Open Government: Collaboration, Transparency, and Participation in Practice

Daniel Lathrop & Laurel Ruma (Eds.)
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REVIEWED BY:
Laura Letbetter
Georgia Institute of Technology

The ability to handle change is fundamental to success in the field of research administration. Research administrators must keep abreast of changes in government in order to be successful and to be of service to their stakeholders. This compendium of 34 short essays centers on the idea that we are witnessing a radical transformation of government as we know it—specifically, that technological developments are moving us toward a more participatory, collaborative, transparent, model of democracy described as open government. Such a transformation will inevitably impact research administration.

The book is geared toward participants in the technology community as well as a more general audience interested in how technology development and the transparency movement are reshaping our world, and research administrators are certainly a subset of this audience. Contributors to this collection include long marchers and relative newcomers, and themes include the promise of open government, its evolution, current barriers, and potential solutions.

Most of the contributors seem to share an optimistic vision of open government’s ability to solve problems. In chapter 3, “By the People”, long-time public domain advocate Carl Malamud explains why he views “the Internet wave” as a continuation of principles established by the Founding Fathers. Technology allows “the underpinnings and machinery of government” to be used by the people, not just by those in power (p. 43). In chapter 14,
“Emergent Democracy,” Charles Armstrong argues that “the Internet . . . will lead to democratic systems that are more fluid, less centralized, and more responsive than those we know today . . .” (p. 167). He calls this system Emergent Democracy.

In chapter 17, “Disrupting Washington’s Golden Rule”, Ellen Miller, executive director of the Sunlight Foundation and founder of both the Center for Responsive Politics and Public Campaign, discusses how recent advances in transparency with regard to campaign financing are allowing citizens themselves to conduct data analysis, leading us toward “healthier debate” and “a fairer, more vibrant democracy”. She asserts that “the old paternalism is dying” (p. 199).

The final chapter is a case study of Utah and how the state has in recent years made great strides in adopting e-government and offering online services. This movement required champions in every branch of government, the use of Web 2.0 principles and tools, a lot of strategic planning, and provision of real-time, accessible government data to the citizens of the state.

Several essays draw a comparison between the open source software movement and the development of a new, more participatory model of government. In chapter 2, “Government as a Platform”, Tim O’Reilly argues in favor of “platform thinking”, asserting that government must be re-envisioned as a platform upon which the private sector can create and build applications that produce value in ways the government could never do on its own, much as programmers contribute to the development of open source software. He asks the question, “what lessons can the government take from the success of computer platforms, as it tries to harness the power of technology to remake government?” (p. 15). He argues in favor of open standards, simple systems, designing for participation and robustness, learning from your “hackers,” data mining, incentivizing experimentation, and leading by example.

In chapter 5 (which I would recommend reading before chapter 2), “Engineering Good Government”, software designer Howard Dierking walks the reader through the idea of “software design as a new metaphor for exploring the dynamics of government” (p. 80). He defines for the lay reader several terms common to programmers and applies this terminology to the evolution of government in the United States. For example, he views the Constitution as a well-designed standards reference model, in contrast with the Articles of Confederation, which he views as a stovepipe antipattern, the programming term for a patchwork of multiple application development efforts that become difficult or even impossible to integrate. Attempts to resolve the stovepipe antipattern lead to the blob or god class, defined as an even worse
antipattern “whereby a single entity evolves to assume a large set of responsibilities outside of those to which it was originally purposed.”

In other words, designing good government is like designing good software: the architecture should have an appropriate balance of flexibility and prescriptiveness, as well as a standards reference model that provides a unifying vision. Research administrators who must rely on an assortment of systems for institutional and government data and approval processes will certainly be able relate to the concept of the stovepipe, blob, and god class antipatterns!

Chapter 34, “Open Source Software for Open Government Agencies”, focuses on “management, technical, and social aspects” and offers advice and best practices for the adoption of open source software. The essay is directed at government agencies but is also worthwhile reading for research administrators who are preparing for a major software change and are considering an open source solution.

A number of essays in this book address barriers to the development of open government. Barriers are not only technological but also cultural. In chapter 11, “Citizens’ View of Open Government”, Brian Reich points out that availability of information does not necessarily make relevant information findable. He argues that we should measure progress toward transparency not by how much data has been released but by whether it is actually improving people’s lives. In chapter 12, “After the Collapse: Open Government and the Future of Civil Service”, David Eaves addresses the cultural shift that needs to take place within the government to move civil servants away from a culture of hoarding data and toward a culture of sharing data. I believe research administrators will recognize an element of the culture of our field in this statement:

“Sharing information or labor (as a gift) within civil service increases one’s usefulness to, and reputation among, others within the system. Power and influence in this system thus moves away from the ability to control information, and instead shifts to a new set of skills: the ability to convene, partner, engage stakeholders, act creatively, and analyze” (p. 150).

Chapter 18, “Case Study: GovTrack.us”, authored by GovTrack’s founder Josh Tauberer discusses how GovTrack took on the challenges posed by the immense volume of information, the fact that much of it is not machine readable, and the government’s downright unwillingness to make legislative data available to the public.

In chapter 19, “Case Study: FollowTheMoney.org”, Edwin Bender discusses the role that political will plays in advancing or hindering transparency, especially at the state government level. Not
all states require electronic disclosure of campaign finance information, and those that do are inconsistent at best with regard to completeness, quality, searchability, and maintaining the hardware and architecture to support a useful disclosure system.

In chapter 24, “My Data Can’t Tell You That”, Bill Allison of the Sunlight Foundation also discusses the problem of data quality, using an example that any research administrator who deals with FFATA or ARRA can certainly appreciate: the flaws in the way data on federal spending are collected and reported in Recovery.gov and USA.Spending.gov. Knowing who was awarded funds is not the same thing as knowing how they were actually spent. Research administrators will also recognize barriers to open government in chapter 30, “Freedom of Information Acts”, in which Brant Houston discusses the exemptions, denials, and delays that plague FOIA laws.

Throughout the collection, these short, pithy essays read rather like the web itself—the links among the ideas and themes are clear, but it is difficult to identify an overall structure or thematic arrangement among the multiple threads. This web-like reading experience will appeal most to readers who are already participants in the technology community and are comfortable with following multiple threads and voices in no particular order. A reader unfamiliar with the latest technology and associated terminology might find this presentation of information more challenging, though the conversational style and the contributors’ efforts to define terms such as Government 2.0, API, and open source software make it possible for the technologically uninitiated to gain some understanding of the transformation the contributors endeavor to describe.

A number of the book’s illustrations are screen shots that are blurry and difficult to decipher; however, the interested reader could choose to go online for better visuals as needed, so the screen shots do not necessarily detract from the reading experience. Overall, many research administrators will understand and appreciate the open government concept, the necessity of adapting to technological changes, and the emphasis on collaboration and participation to create public value, as well as the challenges inherent in the continued evolution of the open government model.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Letbetter is a contracting officer at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta, GA. She holds a Master of Arts in English from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. Her background includes teaching, editing, and program administration. She began her research administration career in 2004 at Kennesaw State University and is a 2012 graduate of NCURA’s Executive Leadership Program.