

Open Government Data: The OECD's Swiss army knife in the transformation of government

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Abstract

Open Government Data (OGD) has been framed as a collection of tools enabling the achievement of diverse goals: to increase transparency and thus improve democracy, to boost economic development, and to enhance the efficiency of public services. To investigate the evolution of OGD, this study focuses on the work of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). To identify the underlying values and multiple purposes of OGD, we propose a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) study, which aims to show how OGD has been forged and how the expectations towards it have evolved. This paper aims to contribute to the existing literature, offering a critical perspective of the OECD's work on OGD, as well as developing a more nuanced understanding of OGD's conceptual features. Finally, the study reveals the emergence of a data-driven government model, paving the way for further research on its effects on Public Administration and Public Law.

KEYWORDS

critical discourse analysis, data-driven government, OECD, Open Government Data, public policy

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INTRODUCTION

Open Government Data (OGD) refers to the free release of public-funded data in a machine-readable format. Further, the published data should not be submitted to any privacy, proprietary, or licensing restrictions (Janssen et al., 2012). Many countries around the world have incorporated OGD into their information and innovation policies (Ruijter & Meijer, 2020), largely due to the strong support it received from international organizations (Gonzalez-Zapata & Heeks, 2015). Despite the popularity of the idea, the underlying reasons for governments to adopt OGD are ambiguous and have significantly evolved since its first appearance (Attard et al., 2016).

Different disciplines investigate the potential success and problems of OGD, and investigate the most efficient manner of implementation (Charalabidis et al., 2016; Matheus & Janssen, 2019). An important part of the recent literature has addressed the ability of OGD to respond to high expectations (Ingrams, 2017; Jetzek, 2016; Magalhaes & Roseira, 2020; Zuiderwijk et al., 2019). Overall, the analysis of both public policies and scholarship reveals a level of ambiguity and a lack of consensus regarding the very concept of OGD and its utility (Zuiderwijk & Hinnant, 2019). In public administration, several models of integrating Information Technology (IT) into government structures have been proposed (Charalabidis et al., 2019; Janowski, 2015): from e-Government to Digital Government, passing over the idea of government as a platform. OGD has been systematically ascribed with a crucial role in the development of such models.

In this paper, we argue that OGD has been framed as a set of tools for performing diverse and multiple tasks. From this perspective, OGD takes shape as a kind of “Swiss Army Knife”: always useful, but without a single and clearly defined purpose. After reviewing recent literature on OGD, we find that the concept has been attributed renewed purpose as the enabler of data-driven government. Such an emergent government model expresses a particular view of the world, and, in this context, it is crucial to understand the underlying assumptions. To investigate the incremental change of the OGD's purpose, and the underlying values that sustain this evolution, we focus on the work of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Indeed, we consider this international organization particularly relevant given its strong efforts to promote OGD to national governments around the world.

Concerning the broad institutional agenda, the OGD is part of a suite of topics related to the “digital economy” and “good governance agendas.” To identify the underlying values and multiple purposes of OGD, we propose a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) study, which aims to how OGD has been forged and how the expectations towards OGD have evolved. CDA and OGD are an appropriate fit, and it has been applied investigate various questions directly or closely related with our topic, including: the OGD civil society movement (Bates, 2013), the understanding of citizenship through e-Government policies (Schou & Hjelholt, 2017), the neoliberal ideology underlying OGD (Bates, 2014), and reasons why adhering to Open Government policies (Blasio & Selva, 2016). This paper seeks to contribute to the existing literature, offering a critical perspective of the OECD's work on OGD, as well as developing a more nuanced understanding of OGD's conceptual features. Finally, the study reveals the emergence of a data-driven government model, paving the way for further research on its effects on Public Administration and Public Law.

The structure is as follows: we first sketch the literature on the concept of OGD and show different understandings and limits (II). We then present our methodological approach (III), before engaging in an analysis of the material (IV). We distinguish three phases of OECD work: first, where OGD echoed social values such as transparency and openness; second, where the OGD's economic potential was emphasized; and finally, where OGD promotes the conditions for private actors to provide IT solutions and deliver government tasks,

helping to build a data-driven approach to policy-making. Finally, we draw conclusions and indicate future avenues of research (V).

OPEN GOVERNMENT DATA: THE SCHOLARSHIP'S PERSPECTIVE

Since its emergence in 2009, OGD has been analyzed across a variety of disciplines. Analysis of the literature shows that OGD has different functions and purposes. More recently, certain authors have proposed a new development, in relation with the Big Data phenomena (Dwivedi et al., 2016; Janssen & Kuk, 2015).

In general, the 2009 article from Robinson et al. (2009) named “Government Data and the Invisible Hand” is treated as a starting point for the study of OGD. The article does not use the expression OGD, but it explores the idea that a more efficient way to provide citizens with information is needed. In the authors' view, governments should provide data and let the “vibrant marketplace of engineering ideas” explore public and governmental information; they argue that private actors are better equipped to use, explore, and create value from the data. The scholarship also considers the first year of Barack Obama's presidency as a milestone in the development of OGD (Wirtz et al., 2018).

In the past decade, Information Management and Public Administration have provided major contributions in the field, describing policies and empirical features of OGD implementation (Attard et al., 2015; Martin, 2014; Zuiderwijk & Janssen, 2014; Zuiderwijk et al., 2019). In legal scholarship, contributions are more interested in the relationship between OGD and Freedom of Information (Noveck, 2017), the principle of good administration (Gilles & Bouhadana, 2020), and privacy and personal data protection (Borgesius et al., 2015). Political science, political theory, and critical studies have also offered insight concerning OGD's ideological links and its role in strengthening democracy (Birchall, 2016; Lourenço et al., 2017; Ruijter et al., 2017). If early research on OGD was mostly optimistic, authors have increasingly adopted a more moderate and realistic view, revealing a growing uncertainty concerning outcomes (Jamieson et al., 2019; Matheus & Janssen, 2019; Omar et al., 2020; Worthy, 2015; Zuiderwijk et al., 2019).

In terms of conceptualization, all of the aforementioned works described OGD in very different ways, hinting at the ambiguity of the concept. OGD has been analyzed as a movement (Chen et al., 2018; Wang & Shepherd, 2020), an initiative (Attard et al., 2015; Matheus & Janssen, 2019), a policy (Chatfield & Reddick, 2018; Janssen & Kuk, 2015), and a strategy (Cahlikova & Mabillard, 2019; Kubler et al., 2018). It has also been described as a manifestation, or a “concurrent implementation,” of Open Government (Wirtz et al., 2018). Finally, it is treated as an “organizational invention,” which has a set of meanings and practices still evolving (Charalabidis et al., 2016). This study takes the public policy perspective, and uses this level of analysis to develop its findings.

Despite the hesitation of scholars when addressing OGD, a new trend in the literature that embraces AI appears to give renewed hope in the project, especially concerning Big Open Linked Data (BOLD); for some, OGD can play a role in developing Big Data (Hardy & Maurushat, 2017). Combining and linking isolated datasets (public and private generated) would enable the discovery of hitherto unreachable insights (Dwivedi et al., 2016; Janssen & Kuk, 2015), and such an innovation would thus benefit the private and public sectors (Lnenicka & Komarkova, 2019). Studying the role of Big Data in the data-driven policy process, Poel et al. (2018) find that most initiatives using data-driven and Big Data approaches rely on some kind of OGD. However, the same authors consider that deeper research is required to unlock the full potential of OGD and Big Data analytics for the policy-making process. With a more cautionary tone, Rieder and Simon (2016) consider that the

reliance on supposed mechanical objectivity reinforces the mainstream tendency of using data as the core of the policy process. The authors add that such a trend participates in the datafication phenomena (Rieder & Simon, 2016). For Meijer and Thaens (2020), a positive view of innovation in the public sector and the lack of investigation of innovation's perverse effects also supports this tendency.

In view of these recent developments, we propose to verify how the evolution seen in the research is reflected by the OECD's work.

METHODOLOGY

Considering the evolution of the scholarship on OGD, and the OECD's institutional role in promoting OGD as part of its good governance and digital economy agenda, we propose to use a CDA methodology to understand the underlying assumptions of this change. The CDA approach is useful in understanding the development of policies, describing conceptual change, and revealing the political views underlying public policy choices (John, 2012; Yanow, 2015). Keeping in mind the discourse's constitutive function (Howarth & Griggs, 2015), it is possible to observe how discursive practices come to develop concepts and categorize reality. The discourse not only describes the world, it also creates reality (David & Steven, 2012).

We adopt a post-structural approach that considers policy as a contingent and cultural creation. So understood, policies are discourses that need to be interpreted and unfolded to be fully understood. We build on Bacchi's problematization study, which considers that by framing the social problem ahead, public policies also frame the scope of solutions available (Bacchi, 2012). The study of problematization enables reflection on how governments act and on the effects of those actions. Bacchi and Goodwin write, "By asking how 'problems' are represented or constituted in policies, it becomes possible to probe underlying assumptions that render these representations intelligible and the implications that follow for how lives are imagined and lived" (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 176). The goal is thus to develop an in-depth analysis of the "mutability" of OGD's uses and practices (Bacchi, 2012).

The OECD's work is particularly relevant here given its institutional role as guiding national administrations (both to OECD State members and third parties countries). Additionally, institutional studies analyzing the OECD's organizational features point out the importance of its work on building a shared definition of problems and solutions, based on a shared value framework (Woodward, 2009). The OECD as an institution relies heavily on reports, guidelines, working papers, which are all used as leverage to push its agenda (Woodward, 2009). A common scenario is that the OECD announces its support of policymakers in both member states and partner countries by providing a forum for policy dialogue and by creating common standards and principles. The institution also offers policy reviews, practical recommendations, comparative international data, and analysis to support public sector innovation and reform. Data is gathered from government officials, experts from the private sector, civil society organizations, and trade unions. OECD's work offers suitable data for CDA analysis.

To proceed with our analysis, we have pre-selected 57 documents, which were retrieved online in the OECD online library. After a first scan, the more relevant documents were selected and subjected to an in-depth analysis. This final analysis focused on 22 documents that the authors read and coded with NVivo software's assistance. The coding processes captured the incremental changes in the OECD discourse and how OGD has been conceptualized to address different problems over time. The analysis also reached the roots of OGD, looking into works that preceded the use of the expression, but which nevertheless contained essential insights to understand the context in which OGD emerged.

OGD IN THE WORKS OF OECD

OGD is a frequent subject in the broad work of the OECD. Formally, the organ in charge of OGD inside the OECD is the “Public Governance Directorate.” The first mention of OGD on the OECD’s work appears in 2013, where the institution published a working paper titled “Open Government Data: Towards Empirical Analysis of Open Government Data Initiatives” (Ubaldi, 2013). Following this, at least 20 of the analyzed documents explicitly mentioned this particular working paper, and this was also frequently cited by the scientific scholarship studying the subject (Attard et al., 2015; Borgesius et al., 2015; Donker & Loenen, 2017; Gonzalez-Zapata & Heeks, 2015; Lassinantti et al., 2019). The OECD’s working paper can be seen as an entry ticket to the discussion, however, the ideas embodied by OGD were already present in the OECD before it was formalized. Therefore, a detailed look into the work produced before 2013 will allow us to understand the premises upon which OGD was built. The following in-depth analysis is therefore organized in three phases: pre-2013, the consolidation, and the future ahead. The timeline below (Figure 1) illustrates these different phases.

It is important to recognize that regardless of the importance of the OECD’s work on this topic, it has not occurred in a vacuum. Indeed, several international organizations implicitly or explicitly push the OGD agenda, such as the Open Government Partnership,¹ the United Nations (notably via the Agenda for Sustainable Development), and the World Economic Forum. The combined efforts of these institutions have a direct impact on the OECD’s own work. In its publications, the OECD frequently mentions the work of these institutions to lend gravity to the issue at hand, stressing the importance and urgency. Besides this, several of the OECD’s publications are based on national practices; in this sense, it is one of the OECD’s modes of action to disseminate best practices and compare performance across member states and partner countries. By doing so, the OECD is also influenced by practices at the national level. We can infer from this dynamic that there exists a *policy cross-fertilization* phenomenon: the OECD’s work helps to shape national policies while also being influenced by international organizations and national government practices. Notwithstanding, the specific contours and level of this impact is difficult (and in some cases impossible) to measure.

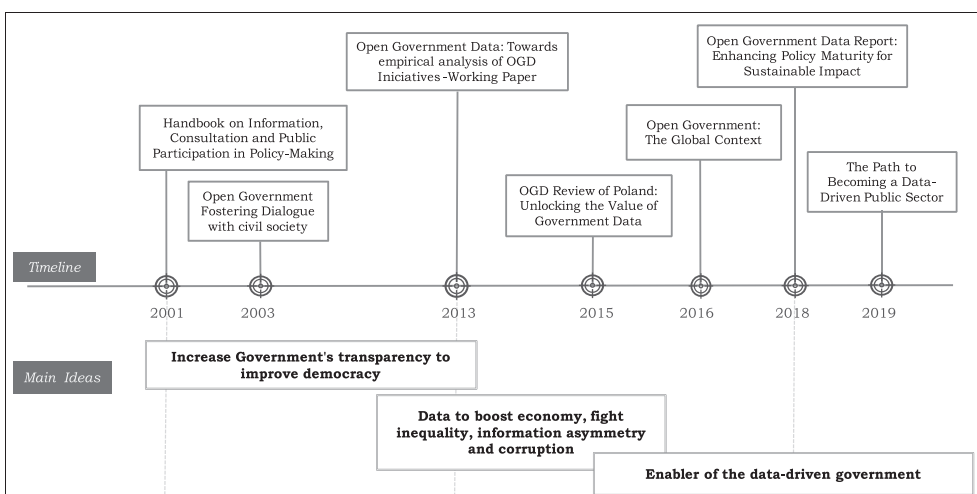


FIGURE 1 Timeline of main ideas

Pre-2013: Freedom of information as a cornerstone of the liberal model of government

One of the core institutional roles of OECD is to promote the model of liberal democracy, within which the informed citizen is central. In this regard, the documents produced between 2001 and 2013 express the idea of providing citizens with public information through emergent IT, and emphasize governments' need to embrace new technologies, both ideas that are central to the development of OGD as a concept.

In 2001, OECD published the Handbook on Information Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-Making (OECD, 2001), which emphasizes the idea of using IT as a means of providing citizens with public information. The document's argument is that more information is better because it provides citizens with better tools to participate in public debate and the democratic process. More and easily accessible information would benefit citizens and reinforce trust in governments. It should be noted that this document does not mention "public data," but refers only to "public information."

In 2003, OECD published two documents particularly relevant to this analysis. The first being "Open Government Fostering Dialogue with Civil Society" (OECD, 2003b). The focus of this document is on democracy and the reinforcement of trust, and there is a reinforced idea technology is the primary mediator between government and society. The second document published in 2003 is dedicated to e-Government: "The e-Government Imperative" (OECD, 2003a). Here again, it launches the idea that governments should take part in the "information revolution." It encourages governments to promote a profound transformation of administrative structures and organizational culture through IT use, mentioning among other things the question of releasing public datasets. It notes that some countries were already implementing policies in this area and deemed it as deeply desirable. The proposed new public administration model is based on a governance approach, in which the boundaries between public and private actors would become blurred "as a result of the greater use of private-sector firms and social intermediaries, driven in part by the imperatives of e-government." (p. 154) Besides the idea of better governance, other considerations began to take shape; including the fact that the government is the data provider, and private actors are the providers of innovation, and what links them together is data. The most efficient way to adapt to this new reality is to open public data to private actors, better suited to promote innovation and provide solutions.

In 2008, the OECD adopted a Recommendation² to increase the availability and use of Public Sector Information policies (PSI). The Recommendation stated that it was necessary to enhance PSI's availability, but it did not embrace all of the principles concerning OGD. Indeed, the Recommendation still admits, for example, that the PSI release could be conditioned to certain fees.

In 2009, OECD launched a new work series: "Government at a Glance" (OECD, 2009). This biannual report gathers qualitative and quantitative indicators on governments, providing "a snapshot of the quality of public governance," measuring governments' performance over time. It was designed to contribute to the debate of how to achieve "stronger, cleaner and fairer economies and societies" (pp. 7–8). In its first edition, the analysis covers the entire first decade of the 2000s. An important mutation on the core of public service values marked this period, with the inclusion of transparency and efficiency standards by several member countries (p. 40). Indeed, the report attests that 85% of the member countries had reviewed their core public service values between 2000 and 2009 (p. 40). Furthermore, the report underlines the need for an evidence-based approach in the adoption of public policies, however, it warns governments that current practices concerning evidence gathering in policymaking could entail distortions and inequalities. The report encourages governments to work in partnership with civil society to improve data collection and analysis,

as a way of counterbalancing the power of lobbyists. Asserting the government's responsibility to provide neutral and trustworthy data and evidence to guide political decision-making (p. 39), data becomes the leading source of public debate on policy. This approach will remain central in the OECD's discourse covering the policymaking process.

Two years later, the second report of the series "Government at a Glance" (OECD, 2011) insisted on the "Proactive disclosure of information" (p. 142). It still referred to the idea of "information," but it introduced the concept of "public data" and its possible reuse. Indeed, the release and reuse of public data are viewed as an opportunity "to further enhance transparency and create new added-value" (p. 142). In this perspective, the report asserts that governments were already making efforts to increase the release of "electronic information," "in formats that allow for reuse and manipulation" (p. 142). The report reinforces the importance of transparency in governments' general goals, and it links the main features of OGD (public data made easily and freely accessible in a format that allows its reuse) with the achievement of transparency. In this context, it is no surprise that the 2013 report "Government at a Glance" includes a specific chapter on OGD.

The consolidation moment: From freedom of information to free access to data

In 2013, two documents officially introduced the concept of OGD to the OECD's action: the first was the aforementioned conceptual working paper, and the second was the 2013 report "Governance at the Glance." These two documents show the OECD's new direction regarding public information policy guidance; transparency, which was paradigmatic in the previous period, came into competition with the economic potential of open data.

The first document aimed to conceptualize the idea of OGD (Ubaldi, 2013). It indicates that OGD was advocated by private and for-profit-actors from its very early days,³ and also relates OGD with several similar concepts, such as the Right to Information, PSI, Open Government, and the Big Data movement. For example, it stresses that OGD and the Right to Information both aim to increase the transparency of government, but the Right to Information is concerned more with information, whereas OGD is concerned with data (p. 5). In this regard, data is considered the "lowest level of abstraction from which information and then knowledge are derived" (p. 5). Public data, therefore, is derived from public information. The regime regulating PSI directly impacts public data policies, and thus OGD. The paper presents OGD as a "building block" of Open Government (p. 6). Big Data is also mentioned, emphasizing the increased awareness concerning the potential value of datasets and processes. Moreover, the paper stresses that such an increased valorization of data signals "a shift towards a data-driven socioeconomic model" (p. 7). In other words, it asserts that, besides aiming to promote government transparency and accountability, OGD's goals are more broadly to increase innovation, efficiency, and flexibility in government. However, it does not provide any details on how OGD contributes to such an achievement.

The working paper "Open Government Data: Towards Empirical Analysis of Open Government Data Initiatives" (Ubaldi, 2013) adopted an optimistic tone towards OGD. It noted that a variety of actors should benefit from the release of public data: civil society, governments, citizens, private sector, and markets (p. 12). Nevertheless, when addressing the benefits of OGD for promoting openness, transparency, and accountability in governments, the paper is less enthusiastic (p. 15). From this perspective, the positive economic effects of OGD are mostly underlined and considered "evident." At the same time, the paper recognizes that even in what concerns the OGD's economic potential, the available empirical data on the matter is minimal (p. 16). Considering the variety of goals of OGD,

the paper is aware of the fact that different positive outcomes depend on different types of action:

Understanding the different values is essential to identify which enablers and type of data to prioritise to achieve the targeted value creation goals. Different values require different types of data. For instance, while many accountability and good governance objectives can be served by releasing aggregated data, boosting economic growth may require specific datasets to be released to the business community or apps developers at a more granular level data, in a timely manner and updated regularly to diffuse them vastly and rapidly to create business opportunities. (p. 12).

The paper also replicates an idea present in the academic scholarship (Robinson et al., 2009), which is that private actors are better suited to extract value from public data: “rather than deciding on the best option up front, governments can stimulate private party interest to engineer ideas and experiments to discover what works in different situations.” (p. 17). The document illuminates the vision of OECD on OGD, and a careful reading brings to light the OECD's underlying assumptions. First, we identify techno-determinism and techno-solutionism, in relation to the assertion of Big Data as something inexorable and when assuming that IT, and specifically OGD, can provide a vast realm of solutions. Second, it is clear that the OECD's view of OGD has strong foundations in neoliberal thought; for example, the assertion that the market is better equipped to explore public datasets than the public sector. Finally, New Public Management ideas can be detected in the reliance on private actors to provide innovation and increase government flexibility and efficiency.

The second document published in 2013 is the report “Governance at Glance,” which explicitly mentions the previous Working Paper (OECD, 2013). It asserts that OGD is an emerging concept with no established features and is described as an ongoing project in constant evolution. It reports that half of OECD countries had “a national strategy for providing OGD to citizens” (p. 10). The document reinforces the high expectations linked with OGD, that it should provide “the basis for meaningful public participation and collaboration in the creation of innovative, responsive and value-added services and policies, and are ultimately expected to improve the decision-making process of both government and individuals.” (p. 140) The icing on the cake: “OGD is seen as a potential source of economic growth, and as a basis for new forms of entrepreneurship and social innovation.” (p. 140). However, the report raises the question that the practical impact of OGD policies remains difficult to measure and assess.

Finally, this consolidation phase demonstrates that from its formation, OGD resulted in high expectations of achieving goals of two different natures: strengthening democracy and boosting economic development.

The future ahead: OGD as an enabler of a new model of government

From 2014 to 2019, the OECD discourse took a new direction. The main idea promoted was less focused on e-Government and more on the promotion of “Digital Government.” The model of Digital Government is linked with the development of data-driven policymaking, and the increased use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the realm of public administration.

In 2014, aiming to support accountability in developing countries, the OECD published the report, “Open Government in Latin America” (OECD, 2014a). The report emphasizes the still-evolving character of the main concepts forming the basis of open government, especially in relation to OGD, PSI, and Big Data (p. 64).

Also in 2014, the OECD Council issued a Recommendation offering guidance to governments “to make the most” of technological changes and digital opportunities (OECD, 2014b). From this point on, the OECD changed its discourse, with Digital Government replacing the idea of e-Government. The Recommendations' introductory text states that it is “the first international legal instrument on digital government” (p. 4). It further provides support for a deep reform on the public sector's approach to technology: “from a use of technology to support better public sector operations to integrating strategic decisions on digital technologies in the shaping of overarching strategies and agendas for public sector reform and modernisation” (p. 3). The Recommendation prescribes that Digital Government should be anchored on openness, transparency, and inclusiveness; among these four principles of action, two are intrinsically connected to OGD. The first is to “ensure greater transparency, openness and inclusiveness,” mediated by technology. While the second aims to create “a data-driven culture in the public sector,” reinforcing the idea of increased access and reuse of data and mentioning the need for “managing the risks of data misuse” (pp. 6–7). Finally, the Recommendation asserts that state members should ensure that the Digital Government is recognized as a “strong political engagement” and promote its implementation at all governmental levels and power spheres (p. 7).

In 2015, the OGD is directly addressed by two works of OECD. The first is the biannual report “Government at a Glance” (OECD, 2015a). The report points out the increase of economic inequality, recognizing that the emphasis given to economic efficiency has an impact on the pursuit of other public values. An exaggerated importance attributed to efficiency has resulted in the rise of inequality (or, at least, it did not contribute to the relief of such disparities). In its own words: “In the last three decades, efficiency became one of the most important guiding principles of how governments operate and how services are delivered in OECD countries, often putting equity or fairness considerations on the back burner.” (p. 26).

Access to information is deemed an essential element for reshaping public governance orientation and implementing an inclusive process. In this sense, the report cites Freedom of Information laws and the shift from passive information dissemination to proactive information dissemination enabled by the OGD. This transition is considered a crucial step in the right direction, with OGD presented as a shared tool for promoting public and private value (p. 32). This report highlights the OGD as a tool to fight inequality, despite the somewhat loose assumptions over its actual effects.

The second work from 2015 focused on implementing Poland's OGD policy (OECD, 2015b). This report introduces to the OGD agenda the idea of “OGD ecosystems.” Indeed, it states that the OGD's success depends on the existence of a favorable environment, or “an ecosystem.” Such an ecosystem relies on the coordination between different institutions, beyond national borders, across different levels of governments, and involving public, private, and civil society actors alike. In such an ecosystem, “the distinctions between professional, politician, practitioner, civil servant, expert, consumer, and citizen are blurring dramatically.” (p. 36). Governments must play a vital role in creating, fostering, and encouraging this system; indeed it is up to governments to “stimulate the emergence of an ‘ecosystem’ composed of related and co-operating stakeholders” (p. 9). Hence, there is a significant change in the government's role: from the simple release of public data to actively fostering an ecosystem. This shift in the OECD's discourse shows a relativization of the original idea that the simple publication of data to the “vibrant marketplace of engineering ideas” (Robinson et al., 2009) would deliver the intended results. This report also announced another mutation of the OGD concept. The link between OGD and the creation of a data-driven government begins to appear, with the main focus of OGD pivoting from the reinforcement of democracy and the support of economic development, to the implementation of this new government model—one that pursues solutions to social

problems through the exploration of data. By adopting this position, the report has a very optimistic view of data-driven solutions and advocates the potential of data analytics:

There is great potential in applying powerful digital tools to the rich amount of government data to reveal new insights into difficult problems in nearly every area of human endeavour. (...) Furthermore, data-driven approaches to decision making are being acclaimed as capable of generating improved insights to societal problems and improved responses to dealing with them. (p. 80).

In 2016, the OECD released two important works addressing governmental reforms: “Digital Government Strategies for Transforming Public Services in the Welfare Areas” (OECD, 2016a) and “Open Government: The Global Context and the Way Forward” (OECD, 2016b). From their perspective, Open Government and Digital Government are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing (OECD, 2016b, p. 87). Indeed, the comparative study on Digital Government put efficiency and effectiveness on the front line, leaving behind the 2015 report's emphasis on equality.

OGD is considered one of the key building blocks of both Open and Digital Government. In the report on Open Government, OGD is deemed “vital for most of the open government initiatives to thrive.” (OECD, 2016b, p. 54). In the same vein, the report on Digital Government asserts that the “availability of public sector data is a precondition” to the development of public sector innovation (OECD, 2016a, p. 36). In this context, public sector innovation is presented as helping “government become more transparent and facilitate public engagement.” (OECD, 2016b, p. 96). This position reveals an approach to innovation that ignores possible backlash; indeed the report on Digital Government marked the return of economic values, such as efficiency and effectiveness, in the OECD's discourse (OECD, 2016a).

Following the developments of 2016, in 2017, the OECD Council issued a Recommendation on Open Government (OECD, 2017b). It provides the core features of OECD's understanding of Open Government. Accordingly, the Recommendation addressed the issue of OGD and covers OGD principles in paragraph 7. The closeness of the OGD and Open Government concepts is once again reinforced. Also in 2017, the OECD published a paper presenting a compilation of good practices on public data publication and reuse, focusing specifically on the fight against corruption (OECD, 2017a). Through the encouragement of OGD practices, this compendium aims to create a so-called “data-driven public sector integrity,” and to boost civic auditing. The document analyzes several countries' practices to illustrate how the use of open data can increase public sector accountability. It states that:

Open Data can indeed provide a platform to increase social participation and enhance co-responsibility in areas such as public procurement, political financing standards, judiciary and law enforcement, public officials' integrity, fiscal and budget transparency, planning and land use, dispute and conflict resolution, as well as broader public policy and decision making. (pp. 12–13).

Therefore, another aspect of the utility of OGD is advanced, as an instrument to fight corruption.

In 2018, the OECD went one step further in the use of the tools of governance, launching the OECD Open Useful and Re-usable data index (OURdata) (OECD, 2018). This index measures the advances made in OGD implementation across OECD member states and partner countries, and is designed to offer a periodical assessment.⁴ The use of an index is not anodyne; it entails a comparison between member states and partner countries, and in

promoting peer scrutiny aims to increase peer pressure and accelerate policy objectives (Woodward, 2009).

Regarding its content, the Index brought forward three significant developments. First, it advanced the concept of “government as a platform” and connected this to OGD, which is considered the enabler of the platform model. This new concept of government involves,

the recognition of the potential value of data as an enabler of collaboration for the co-development of products and services, and an asset to support more strategic, predictive and informed decision making, drawing upon data crowdsourcing and user-driven collaboration models. (p. 156).

This mutation has consequences concerning governments' role: “it entails a significant shift in governments' operations requiring the perception of their role to shift from data owners and solution providers to data stewards.” (p. 16). Once again, OGD is the protagonist of this change in the government model.

Second, the Index made the link between OGD and AI. In the OECD's view, open data is an essential source of “evidence on user behavior and preferences,” and it should feed “artificial intelligence” to develop “innovative citizens experiences driven by their needs.” The OECD praises data availability and the linkage of different datasets: “Data contains relevant information about people's lives and preferences that need to be available and accessible to all” (p. 62). AI is deemed important to hold “considerable potential for public value creation” (p. 68). From this perspective, the Index encourages administrations to build an “open by default culture” (p. 120).

Finally, the Index underlines a few considerations on the OGD's real-world impacts. Although the report is optimistic in the potential efficacy of OGD, it recognizes that its results are difficult to measure. The Index states that governments neglect OGD's “social terms” or social goals, with only a few countries “releasing data to either enhance public debate and co-responsibility in policy areas or to facilitate collective intelligence to crowdsource solutions for public policy problems” (p. 32). It is also worth mentioning that the OECD regrets that governments did not embrace the idea of developing an “OGD ecosystem.” In its view, governments have invested little in the development of data literacy between business and citizens (pp. 144–146).

In 2019, the report “Going Digital: Shaping Policies, Improving Lives” foregrounds OGD as a tool to fight inequality (OECD, 2019a). It indicates a significant imbalance in data access and the capacity to create value from data. According to the report, large amounts of data are concentrated in the hands of a small group of companies. Governments are encouraged to address this inequality by implementing public policies built on existing OGD projects (p. 26). OGD thus would remove “competitive advantage by reducing information asymmetries” (p. 75). The OECD also stresses the OGD's crucial role in boosting innovation: “One of the most important things that the public sector can do to drive innovation is to enhance access to public sector data” (p. 75). Measures aiming to incentivize data reuse would also benefit the implementation of Digital Government (p. 55).

A second report titled “How's life in the digital age?” (OECD, 2019c) addresses OGD in the context of civic engagement. In this report, OGD is once again framed as a tool for “improved transparency and government accountability” (p. 22). In the biannual report “Government at a glance,” the progress of OGD implementation is considered significant. The report adopts an enthusiastic tone, stating that there have been major advances in data availability and accessibility, and broad government support of OGD policies (OECD, 2019b, pp. 148–149).

The 2019s updated version of the OURdata Index (OECD, 2019d)⁵ reinforces the ideas already present in the 2018 edition, with the concept of “government as a platform”

emphasized, and data placed at the core of the governmental action. The Index notes the centrality of OGD for the implementation of a data-driven public sector:

Thus, data shapes policies and services, their design and ongoing delivery, helps in understanding their impact, and spotting the changes that may need to be made. Data-driven governments ensure public sector data are shared inside and outside the public sector in a trustworthy fashion, and under clear protection, privacy, security rules and ethical principles for national and public interest. (p. 14).

While reinforcing these concepts, the OECD also expresses significant concern about “recent events” that decreased citizen trust in data-driven innovations. In the specific context of OGD, the report considers that “risk-averse behavior towards data openness may risk slowing down open data or data sharing policies” (p. 29). To address this question, the OECD proposes that the increase of citizens' trust in sharing their data should be a “high priority” for policymakers (p. 29).

The idea of a data-driven public sector is further developed in another report published in the same year (OECD, 2019e) and that repeats the main arguments of the 2019s OUR-Index. The report also expresses the need for overreaching data governance to assure interoperability across different organizations and sectors. Interoperability is understood as a technical and legal challenge since both technical features, and legal arrangements can be an obstacle to data sharing (p. 26).

As foreseen in this report, the design of a data-driven public sector relies on Big Data analytics techniques and the link between different data sets. Such a combination of techniques would enable predictive policies that would help the long-term planning (p. 80):

The increasing ubiquity of mobile devices and social media platforms means public authorities have a wider range of routes to gather valuable information from citizens related to their daily lives as well as their needs, preferences, and behaviours. Taken together, these data allow governments to better assess needs, design more appropriate policy measures and be more precise in estimating an expected impact. (p. 81).

The OECD recognizes that the increased use of AI by the public administration raises ethical and legal challenges. To respond to such challenges, the document proposes global ethical guidelines that would complement the legal framework in which the public administrations are deemed to respect:

Although laws and regulations around the rights of citizens, the behaviour of public servants, and the application of data and technology already inform the activity of government, it is necessary to pair them with ethical guidelines to ensure ethical practices, consistency of conduct and maintain trust. (p. 118).

As this review of OECD documentation shows, the approach to OGD has significantly changed over the years. The appeal of promoting OGD policies has increased intensely, even if real-world evidence of its positive effects remains scarce. The diversity of OGD's purposes makes it difficult to develop a stable theoretical foundation of the concept.

CONCLUSION

The OECD's work analysis shows that OGD has been framed as a set of tools serving a wide range of objectives. Initially connected with the idea of increasing transparency, OGD soon became viewed as a means of boosting economic development; it was also linked with the fight against inequality, information asymmetry, and corruption. Finally, OGD was seen as a feeder of Big Data, and its functionalities continue to evolve and find an integral role as an enabler of data-driven government. The variety of OGD's utility suggests the image of a Swiss Army Knife, even if the link between OGD and its goals often remains nebulous.

The analysis also reveals the tendency to use the OGD agenda to reinforce specific public values—that is, efficiency, innovation, and economic development—to the detriment of other public goals, such as supporting democracy or promoting fairness and equality. Despite the fact that the inflection noticed in 2015s “Government at a Glance,” towards a fight against inequality, was not developed in later iterations, it shows the contingency of public priorities and how OGD can achieve different political choices.

At each stage of the OECD's work, OGD plays a crucial role as the mediator between government and private actors. The ultimate utility of OGD as an enabler of data-driven government is explicit in OECD's recent work. OGD allows private actors to promote innovation within the private sector and invites those same actors to encourage innovation in the public sector (the idea of government as a platform). In this context, the OECD presents public sector innovation as an overall positive development, and ignores possible backlash. However, scholars have already warned against such a naïve position (Meijer & Thaens, 2020).

This study involves a number of limitations. One that should be noted is the lack of evidence concerning the real-world impact of the OECD's work concerning national governments. The OECD is one of many organizations working within the OGD field, thus the identification of the specific sphere of influence is difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, considering this article's goal of contributing to a critical understanding of OGD as a concept serving diverse objectives, the OECD's work is useful and helps illustrate the evolution of the concept. A fruitful future avenue of research would be to investigate the influence of different actors in the OECD's work on the subject of OGD. In the same vein, further research is needed to assess the impact that certain unexpected outcomes (at both the technological and political level) could have on the evolution of OGD. Research on the topic of OGD in the context of data-driven government would also significantly benefit from interdisciplinary contributions, from the fields of public administration and public law.

In this context, researchers and practitioners working on improving the efficiency of OGD, or measuring its impact, must keep in mind the goal pursued in each implementation context. Given the future application of OGD as an enabler of data-driven government, a comprehensive understanding of the topic should also consider the implications of this new model of government.

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ENDNOTES

¹The Open Government Partnership (OGP) is a multilateral and independent body formed under the leadership of the United States, which aims to promote the principles of transparency, accountability, citizen participation, technology, and innovation. The openness of governmental data is an essential pillar of the OGP (Yu and Robinson, 2012). The OECD participates at the OGP as a partner institution. See more at: <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/about/partnerships-and-coalitions/>

²Recommendations are considered non-legally binding instruments, but still legal documents vested with a significant moral force. They are open to adherence by members states, and when adhering to a Recommendation, States are expected to comply with its dispositions.

³The Working Paper mentions the Open Government Working Group Meeting. This meeting took place in California in 2007. It gathered practitioners and researchers in governance and technology, under the sponsorship of important private actors (among them Google and Yahoo, and the Sunlight Foundation). The meeting is considered as crucial on the OGD development because it established the OGD's principles. Public Data should be made available and it should be complete, primary, timely, accessible, machine-processable, non-discriminatory, nonproprietary, license-free.

⁴The Index is based on previous surveys conducted in the realm of the biannual report Government at a Glance. A pilote version of this Index was first published in 2007 in the form of a Working Paper (Lafortune & Ubaldi, 2017). OECD 2017 OURdata Index: Methodology and results. It presents a short version of the 2018s document, so we focus our analysis in the later.

⁵A second version of the same rapport was published in 2020 OECD 2020. OECD Open, Useful and Re-usable data (OURdata) Index: 2019. Paris: OECD Publishing.

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