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Suzanne Piotrowski, PhD

Associate Professor,
School of Public Affairs and
Administration (SPAA),
Rutgers University–Newark

Director,
Rutgers Transparency and
Governance Center

David H. Rosenbloom, PhD

School of Public Affairs,
American University
School of Public Administration and
Policy, Renmin University of China

Sinah Kang

School of Public Affairs and
Administration (SPAA),
Rutgers University–Newark

Alex Ingrams, PhD

Institute of Governance,
Tilburg University

RUTGERS
School of Public Affairs
and Administration | Newark

Is Open Government a Performance Target of U.S. Federal Agencies?

A continuing concern for contemporary public administration scholars is whether a highly focused emphasis on managing for central mission results and ever-greater programmatic performance levels diverts agencies' attention and resources from promoting broader but less immediate public values that underlie democratic-constitutional government, such as representation, citizen participation, transparency, and individual rights.

Prior research found that the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) was largely ignored in federal agencies' annual performance plans in favor of attending to more specific mission objectives, and concluded that transparency is not a core mission value for most agencies. Our paper revisits the framework developed in that study, applies and develops it in the light of new U.S. initiatives, and focuses on a concept of open government that is broader than FOIA alone.

Mission-Extrinsic Public Values and Open Government

Mission-intrinsic public values are the central purposes of government agencies such as providing better education for departments of education or keeping people safe and secure for law enforcement agencies. Mission-extrinsic values, on the other hand, are values that are at best only weakly related to the central purposes of an agency and are not necessarily supported by agency leaders and personnel. For instance, compliance with FOIA would be mission-extrinsic for most federal agencies, excluding the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) where management of public information is intrinsic.

However, regardless of their effect on core mission results, mission-extrinsic democratic-constitutional values are important in their own right because they help define the overall quality of government and promote citizen trust, social capital, political participation, and civic engagement. Transparency, for example, is considered fundamental to U.S. constitutional government.

Open government has three basic governance principles: citizen participation, collaboration, and transparency. Open government is underpinned by the facilitation of citizen *vision* by providing public information, but also of *voice* by providing opportunities for citizens to have their preferences heard by the government in ways such as voting, consultation, or policy feedback.

Open government has thus added urgency to the question of how public agencies can take advantage of information and communications technology (ICT). Agencies have undertaken initiatives to promote information sharing and public participation in policymaking or policy feedback through various internet channels.

Despite these new opportunities to raise mission extrinsic public values, there remains an implementation deficit in the development of agency arrangements and measurement techniques needed to deliver on public value commitments. It is therefore important to ask how such shifts in open government have influenced democratic legitimacy and the promotion of public values.

Research Questions, Hypotheses, and Design

Our research addresses two specific policy questions as well as a general theoretical question:

- (1) To what extent do U.S. federal agencies measure the performance of open government?
- (2) Did the Obama presidency make a substantial difference with respect to the prevalence of open government values in agency performance plans?
- (3) What are the conceptual relationships among different types of performance statements and an organization's intention and ability to pursue and measure goals?

The first and second questions are considered using a content analysis of U.S. federal agency performance and strategic plans, while the third is examined using a typology based on scholarly literature supplemented with a discussion of methods and findings.

Democratic values are largely excluded from performance planning and measurement. As such, agencies are less likely to invest their resources into activities related to those values. Nevertheless, mission-extrinsic public values, particularly in the case of open government, can and have been incorporated into agencies' performance planning, at least to some limited extent.

The Obama administration advanced initiatives to foster transparency, participation, and collaboration in the federal government. In January 2009, Obama signed the Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government, strongly committing his administration to "creating an unprecedented level of openness in Government." Subsequently, the Open Government Directive (OGD) was issued, requiring executive departments and agencies to develop their own open government plans every two years.

If agencies are adhering to and promoting public values such as openness, we would expect a change in the degree to which they devote attention to, and incorporate, open government concerns into their performance planning. However, because it is often more difficult to develop and interpret performance indicators for mission-extrinsic public values like open government than it is for mission-based values, high integration of mission-extrinsic values relies in part on their being already well-defined in agency mission statements.

We have thus devised these three hypotheses regarding open government:

- (1) Agencies for which open government is mission-extrinsic have incorporated open government principles into their performance planning.
- (2) From 2010 (the first year the Obama administration was responsible for developing performance plans) through 2016, there was a substantial increase in the level of integration of open government principles into federal agencies' performance plans.
- (3) Agencies in which open government is part of the core mission or related value preferences have higher levels of integration of open government principles than agencies where it is not.

To test these hypotheses, 24 federal agencies' annual performance plans from FY 2001 to FY 2016 were reviewed, along with each agency's most recent strategic plans. The authors obtained performance plans that are not publicly available through FOIA requests. Overall, agencies were responsive to these requests and the majority of each agency's 15 years of performance plans, 337 in total, were collected.

Comparisons were made among agencies where open government is: (1) mission and value explicit (explicitly mentioned in the agency’s mission statement and value statement), (2) mission explicit, (3) value explicit, and lastly, (4) neither mission nor value explicit.

Among the agencies included in this study, only NARA recognizes open government as mission-related. Seven other agencies listed one or more of the values related to open government as value preferences in their latest strategic plans.

The final codebook contains four coding categories, including the three principles of open government—*transparency*, *participation*, and *collaboration*—as well as the generic category, *open government*. Each category contains two to six keywords, and the frequency of the appearance of each keyword in the agency performance plans was coded. A keyword was considered to have “high integration” if it was “incorporated at some level into one or more performance measures in the performance plan,” and “partial integration” if it appeared in the plan but not as a performance target or measure.

Findings

Our findings only partly support Hypothesis 1. The majority of agencies where open government is not part of the mission rarely mentioned open government and its correlates in their performance plans.

There was a significant increase in the number of open government keywords that were integrated into agency performance plans between FY 2008 (393) and FY 2012 (602). This finding is consistent with our expectation that the emphasis President Obama’s administration placed on open government initiatives may have increased the integration of open government values. Our data thus support Hypothesis 2.

But why did the level of integration of open government in federal agencies’ performance plans decrease sharply during 2012-2015, to only 483 references at the end of Obama’s administration?

One of the factors may be *time*. Agency heads may have “satisfied” at some point with the degree to which they responded to the Obama initiatives and paid less attention to them as time went by. Another possible explanation is that the combination of a “lame duck” Obama presidency with the high-profile revelations by Edward Snowden in 2013 of personal data collection by the U.S. government may have dampened enthusiasm in government for transparency.

Regarding the four coding categories, open government was virtually nonexistent before 2010 and had few references in the period under consideration, but did exhibit a peak in 2012 before declining steeply.

- There was a substantial increase in the number of transparency references from 2009 to 2012, followed by a sharp decline throughout Obama’s second presidential term, notwithstanding his 2013 Open Data executive order.
- The inclusion of participation as a keyword in performance plans has ebbed and flowed from 2001 to 2016. While there was an increase during the Obama administration of participation references, it was significantly less than the transparency category.
- There has been an overall increasing trend in the collaboration category since 2001, which continued during the Obama administration, lasting through his second term.
- Transparency and collaboration are the first and second-largest components, respectively, of the open government composite measure, and are driving the trends.

Finally, regarding Hypothesis 3, when open government is part of an agency’s mission (mission explicit), open government values are more frequently highly integrated as performance measures in their performance plans. Specifically, NARA included open government keywords as performance targets in its performance plans approximately three times more than all of the other agencies. Having open government as a core value, however, made little difference in the level of integration of open government keywords in agency performance plans. Our findings thus only partly support Hypothesis 3.

What Do These Findings Mean for Practice?

Our findings are mixed regarding the level of integration of open government in federal agencies' performance planning. The decline in this level of integration since 2012 warrants concern because the decrease is substantial; furthermore, the decline is stronger for the performance planning level of high integration, particularly in the participation category.

Some agencies essentially ignored open government almost entirely in their performance plans, despite the efforts of President Obama and his administration. Agencies may base their planning decisions on political strategies or budgetary restrictions, which could affect democratic norms and citizen expectations in an area such as open government.

Our most surprising finding is that agencies with open government values explicitly listed in their value statements are no more likely than other agencies to include open government in their performance plans. Agencies' stated core values are not consistently integrated into their performance plans, perhaps because performance planning can be a high risk effort with low or negative reward, or perhaps because managers do not actually hold these values and are merely seeking public approval.

Possible explanations as to why agencies differ in incorporation of performance information include agencies' inherent characteristics or management capacity. Additionally, the way that the need for openness is assessed differs by agency type and capacity. Alternatively, it may be that open government performance measurement is better explained by other factors that are not agency-specific, such as leadership, mimetic learning, or that developing these performance indicators can be technically difficult. The lesser level of integration of participation and collaboration as compared to that of transparency may reflect greater institutional embeddedness of established transparency management practices.

Nonetheless, it is important for agencies not to neglect incorporating mission-extrinsic values in performance planning, even though doing so may compete with political incentives or other public values. Incorporating these values is important for strengthening democratic-constitutional government and increasing public legitimacy, which in turn may contribute to establishing legitimating accountability.

This brief is based on the full article:

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111 Washington Street
Newark, NJ 07102
973-353-5093

spaa.newark.rutgers.edu