

Nathaniel Tkacz

Don't Get Caught in The Open

My first encounters with openness can be likened to bumping into somebody on a sidewalk. I kept walking into it, attempting to change direction, then bumping into it again. It became a major obstacle. Wherever I looked for conflicts, disputes, controversies or disagreements on the pages of Wikipedia – as visible markers of knowledge politics – I found someone rationalizing this or that away with the language of openness. This became such an issue, it forced its way into my thinking, and became a major focus of my book, *Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness*.¹

My original intent, however, was not to produce a critical discourse on openness. I had wanted to investigate how digital and networked media were impacting upon the production and reception of knowledge. I chose Wikipedia as a case study, since it was at the forefront of this transformation and as an encyclopaedia it came with the added benefit of historical comparison. While the project I envisaged would indeed have a historical dimension, my primary interest, it must be said, was political.

My cultural studies background had trained me to pay attention to the “everyday” and “or-

dinary” workings of power, and I had learned from reading Foucault and others that knowledge was closely coupled with the exercise of power. I was, therefore, interested in what Wikipedia could tell us about how the conditions for knowledge production were changing in the emerging digital society, and in turn what new modes of politics might be detected.

I began seriously researching Wikipedia in 2006. As is well known, this was around the peak of excitement over “Web 2.0”. The web was reimagined as an interactive platform, where commercial actors would roll out new services and users – now recast as “prosumers” or even “produsers” – would take care of the creative heavy lifting (memes, vines, posts, updates, edits, comments, etc.). There was a general euphoria over the born-again web and this provided the backdrop to the study.

But it was not simply that Wikipedia’s rise coincided with this 2.0 euphoria. No, Wikipedia was, rather, at the centre of things. The born-again web needed its idols and Wikipedia was held up as exemplary of everything true and good of “2.0”. Wikipedia was participatory; collaborative; run by volunteers; created in “good faith”; commons-based; a place for amateurs, peers, “anyone”, and so on. It was obvious to me and others, though, that there was much more to be said about Wikipedia (and Web 2.0 more broadly) than it being collaborative or participatory. I envisaged my own contribution as an everyday politics of knowledge meets Web 2.0. But, as mentioned, after bumping into this troublesome political concept of openness time and time again, I eventually gave it my dedicated attention. If I wanted to understand the politics of Wikipedia and Web 2.0 more broadly, I had to pass through openness. My challenge would

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become to think about the specificity of openness and, as it turned out, to think *against* it.

A critique of openness in 476 words

It is difficult to summarise a critique that took many pages to develop, but here is an attempt, with all the caveats one might expect:

“Everyone” agrees that openness is good. Therefore, projects, communities, groups or organisation that call themselves “open” or that value “openness” are desirable.

However, every project, group, etc., necessarily acts *in the world*. Some groups make software, some make education products, others work for the government. All forms of organisation, whether groups, communities, projects, companies, and so on, make decisions. Decisions about what it is the organisation does, about how it does what it does, about who is involved and who is not. These decisions are small cuts in the world. They involve choices between different courses of action; of one thing over another; one person’s idea over someone else’s; this policy and not that policy, and so on.

Every decision or action contours an organisation; it delineates and limits even in the act of enabling something new or expanding capacities. To be more concrete, decisions must be made about which sentences make it into an encyclopaedia entry, who is able to delete or revert contributions, freeze pages or block users. Things quickly get complicated. My critique of openness is that it is not at all suited for dealing with such immanent political developments. In fact, the very language of openness actively inhibits thinking through the political developments that emerge in its name.

Once something is understood as open, anything that happens in that organisation is somehow beyond serious criticism. For example, Wikipedia has a longstanding and well-established gender-bias. It is written mostly by young white men. When it is suggested that this is a problem, the language of openness can be used as a defence and, ultimately, a dismissal: “Sure, there may happen to be more

men, but this is the encyclopaedia *anyone can edit*. There’s nothing preventing women from getting involved.”

Any explicit attempts to address this imbalance through policy or quotas – however difficult to implement – must also be categorically ruled out since these go against openness.

Situations where this imbalance can be detected in the coverage of topics or tone of articles are also not a problem: “since the very openness of articles means that any problems or issues can be quickly rectified”. Openness could be used to explain away some problems, while enabling others to be solved.

In other situations, I found it prevented what were clearly political issues (in the broad sense) from being recognized or acknowledged at all.

After reviewing the longer political and intellectual history of openness, I concluded that this problem or tendency of not being able to address the politics that arise under conditions of openness was constitutive of all forms of openness. On this basis, I suggested that we look elsewhere in our attempts to build and support progressive politics, however conceived.

Open data déjà vu

Perhaps unsurprisingly for an academic book, my critique of openness did not radically alter the landscape.

The debates about openness have shifted onto different objects, but very similar positions are put forward and with similar results.

But not everything is the same. Probably the most significant development has been how the discussions about open government have come to focus so heavily on open data. Since excitement of the web was usurped by data’s new capacities, this development is not surprising. I would have hoped we could do better than imagine the political capacities of data in the same categories we used for the web, and before that software development, and before that internet protocols, and so on, as if technical objects or indeed systems can only be conceived in these binary terms.

Openness as precondition for data capture

I want to finish by making a point about open data, since what I have seen in this space is especially bleak.

Once I finished the book about Wikipedia and openness, I thought I was done with the topic. I was tired of the arguments, bored with the ideas, and keen for something new. My next project involved a study of dashboard interfaces. I too was interested in what was happening with (big) data, but I thought a good place to think about it was literally at the interfaces.

I was interested in how data and numbers were being displayed and used by people in different contexts. One of my case studies was the UK Government Digital Service (GDS) – a team within the UK Cabinet Office tasked with making all public services offered by the Government “digital by default”. As each service underwent this “digital by default” transformation, it was subjected to forms of standardization. All services would look and feel the same, thanks to a new service design manual. Since all services were now effectively digital transactions, they also produced transactional data. It was possible to know how many people were using a service at any one point, or over time. It could now be detected if citizen-users tended to get stuck on one page of a digital form, or what percentage of people completed a service transaction they had started, or how long they spent on each page. Each service would gather standard forms of data into performance dashboards, with a number of key performance indicators such as cost per transaction and user satisfaction. The dashboards were housed on a “performance platform”, which was public-facing and could be used by anyone interested in public service performance, from the service managers themselves, to journalists and “interested citizens”.

Where did all this data come from? Practically speaking, it was often generated by Google Analytics and other web analytics providers. But how did the government get into a

situation where this kind of data was routinely collected, shared, formatted and displayed for general consumption?

In the UK context, it can be traced to the initiatives led by Francis Maude, who led the influential *Open Data White Paper: Unleashing the Potential* and was heavily involved in the related UK Open Government agenda.² Around that time, Maude also set up the Government Digital Service (in his role as Cabinet Office minister). What I was viewing on the government service dashboards (some years later) was made possible by an open government agenda with a strong focus on data. When the GDS was established, it reflected Maude’s approach to openness in general and open data specifically. Design manuals championed open source and posters in the GDS offices contained slogans such as “Be Open”. Thus, data generated through digital services would naturally be open.

But since despite what people say data doesn’t speak for itself, the GDS team decided to filter, format and manipulate their data for ready-made easy consumption. The open government agenda ended up producing performance dashboards for around 800 government services.

What to make of this form of openness? When openness as open data provides the preconditions for the intensification of techniques of performance management? While my initial critique of openness was far-reaching, I did feel a certain empathy for those who saw openness as a possible way out; who felt rules, laws, formats or norms closing in on them. Many people experience this feeling of closure and I can understand why one might label a desire to reverse it as that of openness.

But what about when openness is no longer even associated with such an emancipatory gesture? When it provides little more than the conditions for mundane and bureaucratic forms of capture?

Today it is no longer urgent to come to terms with openness as a serious political concept. Rather, we must design ways to avoid getting caught in the open.

Notes

1. Tkacz (2015).
2. Maude (2012).

References

- Maude, Francis (2012). *Open Data White Paper: Unleashing the Potential*. Norwich: Stationery Office. [Online.] Available at <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/CM8353_acc.pdf>. Accessed 5 May 2018.
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