely untapped resource out there ready to help solve the challenges our societies face. President Obama's transparent government initiatives have had a huge impact in terms of moving this agenda forward, but there is plenty of scope for other governments to build on these experiments and explore ways their public sector organisations can become more transparent, more participative and more collaborative.
