LOOKING FOR MONTREAL DIGITAL CITIZENS: FOR WHO ARE OPEN DATA MADE?

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Context and Research questions

The open data movement has led to open public data policies in states, cities, international institutions, and corporations. Open government initiatives place data at the heart of renewed citizen control while raising expectations to strengthen democratic institutions, bureaucratic efficiency, and improved quality of life for individuals (Boudreau, 2020; Kitchin, 2014). Municipalities' development of open data portals is part of this political drive to bring citizens and local governments closer together. However, despite significant public investments, these initiatives rarely find their audience, because they respond primarily to an imperative of openness that places them in a logic of supply rather than demand (Purwanto, 2020). Furthermore, citizens have a minimal understanding of the concrete implications of open data, not to mention an unfamiliarity with how to access them or interpret them (Goëta, 2016). In this context, one can legitimately ask for whom are these open data portals created.

We consider that opening data processes produce, or at least shape, collectives. At the heart of public data circulation, groups of users gather because an institution has anticipated - or heard expectations about - common uses. Through their configuration, technical devices, structure power relations, materialize visions of data openness and

prescribe uses, thus contributing to the establishment of new forms of colonialism through data.

Using the City of Montreal (Quebec, Canada) as a case study, we can provide a nuanced answer to the question of for whom these portals are concretely developed. If the socio-technical device set up seems to meet the needs of an "imagined" public more technophile and entrepreneurial than most citizens are, this discrepancy is perceived and countered by many procedures. Our longitudinal investigation allows us to detect a co-construction in tension of the web portal. On the one hand, we find preoccupations with municipal prerogatives, administrative routines, and open-data movement ideals - sometimes mixed with territorial branding strategies. On the other, we find attention to citizen appropriation, the search for a better understanding of "empirical" publics and a willingness to design the web portal for the nebulous audience of "Montrealers".

Methodological Framework

We base our analysis on a three-tiered data: the imagined publics in municipal discourses, the publics configured by the digital device, and the publics constructed through the actions and strategies of the actors.

Specifically, we analyzed 1) a corpus of documents consisting of official documents, communication articles and technical documentation collected between 2011 and 2021, 2) verbatim of interviews (8) conducted with key actors (e.g. portal managers, programmers, and developers, etc.), and 3) analysis of the web portal, including its different versions since its creation.

The three different publics are analyzed in terms of their relationship to open data and to the institutions that characterize them, and of the participatory referential that they embody. We adopt a diachronic analysis to capture the evolution of these audiences since the creation of the Portal in 2011.

Findings and Conclusion

Our analysis shows the imperfect dialogue that the web portal managers are trying to establish with the Montreal public through several topics (these topics will be detailed in the presentation):

1. The evolution of the socio-technical device. There are several notable changes to the web portal tools such as integrating visualizations and data stories to explain and contextualize data sets through concrete cases of data reuse. Following the metropolitan open data portal typology proposed by Paquienséguy and Dymitrova (2019), the City of Montreal portal appears to be built on an open data archetype that attempts to implement the ideal of citizen empowerment. A such, it is a witness to the evolution of open data socio-political discourses.

2.The clash between imaginary worlds. If we discern technicist imaginaries, we must insist on their occurrence with other equally mobilizing imaginaries. Accordingly, the figure of the citizen is ever-present in discourse and device structuring. Our analysis

reveals a significant amount of discursive and practical work in maintain this central figure in the portal's imagined audiences. Two sub-figures cut across the citizen figure: the citizen as an "ideal public" and the citizen as an actual user. The ideal of the open data movement that animates the designers of the portal, and its first users, feeds the first one. Over time, this ideal figure (mainly rhetorical) will give way to the figure of the actual user, who will become more precise and defined as the designers seek to embody him in the portal through different strategies (e.g. holding community group events to collect the need for opening data sets, etc.). However, these strategies will struggle to go beyond the insider circles. At the same time, other unanticipated "empirical" audiences will emerge, notably from the City's internal departments that use the portal to access data more easily from other departments.

These two dimensions will allow us to conclude by tracing the evolution of the portal according to three temporal phases:

1.The first phase (until 2014), is marked by an ideal of openness where the value of open data is based on transparency and where the public citizen is thought of essentially in terms of access to the portal. The reuse of data is essentially unthought of, it will follow from the access.

2.The second phase (until 2020) is one of institutionalization. To the transparency ideal is added a conception of data as an informational and economic asset to be valued. The citizen remains a central figure of the imagined public, but in the face of its absence, the beginning of a reflection on his inclusion is initiated.

3.The third phase (in progress) marks an ethical and pedagogical turning point: to the values of transparency and assets to be valued is added a new vision in terms of digital sobriety and privacy and security issues. On the side of the imagined audiences, specialist and non-specialist audiences now coexist with increased efforts to reach the latter through a desire to develop data literacy.

Through our presentation, we hope to actively contribute to the ongoing discussions and debates on critical data studies and the open data movement and on the issues of distributions of power and data (de)colonialism more broadly.

References

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