"The Institutionalization of Digital Openness"

How NGOs, Hackers and Civil Servants Organize Municipal Open Data Ecosystems

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ABSTRACT

Around the world national and municipal governments launch open data initiatives with declared goals like increased efficiency, transparency or economic growth. However, although little of these effects have been proven, more and more administrations open up their datasets to the public. The dissertation project describes this phenomenon as the ongoing institutionalization of digital openness in the field of public sector information. With empirical evidence from three case studies in large European cities the research project intends to theorize how NGOs, hackers and certain civil servants turn open data into an institution, which more and more public bodies feel the need to adapt to.

1. Research Question

My central research question is grounded in several assumptions from previous work [1]: First, open data can be described as a global social movement – a distributed form of organizing with a common core (goals, technology) but diverging peripheral properties (national practices) [2,3]. Furthermore the public administration is subdivided in municipal, national and transnational levels, which all generate datasets in relation to their sphere. Therefore it can be assumed that open data as a social movement can be partitioned in municipal, national and transnational observation units as well. These observation units are not mutually exclusive as individual actors of the social movement (e.g. member of NGOs) are likely to take action on the municipal as well as on the national level. However the practices of promoting open data are relatively bound to their governmental sphere and can be selectively investigated. Finally it can be assumed that different configurations of observation units (e.g. composition of government, relative position of NGOs, cultural role of openness) lead to different structural outcomes and that the underlying relations can be explained through a comparative analysis. Grounded in these assumptions the research question reads: *How do organizations from the civil, commercial and public sector drive the institutionalization of digital openness in the form of open data on a municipal level?*

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2. Work in Progress

I started with my work on this dissertation project by the end of 2013 and expect to finish by the end of 2016. Within the first months I used my time to gather domain knowledge and to decide on a theoretical foundation of my analysis. To extend the domain knowledge, which I already started to build up during my MSc dissertation, I took part in open data conferences, meet-ups and hackathons, and supported international benchmarking projects like the Open Data Barometer or the Open Data Index. Furthermore I decided to use new institutional theory as an overarching framework of my analysis. Concepts like organizational fields to describe my unit of analysis [4], institutional logics to describe categories of actors [5] or institutional entrepreneurs to theorize on organizational change [6] seem to be very suitable to describe the interactions between civil society organizations, commercial actors, the public administration and governmental actors over a certain time. By the time of writing I am in the process of preparing for the first out of three case studies. By the time of OpenSym I expect the data collection for this one to be almost finished. The three case studies will gather data from the municipal open data initiatives in Berlin, London and Vienna. I selected the cases according to Yin's method of theoretical sampling [7], as I expect Berlin and Vienna to provide rather similar outcomes and London to provide rather contrasting findings. In each of these cities the local chapter of the Open Knowledge Foundation (OKF) will serve as a central hub for my data collection. The OKF was founded in Cambridge, UK, in 2004 and from then developed into a rather distributed network of national chapters and working groups, which primarily promote the use and release of open data. I identified the OKF as the most prominent globally operating NGO in the realm of open data and will therefore focus on their work. As a short-term intern I will spend time within the organization to gather data as a participant observer [8]. Furthermore I will conduct 20-30 semi-structured interviews per case study, talking with members of the OKF, civil servants working with or on open data and open data users from the private sector.

3. Contribution

This dissertation shall provide contributions to the practical and theoretical sphere and thereby bridge the gap between academic rigor and practical relevance: For practitioners my results may be able to inform their policy decisions concerning open data and digital openness. I will show how initiatives have evolved in different city councils and thereby create showcases, which can serve as evidence for their decisions. On the theoretical side I intend to extend the literature on the process of institutionalization [9], institutional logics [10] and how they dissolve in hybrid forms of organizing [11]. This research shall contradict critics who claim that new institutional theory might be "past its sell date" [12] by exploring the above mentioned strings of theory within the fairly un-researched area of digital public openness. Although this

research is in its early stages and its future pathway is unpredictable, I will give and example where my work could offer a potentially interesting theoretical contribution: Whilst authors like Battilana & Lee [11] pursue research on systems with a dyadic set of institutional logics (e.g. the microfinance market where logics from the financial and social sector clash), the research on open data ecosystems investigates a triadic setup as the field serves as an arena for logics from civil society organizations, the public bureaucracy and the agile market-based actors from open data entrepreneurship. I expect this configuration to reveal genuinely new patterns of hybrid organizing, which have not been discussed yet.

4. Expectations

The goal of this dissertation project is to create a piece of literature that asks a relevant and unique question, gives a comprehensive and credible account of reality and contributes to the literature with a compelling argument and some theoretical enhancement. My expectations for this doctoral symposium tackle all three domains to different degrees. It is a common characteristic of exploratory qualitative research that the research question changes as the project progresses. By the time of OpenSym my first phase of fieldwork will be almost finished and it is likely that I will be struggling with this very fit of my research question. The exchange with other doctoral candidates and more advanced academics will help me to balance this adaption process and to increase the resilience of my question before entering the next phase of data collection. To give a credible account of the practice of digital openness, I have to acquire as much domain knowledge as possible. A gathering of researchers working on all various dimensions of open collaboration and digital openness will help me to ground the understanding of this phenomenon. Finally I expect the other participants of the colloquium to give feedback on my selection of theoretical models, my methodology and the overall composition of my argument-in-the-making. I am looking forward to engage with the other participants work and to collectively improve the outcomes of our dissertation projects.

5. REFERENCES

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