

Providing, guarding, shielding: Open Government Data in Spain and Germany

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Abstract

The trend to publish public sector information (PSI) openly on the Internet has grasped attention worldwide under the term open data. However, despite its global reach and claim of some of the movement's activists, the national and local results of the phenomenon differ considerably. These differences have so far not been sufficiently explained. This article understands open data projects as techno-scientific artefacts negotiated within a network of various actants following vested interests. Building on Latour's theory of actor-networks this article conceptualises open data projects as co-created phenomena transcending the social-technical distinction. This helps us to understand both the particularities of single projects, as well as the continuities specific administrative systems imprint on the formation of open data regimes. This research investigates the situation of open data in Germany and Spain, thereby focusing on national level as well as local level projects. Methodologically it is build on qualitative empirical data collected through document analysis and more than 30 in-depth interviews with experts from the public sector as well as users and open data advocates from outside the public sector.

Introduction

The trend to publish public sector information (PSI) openly on the Internet has grasped attention worldwide under the term open data (Bizer, Heath, & Berners-Lee, 2009; Ganapati & Reddick, 2012). The open data phenomenon seems surrounded by an air of benevolence and often regarded as a self-explanatory endeavour. Activists from private sector and civil society as well as within public administration promote the idea with a heavily techno-optimistic impetus, revealing some technological determinism in its assumed impact and transformative power. Nevertheless, compared to the suggested opportunities and potentials, tangible impact so far remains scarce (Huijboom & van den Broek, 2011). As a reason, several “barriers” (Barry & Bannister, 2013) or “impediments” (Zuiderwijk, Janssen, Choenni, Meijer, & Alibaks, 2012) of an implicit open data ideal have been identified, although also the versatile aspects e. g. of transparency have been discussed in the literature (Bannister & Connolly, 2011) and the complexities of open data illustrated (Meijer, de Hoog, Van Twist, van der Steen, & Scherpenisse, 2014).

Reducing complexities to technicalities, open data process models mostly “describe a consecutive, one-dimensional arrangement of [the operational day-to-day] activities that an unspecified set of actors repeatedly undertake in order to provide a formerly unexposed amount of data to an abstract general public.” (Hunnius & Krieger, 2014) To understand how open data is taken up and shaped by the various actors, a broader perspective at the processes around open data, at the policy-making-level as well as at the implementation process is necessary (see e.g., Blakemore & Craglia, 2006; Courmont, 2012; Heimstädt, Saunderson, & Heath, 2014; Zuiderwijk & Janssen, 2014). With regard to policy-making content-related analyses illustrate considerably different emphases (Huijboom & van den Broek, 2011),