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# Open Government, how ready is Australia?

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*The launch of the NSW Premier's Innovation Initiative signalled a turning point in the Government's approach to improving services. By seeking proposals for the use of Open Data as an area of priority, it has sent a strong message that community expectations for efficiency, accountability, transparency and engagement are increasing and will require new approaches. It remains to be seen whether technology and innovation alone will be enough to steer the NSW public service towards Open Government (OG).*

# Open Government

fundamentally aims to build and maintain a systematic approach to improving transparency, accountability and responsiveness to citizens. It also invites citizens and non-Government organisations to exploit Government information in order to generate innovation and inform dialogue between policymakers and citizens.

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The shift towards Open Government emerged from the adoption of 'e-Government' in the mid-1990s<sup>1</sup>. In 2013, the Australian Federal Government became a member of the Open Government Partnership (OGP), a multilateral initiative originally founded by Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Norway, the Philippines,

South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

The OGP requires participating countries to endorse principles of transparency and Open Government, and deliver against an action plan developed with public consultation. The principles include commitments to increase the availability of information about government activities, support for civic participation, implementation of the highest standards of professional integrity within government and use of new technologies to enable openness and accountability. With the goal of implementing Open Government principles and transforming the way it serves its citizens, the NSW Government has started the process of rethinking traditional work practices. The payoff for this being improvements in the capacity to engage with the community more directly, while fostering innovation in the private sector through improved access to Government data.

So far, the NSW Government has signalled that it will modernise freedom of information laws, implement steps to strengthen anti-corruption safeguards, reduce the time to publish information and develop mechanisms to facilitate dialogue with citizens. The NSW Government have also aligned themselves with Federal Government requirements that agencies implement digital record keeping. This policy means that all NSW agencies will be required to create, store and digitally manage the majority of records. This includes scanning incoming paper records and avoiding the creation of physical files. The Federal Government has set 2015 as its deadline for all newly created records to be digital. From that point forward, the National Archives of Australia will only accept

<sup>1</sup> Couch, Evans, Compos, Evans, (2012) *Open Govt. Initiatives, Challenges to Citizen Participation*

documents in digital format.<sup>2</sup> By rapidly phasing out physical records, Government will enable easier access to information internally. It is hoped that these record keeping changes will simplify efforts to improve information sharing and transparency, and allow new participative and collaborative administrative mechanisms<sup>3</sup>.

New technologies and computing platforms have already transformed the way communities, organisations and Governments communicate over the last ten years. It is now clear that Australians seek an outward looking Government that engages with communities when developing and implementing policies and service delivery solutions.<sup>4</sup>

Modern Internet communications and software have fundamentally transformed the workflows required to deliver efficient Government.<sup>5</sup> Agencies therefore have a unique opportunity and responsibility to leverage these new technologies to better engage with citizens and inspire them with more personally relevant experiences, while improving efficiency and generating budget savings in these cost-conscious times.

*The notion of Open Government is being advanced by what can be easily accomplished politically with new technology.*

The term Open Government draws in part on the philosophy and methods of the ‘open source’ programming movement, in which people have access to, and can contribute to, the development of new ways of designing and delivering services and technology. It is easier to build trust when citizens can verify the inner workings of the ‘black box’ of government. Citizens with access to information, documents, and proceedings can therefore become meaningful participants in Government.

The open source movement is characterised by its advocates as transparent, participative, and collaborative. To some degree these terms also represent political values.

Unquestionably, open and accountable Government is crucial for sustained economic growth, and is an approach that history has shown fosters a better life for the many, while government secrecy has been shown to only benefit the few.<sup>6</sup>

The approach taken by the NSW Government is clearly geared towards the implementation of a whole of Government program, using a raft of strategies (ICT strategy 2014) intended to enhance public engagement and service delivery, with an expanded nsw.gov.au website becoming the primary source for Government information.

These strategies include best practice guidelines for the design of NSW Government websites and applications for smartphones and tablets, to make information available in a way that suits its citizens.

This commitment has abandoned traditional command and control public management techniques for more contemporary work practices, which rely upon close collaboration, negotiation, and decision-making processes. These methods undoubtedly require

<sup>2</sup> Hemestley, (2014) \$22Million Boost for NSW Records Digital Push

<sup>3</sup> Harrison, (2012) Open Govt. & e-Govt, Democratic Challenges from a Public Value Perspective

<sup>4</sup> Pratt, (2014) The Citizen Imperative; Redesigning or Customer Inside

<sup>5</sup> Robson, (2014) Digital Disruption is Changing the Public Sector in 3 Ways

<sup>6</sup> Lewis, (2014) How to restore trust in politics after the Victorian election

more efficient, flexible and secure information systems.<sup>7</sup>

According to Michael Pratt, NSW Customer Services Commissioner, by designing new ways of interacting with its customers, and placing the needs of those customers at the heart of the redesign process, services across Government will truly become more customer-centric. The stated goal of achieving 70% of all transactions processed completely online by June 2019<sup>8</sup>, will accelerate the transition away from traditional 'face to face' and call centre interactions.

As the NSW Government rapidly embraces these new approaches to interacting with customers, there will undoubtedly be unintended consequences resulting from 'flinging the doors open', and a number of critical gaps will need to be carefully considered.

Firstly, it needs to be considered whether policy makers and NSW Government agencies are actually equipped to respond to the results of greater levels of transparency, accountability and community engagement.

Secondly, the goal of Open Government is to ensure that citizens have access to objective, relevant and reliable information to help them arrive at informed judgments. It is critical to examine whether the information that Governments provide is the right information, and whether it will be delivered in a way that supports Government's vision of Open Government and improved service delivery.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, in an environment where agencies are receiving increasing pressure to do more with less, Governments that embrace the concepts underpinning Open Government need to determine whether agencies can or should continue to deliver traditional services, and whether to extract higher margins from fees or pass cost savings on to taxpayers<sup>10</sup>.

### Is Open Government a good thing?

*Open and honest collaboration with citizens and civil society over the long term, no matter how uncomfortable it is, makes countries stronger and more successful<sup>11</sup>*

Open Government in NSW is based on building Government around citizens and ensuring that people, information and technology are all connected.<sup>12</sup>

The NSW Government's 2021 Strategic Plan focuses on improving transparency by increasing access to Government information and involving the community in decision making regarding policy, services and projects.

According to the Minister for Finance & Services, Dominic Perrottet MP, the Government has prioritised extracting savings across the sector and delivering the next generation of services, and seeks to achieve this through the aggressive adoption of information technologies. The capabilities of these new technology platforms will be used to innovate in the areas of service delivery and decision-making processes.

As Government agencies seek to modernise the current highly fragmented service-centric information infrastructure, evidence suggests that improving information flow and decision making processes will

<sup>7</sup> Joshi & Spafford, (2001) *Government Security Infrastructure Design Challenges*  
<sup>8</sup> Pratt, (2014) *The Citizen Imperative; Redesigning or Customer Inside*  
<sup>9</sup> Couch, Evans, Compos; Evans, (2012) *Open Govt. Initiatives, Challenges to Citizen Participation*

<sup>10</sup> Balter, (2014) *8 reasons why government contractors should embrace open source software*

<sup>11</sup> Obama speech (2014)

<sup>12</sup> Perrottet, (2014) *Ministerial Address - NSW Open Government Community of Practice*

lead to increased efficiency, faster decisions and more effective use of existing resources.<sup>13</sup>

Despite already being considered a world leader in providing online public access to government information, the NSW Government has committed \$22 million in the 2014-15 Budget to the State Records Authority for technology upgrades designed to make archives available more readily, justifying the spending based on the access needs of people in regional areas.<sup>14</sup> This boost in spending is also designed to send a clear message to the private sector, and encourage the development of apps using the Government's open data. This approach coincides with the Victorian Government's announcement of the release of 11 new 'technology challenges' as part of Round Two of the Victorian Government's \$16 million *Driving Business Innovation* program.

According to Perrottet, the NSW Government's Service NSW enterprise has already served 4 million customers with a satisfaction rate of 99 per cent. This has been combined with the NSW Government's 'One Stop Shop' approach to face to face service delivery, which is revolutionising expectations around customer service delivery within government agencies. Perrottet describes these efforts as "just the tip of the iceberg", and the centrepiece of digital Government strategy going forward.<sup>15</sup>

## Open Data - Open Government, who benefits

*Government data worldwide could unlock more than \$3 trillion dollars in value every year.*<sup>16</sup>

A 2014 report by Lateral Economics suggests that Open Government initiatives could add \$16 billion dollars a year to the Australian economy.<sup>17</sup> The study documents examples of citizens in the US using data from Open Government projects to identify millions of dollars in potential savings, including uncovering improvements in procurement, and duplicated or obsolete contracts.<sup>18</sup>

Historically, open source technologies have been viewed as a fringe effort linked with higher risks and difficulties maintaining systems. These assumptions have changed dramatically in the recent years, especially within the Government sector, as we see open source technologies increasingly used alongside traditional 'enterprise-grade' solutions.

Similarly, attitudes towards adopting workflow templates from other organisations have also changed, as they can be a 'force multiplier' for teams working within Government, allowing them to shed bureaucratic cruft and adopt leaner, more agile workflows.

While it is possible to continue delivering services using traditional approaches, modern software methodologies used to implement customer service delivery now encourage iterative development and deployment approaches.<sup>19</sup>

Arguably, the private sector will often be best placed to develop and bring these new services to market, rather than attempting to adopt new methods and build skills within agencies. By giving private sector

<sup>13</sup> Joshi & Spafford, (2001) *Government Security Infrastructure Design Challenges*  
<sup>14</sup> Hemesley, (2014) *\$22 Million Boost for NSW Records Digital Push*  
<sup>15</sup> Perrottet, (2014) *Ministerial Address - NSW Open Government Community of Practice*

<sup>16</sup> McKinsey Global Institute, (2013) *Open data: Unlocking innovation and performance with liquid information*

<sup>17</sup> Lateral Economics (2014); *Open for Business: How Open Data Can Help Achieve the G20 Growth Target*

<sup>18</sup> Perrottet, (2014) *Ministerial Address - NSW Open Government Community of Practice*

<sup>19</sup> Balter, (2014) *8 reasons why government contractors should embrace open source software*

businesses better access to the Government's data sets, deployment of new services is likely to occur far more rapidly and attract investment from the private sector, further easing pressure on Government budgets. As a result, Governments need to be ready to shift away from their traditional role of being the 'sole solution provider' to being 'stewards of data.'<sup>20</sup>

Over the past two years, the NSW Government has released large amounts of data online via the NSW Open Data Portal, with an expectation that more data sets will be de-identified and fast-tracked for release to developers. According to Minister Perrottet, greater transparency and an accelerated release of data will assist with the creation of new products and apps that could provide wider benefits for the whole community.

The most recent example of this is the use of public transport information. Transit authorities hold data on timetables and the locations of their vehicles. In the past, these agencies would have used that data to design, build and deliver transport apps. Now they release the data, providing an opportunity for businesses and software developers to create their own applications and information services.

Perrottet argues that NSW customers should expect this model of Government moving into the future, where Government acts more like a platform, a connector, or a hub, rather than directly delivering services.<sup>21</sup> Open Data also presents a way forward for Governments to crowd source ideas.

## The challenges to building an Open NSW Government

*The processing and incorporation of community input through Open Government projects has presented significant challenges to some Government agencies.*

The rapid adoption of new technologies within the Australian community has resulted in policy falling behind community expectations in some areas. For example, there is currently a lack of established policies to guide Government - citizen interactions via social media in Open Government projects.<sup>22</sup>

Fundamental issues – such as ensuring systems spanning Government agencies remain secure, continue to provide challenges at a policy level. Developing better methods and measures of community participation, improving archiving and lifecycle management of electronic records, finding better methods for IT resource management, and ensuring availability and equity of access must all be areas of priority.<sup>23</sup>

Among all Government functions, maintaining collective security remains the most crucial element, requiring security concerns to be addressed at each level of the Government's information infrastructure.

One characteristic of today's transparent Government philosophy is that it forms an essentially open system where the entities that represent users, objects, policies, security domains, and other components are transient. This inherent dynamism makes the task of overall management and, in particular, security configuration management, highly complex.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Mark Headd (2013) *Beyond Transparency*

<sup>21</sup> Perrottet, (2014) *Ministerial Address - NSW Open Government Community of Practice*

<sup>22</sup> Bertot, Jaeger, Munson, Glaisyer, (2010). *Engaging the public in Open Government: Social Media technology and policy for Government transparency.*

<sup>23</sup> H. Schorr & S.J. Stolfo (1997) *Towards the Digital Government of the 21st Century*

<sup>24</sup> Joshi & Spafford, (2001) *Government Security Infrastructure Design Challenges*

## The utility or futility of open data

*Open Government principles are easily operationalised. However, doing so without reference to value carries the risk that such actions will be empty scaffolding.*

Transparency will not be realised through the availability or mere downloading of data sets. These data sets must be reliable and valid. More importantly, they must enable citizens to do something they find valuable and important. If not, transparency is just an empty promise, and will contribute to growing cynicism within the electorate.

Similarly, participation and collaboration must be meaningful, directed toward goals that are carefully defined, and acknowledged by ample Government feedback.

Much of the work in Open Government has traditionally focused on data and the information and communications technologies supporting their access, interoperability, and usability. However, this data-driven focus has not been shown to significantly increase citizen understanding of the complexities of issues and policies, or increase their participation in relevant policy deliberations.

If the primary goal of Open Government is to engage citizens, then initiatives such as the indiscriminate release of agency data need be re-evaluated, and approaches explored which look beyond data delivery.

With the rush to publish data, sometimes little thought is given to questions such as how the data is used internally, and what relevance the data might have in informing citizens about the rationale behind public policy decisions. Information alone does not guarantee positive outcomes, and Government information that lacks context could end up hindering citizen engagement.<sup>25</sup>

Even assuming that data is both usable and of high quality, does the act of making more data available to the public by itself count as transparency? And what kinds of metrics present a clear basis for making this case? Furthermore, will increasing the involvement of citizens in agency decision making increase the extent to which that agency is viewed as participative? And whose perceptions count in arriving at such a conclusion? These difficult issues have not yet been directly confronted.<sup>26</sup>

Transparency and access standards that are inconsistently applied in policymaking may also inhibit efforts for citizen engagement, perhaps creating divergent or conflicting levels of information. If not managed correctly, agencies may face ongoing challenges attempting to meet demand for Open Government while being constrained by financial and human resources.<sup>27</sup> It is also worth considering that Australian Governments have frequently achieved poor results when attempting to manage and engage citizen participation in the past.<sup>28</sup>

Governments need to avoid succumbing to the allure of adopting new technologies as a one-size-fits-all approach. Open Government directives might pose unique challenges to individual agencies, which should be considered upfront through strategic planning exercises. Agencies will need to rethink current practices, and consider ways to move from data-dominated Open Government efforts, to offering

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<sup>25</sup> Couch, Evans, Compos; Evans, (2012) *Open Govt. Initiatives, Challenges to Citizen Participation*

<sup>26</sup> Harrison, (2012) *Open Govt. & Ee-Govt, Democratic Challenges from a Public Value Perspective*

<sup>27</sup> Couch, Evans, Compos; Evans, (2012) *Open Govt. Initiatives, Challenges to Citizen Participation*

<sup>28</sup> Dawes & Helbig, (2010) *Information strategies for Open Government: Challenges and prospects for deriving public value from Government transparency.*

information and analysis that builds a context for how and why data sets are relevant.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, the outcomes of Open Government are not necessarily good news for taxpayers. In countries like the US, the proliferation of open data has witnessed the use of Open Government technologies and processes to identify whistle-blowers and settle grievances. Of the 2,900 requests for information (through their freedom on information legislation) in the US last year, 1,400 involved retaliation against whistle blowers.<sup>30</sup>

### What NSW Government needs to consider

*If the NSW Government aims to reach and engage citizens, they will need to target the information platforms people are using and deliver engaging, personalised experiences.*

As our lives become more reliant on digital technologies, those departments and agencies that embrace digital service delivery will become the most convenient. They will have the opportunity to inspire citizens with engaging, personalised experiences and will reap the benefits of cost savings and efficiencies.<sup>31</sup>

What is not yet clear, however, is how to best assess the impact of the programs and policies created in pursuit of Open Government. While these terms resonate in familiar ways, it isn't obvious how to determine what actions and programs count as transparent, participative, or collaborative, and from whose perspective.<sup>32</sup>

As technology has become more advanced, the utilitarian and unidirectional model of Open Government has become seen as limited, giving rise to new initiatives, which have focused on enhancing proactive citizen participation and collaboration, as well as openness and transparency.<sup>33</sup> When combining the citizen demand for mobile information with the agency demand to increase self-service as a means to lower agency costs, it is clear that mobility is the future of citizen engagement.<sup>34</sup>

Agencies will also need to focus on mobile optimisation, mobile apps and website optimisation. Today, according to Digital Distress, Government communicators are embracing Open Government and open data, and are actively preparing for these changes. In fact, 38% of respondents are considering adopting mobile optimised web, while 42% already use this tactic. In the growing field of website personalisation, 26% of respondents are considering adopting this technology while 19% already use this.

Without question, the information age provides enormous opportunities for NSW Government to transform the way it delivers services. Doing so will require tapping into innovation to unleash cost reductions and improvements in government performance.<sup>35</sup>

Although agencies have invested financial and human resources into the Open Government initiatives, it remains unclear how these investments increase citizen participation. By focusing efforts on data collection, innovations aimed at enhancing citizen

<sup>29</sup> Couch, Evans, Compos; Evans, (2012) *Open Govt. Initiatives, Challenges to Citizen Participation*

<sup>30</sup> Ward, (2014) *Transparently Bad: U.S. Whistleblowers Feel Blowback*

<sup>31</sup> Robson, (2014) *Digital Disruption is Changing the Public Sector in 3 Ways*

<sup>32</sup> Harrison, (2012) *Open Govt. & e-Govt, Democratic Challenges from a Public Value Perspective*

<sup>33</sup> McDermott, (2010) *Building Open Government; Government Information Quarterly*

<sup>34</sup> Robson, (2014) *Digital Disruption is Changing the Public Sector in 3 Ways*

<sup>35</sup> Schorr and Stolfo, (1997) *Towards the Digital Government of the 21st Century*

engagement have tapered off. If the endgame of Open Government is to assist the public in its understanding of the nature and complexity of policies, and improve participation and collaboration to shape policy decisions, then Open Government efforts so far have fallen short.

Shifting the emphasis appears necessary, with better methodologies and adequate resources applied to promote effective public reflection and understanding of pressing policy issues. This has the potential to produce far better returns and improved satisfaction levels from community engagement.<sup>36</sup>

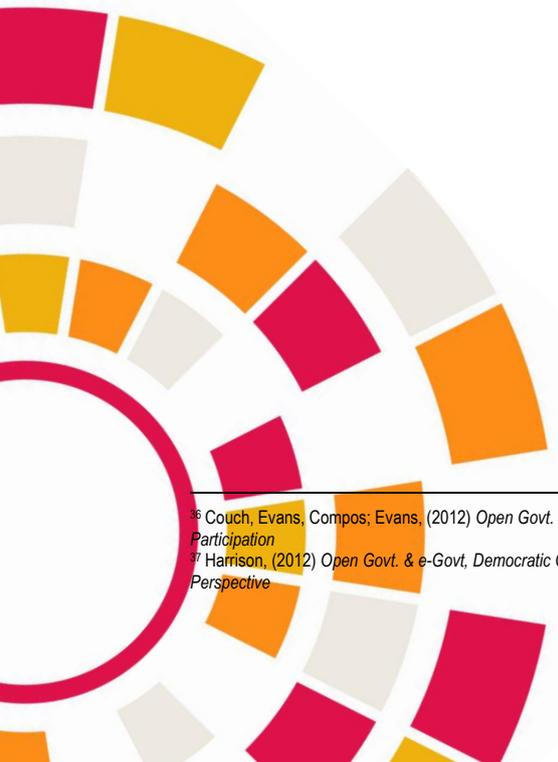
While transparency, participation, and collaboration take time and resources, they bear the promise of ultimately improving policy performance by creating a shared understanding of current performance, generating pressure to improve, increasing the pool of applicable ideas, tapping into new sources of expertise, and building civic capacity. All of these areas may ultimately be the key to concrete improvements in policy outcomes and public services.<sup>37</sup>

Over the next few years, NSW agencies will need to invest in recruiting and retaining top digital talent from the private and public sectors to expand services. These individuals - who have expertise in technology, procurement, human resources, and financing - will serve as digital professionals in a number of capacities across Government Clusters, as well as within agencies. These teams will need to take best practices from the public and private sectors, and scale them across agencies with a focus on the customer experience.

It's clear that NSW Government recognises the need to work with the private sector to find ways to utilise open data, because non-government entities are in a better position to create innovative ways of engaging customers.

However, as nominations begin to roll in for NSW Premier's Open Data challenge, the question that needs to be considered is whether new and creative ways to reuse or reinterpret Government information will actually improve services to citizens, or simply create more complexity and confusion in what is already a highly regulated sector. It remains to be seen whether NSW Government leaders are ready to truly partner with the non-government sector to transform NSW into a world leader in Open Government. Only time will tell.

**Rory Gregg**  
Partner, Grant Thornton (Aust)  
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<sup>36</sup> Couch, Evans, Compos; Evans, (2012) *Open Govt. Initiatives, Challenges to Citizen Participation*

<sup>37</sup> Harrison, (2012) *Open Govt. & e-Govt, Democratic Challenges from a Public Value Perspective*



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