

The progressive ideals behind Open Government Data are being used to further interests of the neoliberal state

By Democratic Audit UK



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Over the last decade there has been a mainstreaming of discourses and practices around Open Knowledge of various kinds, including academic publications, software code, and publicly funded data. One such initiative is Open Government Data (OGD). The idea behind Open Government Data is that non-personal data that is produced by public bodies such as government departments, local authorities and other public institutions should be made available for all to re-use, free of charge, and without discrimination against the type of user or purpose of re-use.

Much of the discussion around Open Government Data has tended to emphasise the benefits for transparency and accountability, social justice, civic and political engagement, and innovation. For example, opening different types of public data might enable citizens to scrutinise lobbying and company information, allow civil society organisations to better inform their campaigns, and allow developers to explore opportunities for creating innovative web applications, amongst other things. For many people, openness also forms part of a radical shift away from the restrictive forms of information proprietisation and commodification that were common in the early neoliberal era.

However, in recent years, as Open Government Data policies have been adopted by local and national governments and international organisations, the ends to which openness is being driven by different social actors have become more complex and contested. For some advocates this emerging complexity has been framed in terms of the 'unintended consequences' of OGD. However, it is crucial to move beyond this framing to recognise the range of competing political and economic interests that have entered the OGD space and are working actively to shape the outcome of OGD towards their own desired ends.

My [recent article in Government Information Quarterly](#) takes these observations as a starting point to examine the adoption of Open Government Data policy in the United Kingdom under the coalition government. The current government came to power in 2010 during a time of political and economic crisis within the UK, and the vision of

the new centre-right government was to steer the country through these crises whilst simultaneously deepening the market-orientation of the UK's neoliberal political economy. One of the earliest policy agendas of the new government was to adopt and significantly extend developments around the opening of public data that had begun under the previous Labour government.

Within the first weeks of the coalition government coming to power, Open Government Data was positioned by policy makers as the core component of the government's new flagship [Transparency Agenda](#). The Transparency Agenda, at one level, was geared towards building public trust in the new government who were continuing to experience the fallout from the MPs Expenses Scandal (2009) and the continuing economic crisis, both of which were having a significant impact on the legitimacy of politicians in the eyes of the British public. However, by making the core of the agenda a focus on the transparency of public spending data, the government were also able to use OGD to help bolster a broader public discourse that framed public spending as wasteful and unaccountable, and thus pave the way for the implementation of a policy of long term austerity.

Beyond these political ends, policy makers also saw Open Government Data as a means to leverage policies aimed at the further marketisation of public services and the deepening financialisation of climate instability. For example, policy makers made explicit connections between the OGD policy and the new [Open Public Services agenda](#). The Open Public Services agenda aims to 'open' provision of almost all public services to competition from the private and third sectors. Policy makers saw Open Government Data as a means of informing 'consumers' of public services within such a market. For example, developers were encouraged to use the data being opened to develop web and mobile apps that could help users of public services decide which providers to choose in a competitive marketplace. We can also assume that business intelligence analysts will find open data about public services valuable when making decisions about where the most profitable opportunities may exist when bidding to take over provision of services within this emerging market.

Some policy makers and lobbyists also saw an opportunity in Open Government Data for promoting agendas that had been around for some time. For example, financial sector lobbyists and neoliberal policy makers were able to use the Open Government Data agenda to push for the release of vast amounts of weather data in a bid to grow the UK's weather derivatives market – a market which in effect profits through [placing bets on the climate](#). George Osborne's announcement in 2011 that the UK's Met Office would be opening the largest volume of weather data available in the world was the beginning of a process which for many was aimed specifically at making the UK weather derivatives market more competitive with the multi-billion dollar US weather derivatives market.

Such examples point to how a seemingly progressive policy agenda such as OGD is being used insidiously by the UK government in an effort to fuel a range of broader and more controversial policies aimed at the continuation of the neoliberal form of state through recent crises. Through examining of these developments, we can begin to appreciate the deeply political nature of Open Government Data and recognise its value for many conflicting political and economic ends.

These observations remind us that if our aim is to support the development of a democratic and egalitarian movement beyond the neoliberal state, we cannot make assumptions about the benefits of 'openness' and must continue to revisit the question of how best to design a data infrastructure and governance framework that can best contribute to our desired ends.

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