



What Makes Governments 'Open'?

Sketching out Models of Open Government

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Abstract: *This article questions what makes governments 'open'. In doing this it sketches out two models of information management: a proactive model and a reactive model. The models provide early language for discussing and assessing the state of open government, and serve as a useful foundation for future research. Ultimately, it is found that governments following a reactive model, characterized by strong informational control and a lack of high-level political and bureaucratic support for open government, cannot fully or successfully realize open government.*

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While the concept of 'open government' has a long history that predates the communication technology available to us today (see Parks writing in 1957 for example), it is a concept that is currently receiving increased interest. Early discussions regarding open government focused primarily on freeing government information (Parks, 1957; Perritt, 1997). Today, those interested in the intersection between governance and information and communication technology (ICTs) see new avenues for making this reality and for expanding the concept of open government beyond simply freeing information. Current discussions emphasize collaboration, shared resources and increased transparency and accountability. This has largely evolved from discussions about 'e-government' and 'government 2.0.' In some cases these concepts are used interchangeably with open government, but there are some differences that can be drawn out that point to open government as the new, ideal and most productive use of technology by government. Open government also includes a culture of governance that transcends ICTs where the goals of openness, sharing and collaboration are reflected, more broadly, in government operations and priorities.

The existing literature offers some good definitions of open government and provides some very interesting case studies that might be considered best practices inline with open government today (see Lathrop and Ruma eds, 2010 for good examples). The purpose of this article is to step back and to consider, more broadly, what makes governments 'open'. This will help us to better understand why some national governments have been able to successfully take steps toward open government while others have struggled or lagged behind. In doing this, the article borrows from literature regarding organizational change and information management to sketch out two models of open government: a proactive model and a reactive model. Three broad criteria, or characteristics of successful open government, are discussed within the context of each model: an open government champion, a plan of action for achieving open government, and existence of mechanisms for achieving goals. Ultimately, it finds that governments following a reactive model, characterized by strong informational control and a lack of high-level political and bureaucratic support, cannot fully or successfully realize open government. In making this observation, the

article draws on examples from Australia, the United Kingdom (U.K.) and the United States (U.S.), but puts particular emphasis on the Canadian situation. The Canadian case is an interesting one as Canada had a reputation as a leader in the early days of e-government for its record in providing government information and services online. However, as technology has evolved and has become more dynamic and interactive, Canada has lost its place at the forefront. The proactive/reactive models help to better illustrate why it is some countries have been able to move toward open government while Canada's efforts have stagnated.

It is recognized that open government holds complexities that cannot be captured in a binary model. However, it is beyond the scope of this article to embark on a lengthy in-depth investigation or categorization. The proactive/reactive models and the three characteristics discussed within each are ideal starting points from which to build more nuanced models. They are sketches as opposed to complete, finished works that require no refinement. However, sketching is a useful exercise. It gives us a basis from which to build. In this case it is anticipated that the reactive/proactive sketch will serve three broad purposes. First, it helps to provide us with language for discussing the state of open government in various localities. Second, it lends insight about some steps to be taken if improved open government is a goal. Third, it provides a basis for future research to flush out and refine models of open government. Before explaining these models in more depth, it is useful to first consider the characteristics of open government today.

1. 21st Century Open Government

ICTs are integral to 21st century open government. Here, understanding the concept of government 2.0 is important. As technology evolved and became more interactive, the term government 2.0 started to gain popularity. Here the technologies driving Web 2.0 – social media such as wikis, Facebook, Twitter, crowdsourcing and cloud computing to name a few – are transposed to government. Open government, in this environment, has been described as “the use of technology – especially the collaborative technologies at the heart of Web 2.0 – to better solve collective problems at a city, state, national and international level” (O'Reilly, 2010, p. 12). The new interactive potential of ICTs allows for more innovative sharing of information and greater collaboration both within different government departments and among different branches of government, as well as with citizens.

O'Reilly's definition touches on important elements of open government, but the concept of open government is much broader. It represents the capacity of new technology and a fundamental shift in the culture and practice of governance that extends beyond Web 2.0, on which government 2.0 is based. It is, as Don Tapscott (2010) states, a “redesign of how government operates; how and what the public sector provides and ultimately how governments interact and engage with their citizens” (p. xvi). Its emphasis is on sharing, the distribution of power and collaboration. It includes things such as people's right to access data, documents and government proceedings. And, it is important to note that information and data should be presented in an open, reusable format so that people can play with and manipulate it in an effort to create something new. New creations could take any number of forms. It might be an application to better display weather data, or a website to more clearly present legislative work as is the case of openparliament.ca. The possibilities are infinite. Open government also includes meaningful participation of citizens and better communication between branches and levels of government (Lathrop and Ruma eds., 2010). It is about rethinking approaches to information management and creating a culture of openness and sharing within government. It includes, but goes beyond open data – simply making publically collected raw data available to citizens – incorporating a whole-of-government culture of sharing, transparency and participation.

In theory, freeing information and opening government has the potential to benefit government and citizens in many ways. It could reduce, if not eliminate, the need for people to acquire

information via access to information requests in countries, such as Canada, or freedom of information as it is called in other countries, where such requests have become the standard, and highly unsatisfactory way, of getting government information. This would liberate human resources that could be used more effectively. In 2003, freedom of information cost over \$23 million (U.S. dollars) in the U.S. and over \$30 million (Canadian dollars) in Canada (Holson, 2007). Cost savings also come when public servants have better access to the information and data they need to do their jobs well in a timely manner. This is something both American and British public servants are finding when it comes to open government initiatives in their respective countries (Eaves, 2011).

Beyond cost savings, open government is thought to have the potential to improve public administration and governance by providing citizens with the tools they need to monitor government, to better hold it to account and to allow it an opportunity to potentially identify problems before, or as they emerge. It also gives citizens a better chance to participate in problem solving and to potentially improve the services and information offered by government. Here, governance and democracy are strengthened.

It is important to note that the goals of open government are in many ways lofty. In a sense it is an ideal that some governments strive toward. However, implementation is not always easy and there are those who caution about the potential consequences of greater openness. Words of caution are most often aimed at a continued need to respect privacy. Jeff Jonas and Jim Harper detail the importance of respecting privacy as a means of building trust between government and citizens (in Lathrop and Ruma eds., 2010).

Detailed debates about the pros and cons of open government go beyond the scope of this article. The important thing to note here is that governments are facing increasing pressure to be more open – to strive for open governance – as a result of the perceived benefits of ICTs. This pressure comes from a number of different sources. It comes from some within government itself. It comes from citizens and media. It is also found at the international level from organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which has stated that this is an “important goal for all countries” (OECD, 2003, p. 29) and indicated that open government is an objective shared by all of its members (OECD, 2005, p. 2). This goal is also shared by members of the new (September 2011) multilateral Open Government Partnership. Given that so many countries have flagged open government as a goal, it is interesting to ask why some countries have been able to move toward it more quickly than others. Some comparative analysis of attitudes toward information management provides early insight.

2. Thinking About Information Management and Open Government

Information management is a discipline unto itself and a full examination of its current state is worthy of much more detailed and rigorous treatment than can be offered here. However, it is useful to think of open government in the context of information management as many of the goals and objectives are similar. Information management can be defined as the “management of the processes and systems that create, acquire, organize, store, distribute, and use information” (Detlor, 2010, p. 103). The goal of information management is to “help people and organizations access, process and use information efficiently and effectively” (Detlor, 2010, p. 103). Underlying this definition and set of goals is the fundamental belief that information is a resource. This belief is key to the concept of open government (Parks, 1957).

Thinking of information as a resource necessitates its management (Detlor, 2010). It is recognized that it takes time, money and human resources to acquire, store, disseminate and use information. However, different countries have different approaches, or attitudes toward information. In the U.S., for example, the Freedom of Information Act has a strong enforcement mechanism in the courts. Ideally, this should ensure that information is shared. This is not to say the system always works perfectly, or that there are not factors like privacy and security which

impact what is shared. In Canada, the U.K. and Australia, enforcement is overseen by an information commissioner and information has often been considered in a much more proprietary manner. This is evident by the existence of instruments such as crown copyright, which gives exclusive control over a wide range of information and work to government. This does not mean that information cannot be shared or reproduced, but it does mean that it cannot be manipulated or altered in any way. As a result, much of the information that is made public is done so in a format that prohibits alteration. This is inherently counter to the idea of open government, which emphasizes openness and collaboration. Here, the idea is that people can take government information and data to use, as they like, in the creation of new, innovative products. However, as we will see below, some nations, most notably Australia and the U.K., have been able to overcome such institutional and historical barriers to move toward the goal of open government. Others, such as Canada, have been less successful. This is interesting given that all three are parliamentary democracies and follow a Westminster style of governance.

Embracing greater openness requires thinking about information and how it is perceived, handled and managed. Perceptions of information and open government are evident in statements made, or lack thereof, by high level politicians and bureaucrats. The handling and management of information as it relates to open government can be seen by looking at access to information, or freedom of information, and evidence of a policy, plan or framework to support open government.

A comparative scan of the U.K., U.S., Australia and Canada looking at perceptions, handling and management of information illustrate two emerging models or approaches to information, which impact the goal of open government. These models are proactive and reactive. While not every example, or case may fall neatly into one of the models, they do help to start guiding our thinking when it comes to the approach taken to information and open governance and to answer the question outlined above asking why some jurisdictions have been more successful in achieving open government than others. A more detailed discussion of each model is offered below.

3. A Proactive Model of Information

By and large, those nations having more success in realizing open government have adopted what we can call a proactive model of information management. Here, the goals of openness, sharing, collaboration, and transparency – the goals of open government – are recognized, to varying degrees, and given the support of senior politicians and senior public or civil servants. Information is considered a public resource and as such it is often shared. Mechanisms are in place to ensure that it can be shared. For example, access to information, or freedom of information, legislation is in place and respected and sharing is not inhibited by onerous copyright. Finally, there should be evidence of a policy or plan, guiding open government and its central tenets. Although they may take on different forms, each of these three elements can be clearly identified when looking at national governments in the U.S., the U.K. and Australia. As such, they are the primary examples that are touched on in this section.

In cases that can be categorized as proactive, we have seen very clear statements of support from senior politicians and officials. In the U.S., President Obama and his first Chief Information Officer (CIO), Vivek Kundra, have been very vocal in promoting open government. Shortly after taking office Obama stated that his “administration is committed to creating an unprecedented level of openness in Government” (World Resources Institute, 2009). In the U.K., Gordon Brown has been calling for greater openness and citizen participation since his nomination as leader of the Labour Party. Former CIO John Suffolk spoke of the potential for innovation: “Community analysts and small agile IT firms can do much more with data than government can. Open Data has unleashed an army of innovators” (Millar, 2011). Similar statements can be found coming from CIOs and senior politicians in Australia and elsewhere.

Under the proactive model of information management, paying lip service to the importance of open government is not enough. Action has to be taken, to varying degrees, to attain greater degrees of openness. Action might come in many different forms, but two types are particularly noteworthy. First, it requires steps to put infrastructure in place to support open government and to disseminate information and facilitate sharing and collaboration. Second, but related to the first, it needs policies and plans to support open government. Each of these will be explored in turn.

When it comes to infrastructure to support open government and to disseminate information, a number of different mechanisms can be identified, but access to information, or freedom of information legislation, is key. Most democracies have some sort of legislation of this type, but often it has been used to protect and conceal information. In the U.S. this was acknowledged by President Obama who argued that a reinterpretation of the American Freedom of Information Act was necessary to ensure that openness and sharing was the default position: "The Government should not keep information confidential merely because public officials might be embarrassed by disclosure, because errors and failures might be revealed, or because of speculative or abstract fears. In the face of doubt, openness prevails" (World Resources Institute, 2009). Such a reinterpretation, which assumes by default that information will be shared, is at the heart of open government.

Efforts have also been made to free information in the U.K. and Australia. Here, the restrictive crown copyright regulations mentioned earlier have been relaxed through the use of new licensing frameworks that allow the government to share public sector data and information more easily, and in a more flexible manner. In the U.K. an Open Government License has been established for this purpose (National Archives, 2011). Similarly, Open Access and Licensing Frameworks have been adopted by the governments of both Australia and New Zealand.

Another mechanism being used to facilitate sharing is the establishment or building of databases providing access to information that has already been released via access to information, or freedom of information requests. In Australia, for example, government agencies have been given until 2016 to provide the CIO with evidence that they are compliant with this freedom of information disclosure log directive and with the whole of government Information Publication Scheme (Africa, 2011).

A common method for sharing information and data and for inviting citizen participation has been the creation of government operated web portals. In the U.K. the former Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, enlisted the help of a technology guru Sir Tim Berners-Lee for this purpose. In 2009, he announced: "So that government information is accessible and useful for the widest possible group of people, I have asked Sir Tim Berners-Lee who led the creation of the world wide web, to help us drive the opening up of access to Government data in the web" (Arthur, 2009). Currently, government data that is made public is searchable via the data.gov.uk portal. As of August 2011, the site reported having over 5,400 data sets that are freely available for users to download and manipulate. Direct.gov.uk is the portal for government information. It also aggregates and links to existing online consultations. This is mirrored on the 'Engagement' section of the Prime Minister's own website at number10.gov.uk. As a further means of inviting engagement, a website dedicated to the creation and submission of electronic petitions has also been set up at epetitions.direct.gov.uk.

Using a single portal, or a series of portals, to drive open government is not a strategy that is unique to the U.K. In the U.S., data.gov is home to over 389,000 data sets that people can use and manipulate. It provides access to a range of applications developed by both government and citizens based on the data provided. Broader consultation and engagement opportunities are not as neatly packaged in the U.S. as they are in the U.K., but the goals of transparency, participation and collaboration are clearly and frequently stated on government websites. When the open government initiative began in 2009, a three-phase plan for consultation was instituted. In the first

phase, citizens were directed to a website where they could make suggestions regarding open government policy. Following, the General Services Administration (GSA) helped individual departments and agencies to develop similar sites for consulting citizens. At the time of writing, a consultation wiki has been set up inviting people to provide “feedback on a concept for next generation citizen consultation, namely a government-wide software tool and process to elicit expert public participation (working title “ExpertNet”)” (Open Government Initiative, 2011). It is thought that such a tool would better link citizens to government in two ways. First, it would “enable government officials to circulate notice of opportunities to participate in public consultations to members of the public with expertise on a topic” (Open Government Initiative, 2011). Second, it would “provide those volunteer experts with a mechanism to provide useful, relevant, and manageable feedback back to government officials”(Open Government Initiative, 2011). The phased consultation plan highlights one of the main characteristics of the proactive model – a plan and or policy guiding open government.

When it comes to the existence of policies and frameworks to advance open government, the U.S. serves as among the most visible of examples. In issuing the Open Government Directive on December 8, 2009, President Obama clearly supported the move toward openness and made efforts to ensure action was taken by requiring that federal agencies take steps to meet a range of milestones regarding transparency, participation and collaboration (Whitehouse, 2011). As of April 7, 2010, each federal department had established, and published its own open government plan. While the impact of the directive might be up for question and is a worthy subject for further study, infrastructure was put in place to help move the federal government toward that ideal form of open government. The milestones for change were clearly articulated and a process was put in place for tracking and reporting on the ability of agencies to meet milestones.

While the American move toward open government happened relatively quickly through a strong political push, other nations have taken a slower approach to determining how to pursue openness. In the U.K. Gordon Brown’s Power of Information Taskforce studied the issue at length. The Australian government took a similar approach with its Government 2.0. Taskforce. In both cases we see terms of reference that mirror the objectives of open government. In the Australian case, for example, the Taskforce sought to study, among other things, how to: make government information more accessible and usable; make government more consultative, participatory and; build a culture of online innovation within Government (Government 2.0 Taskforce).

The Taskforce’s final report outlined a clear path for the government to follow and highlighted existing mechanisms supporting an open government framework, including a set of guidelines for members of the Australian public service to follow when engaging with online participation (Australian Government, 2009). Such guidelines are becoming increasingly common. In the U.K. for example, the Central Office of Information, has published ‘Engaging through social media: a guide for civil servants’ (Central Office of Information, 2009). In general, such guidelines outline the parameters for using social media. They highlight the potential benefits of engaging in a social media strategy and tend to encourage a more direct link between citizens and members of the public, or civil service. Governments of the U.K. and Australia have also developed strategies specifically for Twitter.

Documents, such as those described above, are a vital component of the proactive model. Together with political and bureaucratic discourse supporting open government, and the introduction and refinement of mechanisms for sharing information and facilitating collaboration, we see the proactive sketch taking shape. Here, we see information treated as a public resource. We also see recognition that freeing information and collaborating with citizens can lead to innovation.

4. A Reactive Model of Information

If those adopting a proactive model of information support, both verbally and with action, the idea that information is a public resource, those adopting a reactive model have been slower. Here, Canada serves as an interesting example. Like many other countries it has a Chief Information Officer—one of the officials key in pushing an open government agenda in the examples discussed above - however, the CIO has been relatively quiet on the issue of open government compared to her counterparts in other countries. This is not to say the issue has never been addressed in public. The current CIO did appear before a parliamentary committee in 2011 to discuss the issue when asked, but this is a far cry from the very public and frequent discussion offered by the likes of Kundra in a range of fora, including *Wired Magazine*.

Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper has also been quiet on the issue of open government. However, it did make it into the 2011 Speech from the Throne when the Governor General stated: “Our Government will also ensure that citizens, the private sector and other partners have improved access to the workings of government through open data, open information and open dialogue” (Government of Canada, 2011). Confusion over open government leadership became evident when the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics conducted a short study on the issue. At the time of writing, it had yet to complete its report. During one hearing (February 9, 2011) members of parliament struggled to determine who is responsible for open government at the federal level. The CIO Corinne Charette was asked: “Which minister in government comes to you and asks, ‘How are we doing on open data? How are we doing on our open government plan’? Which minister said that we need an open government plan and an open data plan” (Standing Committee, February 9, 2011)? Ultimately, the CIO could not identify an open government champion at the political level. There is some evidence of change since the Committee's meetings. In December 2011, the President of the Treasury Board, Tony Clement, announced that the government would hold an open government consultation to help it establish a strategy.

This announcement came following the establishment of the Open Government Partnership and much criticized by the government's Interim Information Commissioner, Suzanne Legault, for its poor record in the area of open government. In her *2010-2011 Report to Parliament* on plans and priorities, the Commissioner highlighted the lack of activity in the area of open government at the national level:

Abroad and at the local level in Canada, “open government” and “open data” initiatives are gaining momentum in making data sets more readily available online for public use. The Office of the Information Commissioner will work relentlessly to promote the paradigm shift required for greater public sector transparency in the hope that it will inspire similar initiatives at the national level (Information Commissioner of Canada, 2009 p.4).

The few calls for open government that can be identified tend to originate with Information Commissioners and the Privacy Commissioners, either federally or at the provincial level. In one direct appeal that did not garner significant political attention, Canada's Access to Information and Privacy Commissioners met and passed an Open Government Resolution. The resolution appealed to federal and provincial governments to support open government, to build mechanisms to share information in reusable formats either freely or at a minimal cost, and to enhance citizen participation (Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, 2010). At the same time, the need to respect existing legislation regarding privacy, security and copyright, was emphasized.

The federal government has long been criticized for assuming a closed attitude toward the sharing of information. A range of actors often lament the lack of transparency. As one witness told the Standing Committee looking at open government: “We choose not to let Canadians understand how their government works, and we choose to not let Canadians use that information to

strengthen their companies, strengthen their families, to make their country better. It's a problem I don't understand" (Eaves, 2011).

When it comes to providing infrastructure necessary for supporting the provisions of open government, the Canadian government has not kept pace with many of its counterparts. It does have access to information legislation that was adopted in the early 80s, which should allow citizens to obtain information from government when requested. However, two interesting points can be observed here. First, being request-based means that information is being provided in a reactive manner. There is no emphasis, or push, as there is in the proactive model to err on the side of simply publishing and making data available to the public. As David Eaves (2011) notes "In Canada we have permission culture. If you want to use Canadian government information, okay, but you better talk to us first or at least read the fine print about what you're allowed and not allowed to do." In this sense information is not being considered a public resource. It is seen as something to be kept under wraps and protected from wide distribution. Second, although the federal Information Commissioner is meant to enforce the legislation and ensure that government departments and agencies comply with access to information requests, they are not always fulfilled and those that are fulfilled are often not done so in a timely way. In 2010, the Information Commissioner issued a report in which "Five departments received F rankings and seven earned Ds, while the performance of Foreign Affairs was deemed so poor that its report card ranking simply states "red alert" (Curry, 2010). This highlights continuity in poor records of access to information compliance in spite of criticism by earlier Information Commissioners. In his 2006/ 2007 annual report, for example, Information Commissioner Robert Marleau said: "too often, responses to access requests are late, incomplete, or overly-censored. Too often, access is denied to hide wrong doing, or to protect officials or governments from embarrassment, rather than to serve a legitimate confidentiality requirement" (Information Commissioner of Canada, 2007, p. 11).

Not only has Canada not kept pace with other countries when it comes to freeing information, but in some cases it appears to have become more closed or restrictive. For instance, in 2008 the government closed down an access to information database that had been in place since 1989. The Co-ordination of Access to Information Request System, made access to information requests public so that interested persons could see what has been, and was in the process of being released. This move was taken rather suddenly and was highly criticized by opposition members of parliament, academics, and journalists in particular who reported using the database widely.

While the state of open government in Canada described above appears bleak compared to other jurisdictions it has taken some small, slow, but visible steps toward open government. In March 2011, the government launched open.gc.ca, its open government portal. The portal directs people in three directions: open data, open information and open dialogue. However, the portal was virtually void of content from its inception until after Canada joined the Open Government Partnership mentioned above. As of December 2011, the portal had been updated to serve as a gateway to the government's new open government consultation.

The open government portal links to the open data portal, data.gc.ca. This is where we see the strongest resemblance to the strategies being pursued in other nations. The portal hosts over 5300 general datasets and over 260,000 geospatial datasets. The data is presented in a reusable format so that it can be manipulated easily. Unlike its American counterpart, data.gov, data.gc.ca does not go as far at encouraging participation. Where the American portal invites people to share what they have done with the data available and showcases some of their efforts, the Canadian site is less about collaboration and sharing. Users are offered the opportunity to tell the government what they've used the data for by way of a feedback form. The form indicates that their creation may be shared on the open data portal, but as of December 2011, there was no mechanism on the site to do this.

The open dialogue component of the open.gc.ca site directs users to an older, existing site called Consulting Canadians. The site aggregates and links to ongoing and past consultations being offered across government. The ability to interact with government differs from consultation to consultation. In some cases users are provided with a mailing address or email address and are invited to send feedback. In other cases they are provided with a more structured feedback form. In other cases still there is the ability to participate in an ongoing, online conversation. Opportunities to engage by the latter method appear to be few and far between.

In terms of an overall policy or strategy outlining the path to open governance, there is not one to be found in the Canadian context. A clear framework such as the Open Government Directive in the U.S., does not exist. It has not been the subject of rigorous examination as it has in been in the U.K. or in Australia with the Government 2.0 Taskforce. As was noted above, it did receive some scrutiny from the House of Commons Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics. Committee hearings uncovered the apparent lack of a Canadian strategy. As one member of parliament stated: "We did hear hearsay evidence that federal officials, when at conferences, are only allowed to talk about open data and are not allowed to talk about open government, because of the lack of policy" (Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics). There is cause for optimism with the open government consultation underway.

In the absence of a government wide strategy for open government, there has been some move within the public service to establish guidelines for those wishing to engage in activity which includes greater sharing of information and collaboration, particularly within government. Guidelines for the use of blogs and wikis are made available on the Treasury Board Secretariat website. Guidelines for the engagement of public servants with citizens via new media were released November 2011.

There are some clear guidelines that are geared toward an open, more accountable government, but these are somewhat limited to the proactive disclosure of very narrow sets of information. Government departments have an obligation to publish, on their websites, information related to travel and hospitality expenditure, contracts over \$10,000, position reclassifications and grant and contribution awards (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2006). There are some exceptions made for national security when it comes to disclosing this information. This type of proactive disclosure is primarily aimed at providing citizens and parliament with the information needed to scrutinize government spending. Open government puts emphasis on a wider range of information and raw data that people can take and reuse if desired.

Limitations on disclosure, weak support, lack of a clear strategy and few clearly defined mechanisms for sharing information and collaborating with citizens, signal an approach to information management that differs from the proactive model. Here, information is treated less as a public resource. Rather, under the reactive model, information is approached in a more proprietary way.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Looking at the characteristics of the two models sketched here, and the cases used to demonstrate each, some broad lessons, or observations, can be identified which help to answer the question of why some governments are more open than others. Three broad lessons are particularly noteworthy. First, open government requires a high level political and bureaucratic champion, or champions. Second, open government requires guidelines. Third, open government requires existing institutionalized measures related to information management to be reexamined. Each lesson will be flushed out and discussed further below, starting with the need for a champion.

5.1 The Need for a Champion

To say that open government requires support from senior politicians and civil or public servants as well as action, is neither an earth shattering nor novel statement. It is one that is made whenever government finds itself needing to adapt to a large-scale change. Anthony Williams (2008) clearly outlines reasons that support may wane when writing about government 2.0: *“Deep and resilient legacies combine to frustrate progress. Common obstacles to change include conflicting time-frames, particularly between the public service and politicians; a lack of incentives to innovate; and the absence of urgency in many quarters”*.

As was seen in the above discussion of reactive approaches to information, the same obstacles inhibit progress toward open government. In Canada, open government has not had a clear champion. There is early evidence that the President of the Treasury Board, Tony Clement, may fill this gap. Here, the political and the public service must work together. In the examples discussed under the proactive model, senior politicians and public servants, most typically the Chief Information Officers, were vocal about, and discussed a path to, open government. Under the reactive model, illustrated by the Canadian example, the political and bureaucratic arms of government have, at times, appeared at odds with one another as was seen during the parliamentary hearings on open government.

5.2 The Need for Guidelines

Beyond having clearly identifiable open government champions, the nations discussed under the rubric of the proactive model had another thing in common. All had adopted clear guidelines outlining their goals for open government and the means that they planned to use to pursue those goals. Building on this there were clear guidelines outlining the parameters for using different mechanisms for the sharing of information and for collaboration. Under the reactive model such guidelines are notably absent.

Openness is a difficult goal to achieve in the absence of such guidelines. They are needed to provide government with the articulation of a common goal and means of achieving them. The guidelines might come in different forms, but in the three examples provided above there is a clear statement of goals, timelines and reporting mechanisms. Not only does this help to guide government in moving toward open government, but the public acknowledgement of such guidelines means that government can be questioned and held to account for its records in achieving its stated goals. In the U.S., this comes in the form of an Open Government scorecard which assesses each departments open government plan, its commitment to engagement, its open government website, and its data.

In the Canadian context these guidelines have not been as clearly defined. To date there is not a clear open government plan. However, the open government consultation signals the possibility of a plan being established in the future. And, in the absence of a formal open government strategy, having micro-level guidelines, such as those guiding the use of social media for public, or civil servants, serves to help satisfy some objectives of open government. It provides a forum for outlining how social media may enhance, or detract from, the work of government. It also outlines the parameters of how one should engage with social media. Such guidelines send a clear signal that openness, in certain contexts, is encouraged and supported as long as civil servants follow known guidelines. In effect, this gives civil servants a certain degree of freedom to be more open and transparent without fear of reprisal from those higher up. It has the potential to help break down hierarchies that characterize most public, or civil, services.

5.3 The Need to Re-examine Information Management

Today open government emphasizes the use of ICTs to facilitate the sharing of information and greater participation and collaboration between government and citizens. However, it extends

beyond just ICTs to include attitudes toward openness and mechanisms for sharing information either digitally or in other formats. Access to information, or freedom of information, legislation and regulations on copyright are prime examples. In most cases, such regulations were institutionalized before technology allowed for much interactivity and the possibilities for sharing and collaborating were fewer. Discussions raised about the potential for openness necessitate a revisiting of these often-dated mechanisms.

Some means of information management, such as crown copyright used in the U.K. and other commonwealth countries, are exceedingly difficult to change and require new, innovative solutions if open government is to be realized. The governments in the U.K. and Australia have shown how a re-examination of such practices and innovative solutions are possible. In both cases the older, closed idea of crown copyright are circumvented through the use of new licensing regimes which allow government to provide a great deal of information and data in reusable formats. This is the start of a radical change in the culture of government when it comes to attitudes toward information. Thinking of information, whether it is shared digitally or in some other way, as something to be automatically shared instead of hoarded, will change the way that government works and thinks about information. Similarly, access to information legislation should be interpreted, and respected, in such a way as to maximize the sharing of information.

5.4 Conclusions

This article has sketched two models of information management as it relates to open government — proactive and reactive. It outlined three characteristics of success in the area of open government, including an open government champion, action plans and mechanisms for achieving the objectives of open government, and discussed them in the context of each model. Under the proactive model information is thought of as a public resource – as something to be shared. The goals of sharing, participation and collaboration are clearly articulated by senior politicians and public servants. Clear plans of action outline more specific goals and steps to be taken in reaching them. Mechanisms for these purposes are in place. Examples drawn from the U.S., U.K., and Australia were used to illustrate this model. Action plans and mechanisms supporting open government may vary widely and some may be more effective than others. Under the reactive model, information is treated in a much more proprietary way. Senior politicians and public servants are fairly quiet when it comes to advancing the ideas of sharing information, collaboration and greater government-citizen participation. Guidelines and strategies for realizing the principles of open government either do not exist or are only present in the most epidermal of ways. Examples from the Canadian federal level help to illustrate this model. While the picture painted of open government in Canada under the reactive model looks rather bleak, there is evidence that steps are being taken to improve the state of open government in the country. Its recently announced open government consultation indicating a desire to establish a more formal open government strategy. Indeed, Canada may be on the cusp of a change that would put it on a more equal plane with countries that we might consider under the proactive model. Tracking and assessing the outcome of the consultation and the government's steps following the consultation will be an interesting subject for future research.

Recognizing the limitations of binary models, the sketch offered here served three purposes. First, and perhaps most importantly, it offered some language for categorizing the different approaches taken to information as it relates to the idea of open government. The proactive and reactive models are starting points from which to build more nuanced categorizations. Continuing to establish discourse around, and frameworks for thinking about open government and the management of information, particularly at a time where technology allows for a more direct and ongoing conversation between government and its citizens will be a necessary and important part of future research.

Second, the article lends insight about some steps to be taken if improved open government is a goal. The suggestions to have a champion, guidelines and re-examine institutionalized measures as they relate to informational management, are particularly important to governments, like the Canadian federal government, which are best categorized as following a reactive model should they want to move toward open government, and a more proactive model of information management. While the examples offered here are of national initiatives and conceptions of information, the three lessons identified are more widely applicable to other levels of government.

Third, the article provides a basis for future research to flush out and refine models of open government and to engage in comparative research. While the concept of open government is not new, it is one that is undergoing change as a result of ICTs. As such it is interesting to look at how different governments approach open government today. Given the recent multilateral Open Government Partnership, comparative research will prove fascinating. Open government is a growing discipline that is rich with possibility for future study.

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