

## Open Data As a Key to Citizen Empowerment

An Interview with Dominique Cardon

Ivan JABLONKA and Pauline PERETZ

**A citizen, if informed, is active and attentive. In a transparent democracy, public authorities are truly accountable to their voters and citizens trust their leaders. In this interview, Dominique Cardon therefore advocates opening and making public data available online and encourages us to bet on their upright citizen use.**

Dominique Cardon is a sociologist at the Laboratoire des usages d'Orange Labs and associate researcher at the Center for the Study of social movements (CEMS/EHESS). His research deals with the social uses of new technologies and cultural and media practices. His publications include *La démocratie internet: promesses et limites* (Le Seuil, 2010) and *Mediactivistes* together with Fabien Granjon (Presses de SciencesPo, 2010).

**Dominique Cardon:** It is often said that our democracies are highly transparent, but in fact, looking around, they really aren't. Plenty of governmental actions are opaque, either because they are actions that are treated (not always justifiably) as state secrets, or because communication has become a dominant brand for government activity, by which the realities of governing are masked by little phrases, by using certain kinds of language, and in fact by communication as a whole. Also because in governing, there is a lot of information, a lot of data, and a lot of activities that ought to be made public according to the 1978 law but that actually aren't. Or if they are, then it's done badly, and there is a lot of information that should be much more readily made public.

That is why – especially with regard to the internet, where information circulates and can easily be reproduced, remixed, or rearticulated, and can be used to organize users' cooperation and coordination – information needs to be more readily made public. The open data movement grew out of this movement that tried to liberate data, to make it accessible, to make it public in formats that are open and free, in a way permitting civil society to make arrangements that are based on information that has been produced by the government, of whatever kind – administrative, political, diplomatic, or of interest to citizens more generally. Obviously, the movement is not trying to make public all information about government

activities, but a good part of this information could well become much more easily accessible by citizens.

The idea here is that transparency can help democracy. The theme of transparency is quite ambivalent, because it can be understood in very different ways. Liberals think that transparency is necessary for market efficiency, and it is true that for the open data movement, making information public will lead to the creation of new markets in which, by data capture, new and useful services can be created, especially in transport and a whole slew of other activities.

But transparency is also a theme that is closely tied in with the idea of accountability. So there is the idea that in order to justify their action, governments need to make it verifiable, documentable, and justifiable in citizens' eyes. And, in a way, transparency of information about governments' activities can enhance citizens' trust in governments. This is one of the key values of the open data movement. Another is efficiency, and it is true that governing can be improved through better information flows in government-citizen relations. And it could be argued that the reinforcement of citizens' capacities for expertise is very important, which means establishing in those relations a less paternalistic philosophy, in which citizens can be the experts, that is, they can gather information and make counter-proposals. By accessing information they can co-produce public decisions with executive officials, especially by much more simply and easily capturing a wide range of information dealing with the environment, transportation, and backing up political criticism.

We are starting to see citizen initiatives supported by associations, by small groups of experts who try to put into practice open data principles. For example, in France there is a group called "Citizen Views" (*Regards Citoyens*), which works toward publicizing in detail the activities of Parliamentary Committees each day, as well as the number of questions asked by French Deputies and Senators. This makes it possible for all citizens to have an assessment report with regard to the activity of the representatives they have voted for. There is also a device called "source map" which is a kind of cartography done on the basis of Wikipedia by all users (and lots of experts and associations contribute to it) to record all the different components that go into in the manufacture of industrial products. This makes it possible to comment on the ecological aspects, and also on working conditions in the distribution of various products around the world; that is very useful. And then there's also a way of doing experimental cooperative democracy, as was done by the system set up by Thomas Piketty and his team, with which citizens can not only reflect on the issue of fiscal reform but also can experiment with it, and do this by simulating reform, using a system that exploits public data to verify what the actual effects will be and what citizens have expressed in the way of preferences among various different policies. This is a way of debating on the basis of data made public and available to citizens.

In its open data policy, France is committed to following the English and American examples, through an organization called "The State of Mind" (*l'état d'âme*), which is actually starting to try to apply pressure on government bodies to make data public. Clearly,

what's really important is the direction taken by this kind of organization and initiative. Currently, management is pretty much organized with a view to certain capacities: giving access to data useful for the market to create new services, and, what is really helpful and important, using as a basis public data that are still to be assembled and which can also be useful to citizens in a whole variety of very practical matters, especially in transportation. A lot of French communes have also come in on this action. Obviously, what's missing is the citizen dimension, that is, encouraging the realization that all of this information should add to our societies not only more economic value but also democratic value, both of which will be very significant if we know how to grasp them. So, culturally, probably the most difficult thing to understand and to adopt is the idea that we don't release data in order to monetize it, we don't release data just to create new markets, we also release it without knowing exactly what people are going to do with it. This leaves a kind of autonomy and freedom for civil society to gather data and itself to organize the ways in which, with these data, it can frame new public issues, thus making for a richer, more symmetrical dialogue between rulers and citizens. It would be one of the directions that it would be very helpful to strengthen and especially to encourage. In other words, the government has to learn to give data away without expecting any immediate benefit, and to let citizens go on to organize what could be virtuous uses of this data.

### **For Further Reading**

- Dominique Cardon, « [Vertus démocratiques de l'Internet](#) », *La Vie des idées*, 10 November 2009.
- Audrey Williamson, « [Internet, nouvel espace démocratique ? Entretien avec Dominique Cardon](#) », *La Vie des idées*, 7 July 2009.

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