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Open government data in new digital states: which libraries for which citizens?

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1 Introduction

"Let no Catalan town council be made to forgo its local police force or, for that matter, its own school, library, telephone exchange or national road".

These words, spoken by Enric Prat de la Riba on 6 April 1914 during his inaugural speech as the president of the recently established Assembly of the Commonwealth of Catalonia, are historically important for Catalan people.

But beyond this, they also reflect what was the beginnings of a universal shift towards a new era. At that time, with the Industrial Revolution's arrival in Spain delayed by over a century, and its implementation still far from decisive for a further half a century, Prat de la Riba was tackling the twentieth century with a political programme of radical social transformation where the State would be charged with providing a regulatory framework and ensuring compliance with the law, access to knowledge and communications. The first group of responsibilities, establishing a regulatory framework and ensuring security, were traditional ones that had formed part of governments' remits in even the simplest human settlements, for over thousands of years. However, the notion that governments should take responsibility for providing education and access to knowledge was revolutionary, considering that this embraced the entire population, rather than just the elites, even if those elites' interests were also being protected, to some extent, behind the movement (a separate but important debate). Lastly, the responsibilities related to communications were radically different in nature than those in previous centuries: rather than being used to supply the population and mobilise armies, the telephone and roads became civil infrastructures for actuating industrial societies (and states).

A hundred years later, we could repeat the same discourse. The words may vary slightly or insignificantly, but the concepts would change substantially. Security, access to knowledge and communications in the twenty-first century are not, and will never again be, what they were in the twentieth century.

2 Security

Access to the web, to cyberspace, has opened up a new space in front of us that is halfway between Augé's "non-place" or a conjunctural "transit point" (Augé, 1995) and Echeverría's "third environment" (Echeverría, 1999); and while this space may not go as far as John Perry Barlow's

techno-utopian "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" (1996), it does involve new ways of being and relating.

If we consider that access to the web has come in three waves—physical access, digital competence and empowerment (Peña-López; Bebea; González, 2017)—, it is in this last phase that security has taken on greater significance. The discussion of security has often focused on the first two phases: accessing the web securely to avoid viruses and being competent enough to use the web without running any risks or incurring personal or material damage. However, when we discuss empowerment, the concept of *security* becomes more blurred, as well as more complex and interesting.

In the digital empowerment phase, individuals use the web instrumentally but also strategically. In this phase, people constantly make decisions—consciously or implicitly—that affect their future options and behaviour. This is where the dimension of the online self becomes confused with the dimensions of who we are, what we do, how we present ourselves in the global arena, who others are, what the spaces are, how we interact in them, what is true and false and what changes from one context to another. Identity and socialisation become dynamic constructs in the world of an internet that is no longer a window you look through from your computer, but an extension of a living reality confused in a constant transmedia narrative (Costanza-Chock, 2014; Moloney, 2014; Scolari, 2018).

The formation of this new space runs parallel to the functioning of the states, which provide a restricted geographical setting where certain regulations are applied and enforced. In view of the absence—or, more precisely, the partial presence and tangential influence—of states in the new virtual environments, security in its broadest sense as the defence of our identity, authentic relations and transactions within a framework of trust is, by and large, the citizen's responsibility.

3 Learning and knowledge

Lev Vygotsky (1978) defines a *child's zone of proximal development* as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers". In another way, then, the zone of proximal development can be used to describe what is within a learner's reach but requires the support of a "more capable third party". Traditionally, this third party has been associated with the figure of the educator and, in particular, the teacher and the school.

The internet radically changes this concept of *the more capable third party*, opening up learning to a whole environment surrounding the learner (Castañeda; Adell, 2013), comprising not only people, but also a series of artefacts that can be used to learn, whether they be formal educational resources or otherwise.

The opening up of learning to non-formal and informal settings and agents is one of the great revolutions that we are starting to see in education systems within the framework of the digital revolution. In just the same way as the reality constructed in a transmedia setting, individuals

now operate in a "translearning" context (Peña-López, 2013) that is reconfigured to adapt to their changing knowledge needs.

Within this context, 'learning to learn' competences that facilitate lifelong learning have gone from being a guiding principle to an authentic strategy: a conscious strategy for an individual to plan, manage and direct their own learning.

As we saw earlier, the state has to reconfigure itself to be able to continue providing the coordinates for the new geographies, the new regulatory frameworks, the new tools for identity and socialisation; and knowledge institutions now have to form a network to position themselves within these learning environments, of which they are no longer the focus, but in which the learner now takes centre stage.

4 Communications

In general terms, the shift we have just described is the one where institutions change from being doers to being facilitators, creating networks in which they become the glue that keeps the network together and helps it to spread further.

And if in this shift the institutions stand back, the citizens can come to the fore. In other words, citizens shift from being marginal instruments in the relations of power and production to becoming another node within a network structure that is far more horizontal than traditional hierarchies and that is headed vertically by institutions.

The most interesting aspect about this citizen who creates a network society is that they do not even have to be aware that they are doing so. Nowadays, in a fully digitised environment, communicating is synonymous with doing and being. Every action is recorded and communicated, and many communications become *de facto* actions. In the same way, only individuals who communicate and interrelate become part of a network of information and therefore acquire an identity, as the act of forming this identity and relational network eventually becomes a way of interrelating.

It therefore becomes critical to understand that we become who we are according to what we do and that, because doing is so closely tied to communicating, we need to appreciate the importance of how, where and with whom we communicate, now, in our lives, starting with our affective and professional relations (Warburton, 2010; White; Le Cornu, 2011).

This automated reality has raised awareness of the need for a strategy but also led to the absolute transformation of the agents and spaces, as well as the nature and result of their interactions.

5 Open government as a response

Open government can be generally defined as a progressive process by which information can be shared, communities can communicate and sovereignty can be returned to citizens based on the observation of three principles whose order of importance may vary at any given time: transparency, engagement and collaboration. Transparency involves a government systematically disclosing all the information it works with, whether these are the data on which it bases its decisions, the protocols, procedures and instruments it uses, or the result of its political actions (the basis of transparency and open data). Engagement encompasses all aspects of listening to citizens, either tacitly (commonly known as *active listening*) or explicitly through civic participation channels such as deliberative processes or participatory budgets. Lastly, collaboration (and, in some cases, joint decision-making) assigns the actual act of executing public policies directly to citizens.

The catalyst that facilitates the possibility of open government is, obviously, technology. Whether we are talking about the material resources available to us, the time it takes us or the ease with which we can operate, it bears repeating that the tasks of getting information, communicating, and making, implementing and tracking collective decisions are now far more viable thanks to information and communication technologies.

Open government, therefore, can be understood as *technological* simply because the technology is there to be used and can be used. But it is also *economic* because it finds more efficient ways of managing resources, *political* because it seeks political legitimacy and *scientific* because it provides a system for producing desired results, i.e., for efficacy. And finally, there is another important facet of open government that should be considered here: its social importance.

The social importance of open government becomes clear when we consider the transformation of public institutions in response to the changes brought about by the digital revolution: the way the digital revolution impacts on the composition and development of communities, on the architecture of our society and the definition of states and their institutions. Therefore, returning to the ideas of the paragraph above, as well as being made technologically possible, economically efficient, politically legitimate and systematically effective, open government has to become socially transformative. And to do this it must answer two social questions: what kind of democratic public institutions do we need to manage the collective sphere *after* the digital revolution, and which kind of citizens will we need to be, in the sense of members of a society with their corresponding rights and responsibilities?

6 The library as a medium

Are libraries an instrument for educating citizens? Are libraries an instrument for educating active citizens who accept their responsibility for managing the public sphere collectively and communally?

Libraries have acquired a diverse range of functions in response to the historical and social context: for archiving and consulting legal documents, for elite forms of learning, for the benefit of scholars, leaders and the privileged classes, and for training skilled labour.

While educating free and critical citizens may long have been seen as one of the tasks of libraries, perhaps their importance in this respect has never been so great as it is now. Firstly, this is because, until relatively few decades ago, not everybody was considered a citizen with all the recognised civil and political rights—a claim that may still be made today, even in our most advanced democracies. The second reason is that democracy, in general, and public institutions, in particular, were not previously at risk from the *structural* recession that they have now face as a result of the digital revolution and new technological and social tensions (Peña-López, 2019).

While we wrack our brains to decide *how* libraries should be in the digital society, it is worth emphasising here *why* libraries are needed in our post-democracy (Crouch, 2000). The two perspectives in this respect are equally complementary and different.

If we really are witnessing a profound transformation in the role of public institutions and the governance of communal life, and if it is true that these states are in urgent need of the participation of citizens, that open government could regulate the interaction between states and citizens and that open government will require new definitions, tasks and competences for both institutions and citizens, then it follows that we need institutions that educate and accompany these new citizens and institutions.

This time, the education and accompaniment take place within the context of an extremely rich information ecosystem. It is no longer a matter of accessing resources that are scarce or having to manage information that is incomplete, nor will this ever again be the case; on the contrary, our remit now is to put our mass of data into order and manage the ecosystem itself, which, just like Schrödinger's cat, is sensitive to and changed by our behaviour.

Information defines who we are, what we do and how we socialise and organise ourselves as a group. In turn, these aspects define new information. Information is no longer a resource but a system that overlaps with the other systems involved in human organisation; a system that needs to be defined and governed, which requires competence to operate within; a complex system because it interacts with, affects and is affected by all the others.

Who should take charge of guiding, training and accompanying institutions within this new ecosystem?

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