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Theory of Information and Communication

Sara Martínez Cardama

Lisandra Otero Borges

5.3. Social Participation: Open Government, Participation, and Transparency



Open Government

The roots of the Open Government concept lie in the governmental transparency policies that emerged in the 19th century, particularly within emerging democracies. In these societies, the right to information began to be recognized as a fundamental citizen right and a pillar for strengthening public trust in institutions. Although the term "Open Government" is relatively recent, the idea of accessible, participatory governance is as old as democracy itself. It is embedded in the constitutions and foundational laws of modern Western states.

This historical context has allowed the development of a robust legal framework that facilitates consultation and participation from various social actors. This framework provides laws with a social foundation that contributes to a deeper democracy—or at least to its perception. With technological advances, especially the development of Web 2.0 and the expansion of the Internet as a global network, implementing Open Government has become more far-reaching and sustainable, making it feasible at a more accessible cost for states (Cobo, 2013).

The term "Open Government" first appeared in the 1970s, linked to debates on the need to limit secrecy in public administration and promote transparency with citizens to reduce bureaucratic opacity. However, it was in the 2000s that the concept gained global relevance, responding to increasing citizen demands for access to public information and participation in decision-making. An open government maintains constant, two-way communication with citizens, listens to their concerns and needs, and makes decisions that address these demands. It also encourages active collaboration between citizens and officials in improving and developing public services, ensuring that every decision and action is communicated openly and transparently (Villoria, 2013).

One of the most significant recent milestones in the evolution of Open Government was the initiative led by U.S. President Obama, who issued the Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government in 2009. This initiative promoted the publication of public data. It encouraged citizen participation in public management, reviving the concept and generating a new governance paradigm based on informational openness and collaboration between government and society (Güemes & Ramírez-Alujas, 2010).

Another key moment was the creation of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) in 2011, which was pivotal in institutionalizing this governance philosophy at the global level. This multilateral alliance unites countries committed to transparency, collaboration, and accountability. It has been instrumental in consolidating Open Government practices in numerous governments worldwide, promoting policies that facilitate public access to information and citizen engagement (Dupuy & Pérez, 2010).

Developing Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has been essential in expanding Open Government. Digital tools like Web 2.0 technologies, social networks, and open data platforms have significantly enhanced interaction between governments and citizens. These tools enable new forms of civic participation and provide greater access to extensive volumes of information.

These technologies have democratized access to information and driven the development of applications and tools that foster transparency and accountability (Cobo, 2013).

The evolution of Open Government can be illustrated with concrete examples in various historical and geographical contexts:

- In 1766, Sweden became the first country to adopt legislation recognizing citizens' right to access public information, setting a precedent for transparency.
- In the 1960s, Florida, United States, implemented the "Government in the Sunshine" law, which established the right to access public information, although with some constitutional exceptions.
- In 1978, France enacted the Law on Access to Administrative Documents, which solidified citizens' right to access public information.

- In 1970, Denmark implemented a law granting public access to documents from administrative authorities, marking an important milestone in Europe.

The evolution of Open Government reflects a continuous process that began with the introduction of transparency policies and has evolved into its current form, enhanced by the use of information technologies and the growing demand for citizen participation. Despite progress, the challenges outlined indicate that Open Government is still a developing field, with significant opportunities to improve governance and strengthen the relationship between the State and its citizens. The fundamental pillars of open government are transparency, collaboration, and participation.

Transparency

This concept is a central axis of open government, implying that government activities and state administration must be accessible to the public at all levels. This includes publishing data and information about government management, disclosure of government acts, and citizens' accountability (Ferreiro, 2013). A transparent government informs the public about its actions, allowing people to understand how decisions are made and how public resources are managed, thus contributing to the fight against corruption (Calderón and Lorenzo, 2010).

Transparency, as part of government actions, involves several key issues:

- **Access to Information:** Citizens have the right to know how their taxes are managed and how their governments operate. This requires that data generated by public administrations be public and presented in a clear and accessible manner. Information should be in an open format, and the websites where the data is published must meet accessibility and usability standards to facilitate consultation by all citizens. According to Villoria (2013), the idea of transparency mediated by ICTs is a mandatory aspect of open government, arguing that this approach provides citizens with greater access to information and allows them to make more informed decisions, promoting a more prosperous and democratic society.
- **Public Disclosure of Government Acts:** It is about publishing data and leveraging social media to ensure that information reaches citizens in a comprehensible and useful manner. Greater accessibility to public information, the dissemination of government acts, and the use of political initiatives on the Internet allow every citizen to have direct access to the administration from home. This significantly contributes to the democratic formation of society. Through internal consultations, evaluations, surveys, and other opinion mechanisms, the inclusion of citizen voices in the decisions of their representatives is facilitated (Abal, 2010).
- **Fighting Corruption:** High transparency is essential for preventing corruption and making government actions visible. In this context, one of the pioneers in promoting transparency was Obama, whose campaign was characterized by its commitment to government openness. This initiative included promoting public access to information and implementing measures that facilitated citizen oversight of government actions. Additionally, Obama's administration pushed for reforms to strengthen accountability and improve oversight of public resources, leading to a more open and participatory management style (Guardián, 2010).
- **Open Data and the Use of Free Software** are two key elements in implementing Open Government, as both aim to facilitate access to information and promote greater transparency. Publishing public data in accessible and reusable formats allows citizens and businesses to use this information to develop new services, applications, and knowledge that bring value to society. Additionally, using free software in building Open Government platforms reduces costs and fosters transparency by allowing anyone to review and improve the code. It also facilitates citizen participation and collaboration in creating tools that enhance public management.

Open data offers various benefits, including economic growth by creating derivative products that generate jobs, transparency that helps reduce corruption and optimize the use of public resources, and citizen empowerment by enabling informed decision-making. Moreover, it allows for more effective social control over the actions of authorities and guarantees the right of access to information funded with public resources, thus strengthening democracy (Barros, 2013).

- **Tool for Cultural Change:** Transparency goes beyond the mere publication of information; it represents a profound cultural shift in the management of public affairs. This change is based on the horizontality and bi-directionality of communication, promoting fluid dialogue between government and citizens. Radical transparency is essential for transforming public administration, as it encourages responsibility towards society and creates an environment where anyone with initiative can contribute to improving services. By actively empowering citizens to participate in decision-making processes, transparency strengthens trust in institutions and enriches public debate, generating more innovative solutions adapted to the community's needs (Nemirovski, 2010).

An analysis of the above suggests that transparency involves public access to data, documents, decision-making processes, and information about the activities of public organizations. This access allows society to learn about these institutions' responsibilities, commitments, and results and allows citizens to verify their accuracy.

Concepts like "access and use of information" and "openness" are just some examples of terms that describe the phenomenon of transparency. The proximity between governments and communities also improves responsiveness and transparency to the local provision of goods and services. This, in turn, fosters citizen participation in public management and reinforces the population's sense of responsibility in the political sphere (Cobarsí, 2012).

Collaboration

An open government promotes collaboration among various social actors, including civil society organizations, businesses, and citizens, to develop joint solutions to public problems (Calderón and Lorenzo, 2010). The goal is to collectively address these challenges and build a more inclusive and just society.

Lucke and Große (2014) summarize some concepts of collaboration, describing it as a "higher level of collective action compared to cooperation or coordination," based on a definition developed earlier by Thomson: "Collaboration is a process in which autonomous actors interact through formal and informal negotiations, jointly creating rules and structures that regulate their relationships and ways of acting or making decisions about the issues that brought them together; it is a process that involves shared norms and mutually beneficial interactions." They also mention cooperation and coordination as stages in developing collaboration, characterized as an integrated, long-term process.

Collaboration allows access to a broader range of knowledge and experiences, as combining perspectives and areas of expertise can generate more creative and comprehensive solutions. Additionally, it optimizes resources and reduces costs, as by sharing knowledge and resources, organizations can undertake ambitious projects that would be unfeasible individually. Agger and Hedensted (2017) highlight that collaborative innovation is characterized by the active participation of institutions, including citizens, public officials, politicians, and civil society organizations. This form of innovation relies on collaboration to leverage each participant's different resources, knowledge, and perspectives, significantly enhancing innovation capacity.

Decidim is a prime example of software that supports the creation of collaborative spaces. This free and open-source technology enhances the democratic self-organization of citizens, organizations, and public institutions. Based on transparency, participation, and open-source development, *Decidim* promotes inclusion by providing digital tools adaptable to various social contexts and organizational scales.

Decidim's architecture enables the creation of participatory spaces such as processes, assemblies, votes, and initiatives. These spaces facilitate social interaction and enhance decision-making through components like surveys, participatory budgets, proposals, and accountability systems. These features make *Decidim* a transformative tool that promotes the democratization of technology, supports participatory practices and fosters more horizontal, accessible governance. This technology has been adapted and implemented in governments such as Barcelona, where it is used for participatory budgeting decision-making processes.



Figure 1: Decidim.Barcelona Screenshot of the website <https://www.decidim.barcelona>

Also, in New York, the New York City Civic Engagement Commission (CEC) has implemented Decidim to encourage citizen participation in municipal decision-making. The goal is to involve residents in initiatives like "The People's Money," which allows community members to directly decide how much of the city's budget is allocated. This way, citizens can propose ideas, participate in assemblies, vote on projects, and collaborate on solutions to address local needs.

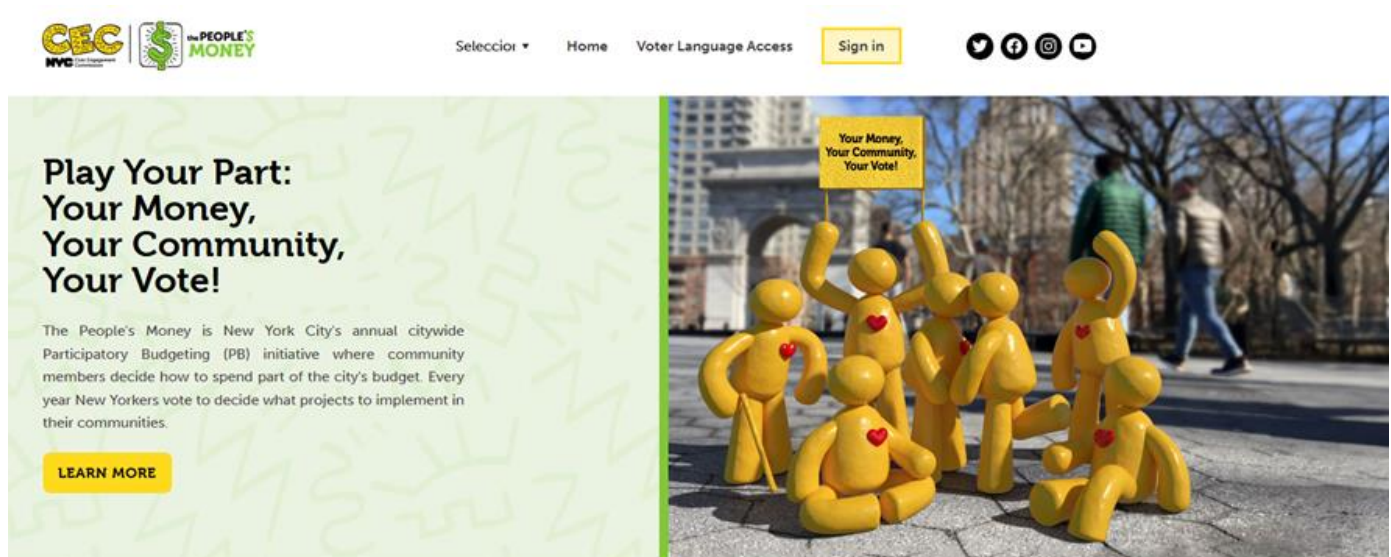


Figure 2: The People's Money Screenshot of the website <https://www.participate.nyc.gov/>

The European Commission's Citizen Participation Platform is designed to allow EU citizens to engage in policymaking actively. Participants can share their opinions, vote on proposals, and join European citizen panels to influence decision-making. The platform promotes a more inclusive and democratic process by enabling discussions on key issues such as energy efficiency and combating hate in society.



Figure 3: European Commission's Citizen Engagement Platform screenshot of the website https://citizens.ec.europa.eu/index_es

This example illustrates the concept of e-collaboration, defined as using various technologies to carry out tasks jointly between different individuals. It is essential to highlight that this definition is broad and includes computers and any technology that facilitates collaboration. For example, tools that traditionally might not be considered part of e-collaboration, such as the telephone, are relevant due to their ability to facilitate communication and cooperation. Specific practices of e-collaboration include using email to coordinate work among team members, holding virtual meetings through videoconferencing platforms, and using online project management tools to share information and assign tasks (Kock, 2005).

Collaboration goes beyond simple consultation. While in consultation processes, participants express opinions on what the consulting party should do, in collaboration processes, participants are expected to work together in the active co-production of solutions. In this sense, collaboration is especially relevant in environmental protection, decision-making, public service innovation, emergency or natural disaster response, and community development.

Participation

Participation is defined as the average citizen's ability to get involved in and influence their government's decision-making processes. Technology plays a significant role in electoral participation, though it is not limited to that; it transforms power relations and bridges the gap between decision-makers and implementers (Valdés, 2006). In this regard, technology is transforming the relationship between citizens and government by creating new opportunities for citizen participation. Citizens now have more access to information, can participate in policy formulation, and hold governments accountable.

In this sense, Kubicek and Aichholzer (2016) outline the types of citizen participation:

- **Direct Participation:** This type of participation involves citizens directly in political decision-making. Examples include referendums, assemblies, and voting. Direct participation allows citizens to express their opinions and preferences clearly and directly, strengthening the decisions' legitimacy and fostering a sense of belonging and civic responsibility.
- **Indirect Participation:** In this model, citizens elect representatives to make decisions. This type of participation is common in representative democratic systems. Although citizens are not involved in every decision, their ability to elect their representatives gives them significant power in governance. Indirect participation can effectively channel citizens' concerns and needs through their representatives.
- **Digital Participation** uses information and communication technologies (ICT) to engage citizens in politics. It includes online surveys, discussion forums, and e-petition platforms. Digital participation can increase access

to information and facilitate interaction between citizens and governments, allowing for greater inclusion and diversity in civic dialogue.

- Civic Participation focuses on citizens' involvement in activities that promote community well-being, such as volunteering, organizing community events, and advocating for social causes. Civic participation strengthens the social fabric and fosters community cohesion, which can, in turn, influence local and national politics.
- Community Participation refers to citizens' involvement in decision-making processes that affect their local community. It can include participation in community councils, planning groups, and other forms of local collaboration. Community participation empowers citizens to influence the development of their immediate environment, promoting a sense of ownership and responsibility toward their community.

Each type of participation strengthens democratic life by fostering inclusion, transparency, and accountability. By offering citizens various ways to engage, the legitimacy of the democratic system is broadened, and a more responsive and accountable government is promoted. This approach seeks to explore tools like citizen panels and online public consultations, which enable direct dialogue between citizens.

Citizen panels consist of a representative group of the population that gathers to discuss and deliberate on specific issues, such as climate change. This methodology allows citizens to collaborate directly with local governments in policy formulation and decision-making, fostering an inclusive and participatory approach. (Kubicek and Aichholzer, 2016).

Online public consultations are supported by digital platforms that allow citizens to participate in public consultations on policies and projects. These platforms facilitate the collection of opinions and feedback from a wide range of citizens, which can influence government decision-making. An example is the consultation on the "Vienna Charter" for respectful coexistence. This online consultation, organized by the Department of Diversity and Integration of the City of Vienna's government, sought to involve all city residents in drafting a charter that promotes peaceful coexistence and respect for diversity. Various online tools, such as discussion forums and surveys, facilitated participation and interaction among citizens (Kubicek, 2016).

For participation to be effective, it is essential to ensure that all citizens have access to information and communication technologies (ICT) and possess the knowledge and skills necessary to use digital tools responsibly. This implies:

- Equitable Access to ICT: It is necessary to ensure that all citizens, regardless of their social, economic, or geographical condition, have access to the Internet and information and communication technologies. Internet-based platforms can effectively engage citizens on issues such as climate change and other sustainability initiatives. Thus, access to these technologies is crucial for all citizens to participate actively in these processes (Acerete, Yetano, and Royo, 2016).
- Digital Literacy: Training programs should be implemented so that citizens can use digital tools and fully participate, and in this regard, public libraries can contribute their knowledge. This is particularly relevant in e-participation, where online interaction becomes a key means for citizens to engage in public affairs (Acerete, Yetano, and Royo, 2016). Digital literacy is essential, especially with the advent of Web 2.0, as accessing, understanding, and sharing information empowers individuals to participate actively in the political process in previously unimaginable ways. This shift from one-way communication to two-way dialogue is key to understanding how digital literacy can strengthen citizen participation and drive a more inclusive and dynamic democracy.