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Publication production

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Proofreading

Valerie Dee
Lori Nordstrom

Graphic design

Monocromo
info@monocromo.com.uy
Phone: +598 2 400 1685

Cover illustration

Matías Bervejillo

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Using technology for collaborative transparency: Risks and opportunities

Shawna Finnegan

Association for Progressive Communications (APC)
www.apc.org

Introduction

By undermining public trust and eroding societal infrastructure, corruption contributes to and is broadly indicative of widening power inequalities in many countries. The often insidious nature of corruption makes it difficult to address, and often requires substantial changes to regulation and public oversight. Transparency is an important tool in combating corruption, exposing weaknesses in governance structures and encouraging participation in governance.

Open and crowd-sourced approaches to information provide an opportunity to extend the link between transparency and participation further, providing an enormous opportunity for sharing and accessing information on not just corruption, but all aspects of governance. However, as recent technology-driven transparency projects have demonstrated, effecting offline change is a long and complex process. This report examines the barriers to effective technology-driven transparency, highlighting the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration in implementing transparency and overcoming these obstacles.

Transparency and technology in a wider context

While transparency is a tool for combating corruption, it is also part of overarching societal goals of accountability, democratisation and good governance. This connection is based on the assumption that using newly disclosed information, citizens, media, civil society and government officials will investigate and positively influence policy. This is a big assumption, and is very much tied into specific political, social, economic and cultural contexts. For example, existing evidence suggests that the democratising power of transparency depends largely on its ability to link into ongoing political and social mobilisation.¹ Transparency can transform existing

power structures, but often fails to, based in part on how problems are framed and the capacity of users to interpret and use information.²

Many of these same power and knowledge asymmetries plague technology projects, particularly as they have begun to tackle complex governance issues. While open source technology is a valuable tool in implementing transparency, work towards accountability and good governance is complex, with high stakes and a diverse set of stakeholders. Issues of privacy, security, trust, inclusivity and capacity take on new importance as technologists navigate real-world communities, which in many cases hold very different values to those espoused by the open source community. At the same time, local groups, government, mass media, NGOs and the global community must make space for technology and the new skill sets required to integrate online tools into development work.

Examining a series of technology-for-transparency pilot projects,³ this report begins with a brief investigation into some of the obstacles to effective implementation, highlighting the communication and knowledge network gaps that exist. Turning to recent research on this topic, the report goes on to explore the concept of collaborative learning networks and their impact on existing gaps in engagement, trust and knowledge.

Undermining accountability: Barriers faced by technology-for-transparency projects

Turning online activity into offline change continues to be a struggle for digital activists all over the world, and projects aimed at addressing issues of corruption are no exception. Low engagement and a lack of infrastructure are commonly cited obstacles for many technology projects; however, they are particularly relevant in the case of transparency, where participation from a diverse set of actors is essential to the success of most initiatives. Privacy and security are also growing concerns, particularly

¹ Berdou, E. (2011) *Mediating voices and communicating realities: using information crowdsourcing tools, open data initiatives and digital media to support and protect the vulnerable and marginalised*, Institute for Development Studies. www.dfid.gov.uk/r4d/PDF/Outputs/Misc_InfoComm/IDS_MediatingVoices_FinalReport.pdf

² Mason, M. (2008) Transparency for whom? Information disclosure and power in global environmental governance, *Global Environmental Politics*, 8(2), p. 8-13.

³ Taken largely from transparency.globalvoicesonline.org

given the recent trends toward government censorship and monitoring.⁴

Low engagement

Effecting offline change often requires a shift in perception of civic engagement. While many technology projects report substantial interest from citizens, some, particularly those focusing on disseminating government information rather than on collecting citizen input, have difficulty gaining and sustaining citizen engagement. In many countries, there is little public awareness and understanding of government activity, or of the power of citizen oversight. The founder of Cidade Democrática (“Democratic City”) in Sao Paulo, Brazil observed that the majority of citizens believe that improving civic services is not their responsibility, due in part to the top-down nature of the state.⁵ In Venezuela, ProAcceso, a project pushing for right to information (RTI) laws, found that even where laws existed to protect and empower citizens, they were not well known or understood. In response, the project developers instead focused on providing information that is directly relevant to individual and community life – such as information on education and public health for a mother with young children.⁶

When data is being collected from individuals and communities, low engagement could also be a result of distrust or poor relationships with the intended users of disclosed information. Local mappers working on the Map Kibera community mapping project were originally met with suspicion by residents, and questioned about their right to collect and record information. Some mappers were asked whether they were being paid for their work, or were asked for payment in return for the data they received.⁷

Engagement with mass media and citizen journalists is also an essential component to achieving wider social impact by transparency-for-technology projects. When asked how their project would spend additional funding, many transparency pilots interviewed by Global Voices focused on citizen and local media capacity building with online tools, new media, reporting and investigating.⁸ This is an important aspect of taking technology projects beyond the “disclosure” stage. Local mass and in-

dependent media must be aware of and able to use the information collected by technology projects in order to hold governing actors accountable.

A lack of engagement with governing actors at various scales can also be a substantial obstacle in combating corruption through technology. Distrust, animosity and secrecy are commonly cited issues for technology projects working towards government accountability, often exacerbated by a lack of communication and consultation on both sides. Government officials can be an essential ally in increasing government transparency, pushing for legislative reform based on reported data. This was the case in Bangalore, where the transport commissioner for the state of Karnataka used data collected from the online platform “I Paid a Bribe” to push through reforms in the motor vehicle department, including online applications and video monitoring to drive down corruption and increase transparency.⁹

One of the most commonly raised issues among pilot technology projects is the need for clear outcomes from citizen engagement. In many cases there was significant interest from communities, but when the project was unable to effect change, interest and support for the project waned.¹⁰ Conversely, when participants felt that their input had led to a definitive outcome, even if that outcome did not translate directly into accountability, confidence in the value of the tool, and in contribution, increased.

This has been the case for the Kiirti¹¹ programme in India, which aggregates and visualises citizen complaints and questions on a variety of issues using FrontlineSMS and Ushahidi. According to the developers of Kiirti, users of the platform are able to bring about a change in their community with minimal effort. These changes are often very local, such as changing a streetlight or paving a road; however, there is a substantial impact on the mindset of users, and there is an expectation that as participation increases, governing actors will be forced to tackle more complex issues.

Lack of infrastructure

In discussing technology, infrastructure is often understood as the physical networks required for access to the internet. But this is only one of many structures needed to realise the potential of transparency.

4 For example: www.apc.org/en/press/digital-security-becomes-key-concern-women-rights

5 transparency.globalvoicesonline.org/project/cidade-democratica

6 transparency.globalvoicesonline.org/project/proacceso

7 Berdou (2011) *Op. cit.*

8 For example: transparency.globalvoicesonline.org/project/penang-watch; transparency.globalvoicesonline.org/project/african-elections-project

9 Strom, S. (2012) Web sites shine light on petty bribery worldwide, *The New York Times*, 6 March. www.nytimes.com/2012/03/07/business/web-sites-shine-light-on-petty-bribery-worldwide.html

10 For example: transparency.globalvoicesonline.org/project/centre-monitoring-election-violence

11 transparency.globalvoicesonline.org/project/kiirti

Technology projects also rely on what is sometimes referred to as “soft infrastructure” – systems of governance, education, regulation, culture and social support.¹² These structures are very much tied into issues of engagement, and in some cases it may be necessary to build up soft infrastructure before effectively engaging various actors. Ideally, technology-driven transparency projects should have clear frameworks for implementation and progression, which ultimately rely on existing and emerging networks of activism, institutional and financial support, and participant capacities.

The founders of Map Kibera revealed the importance of infrastructure in their community information project, which originally started as a three-month pilot.¹³ Partnering with the Kibera Community Development Agenda (KCODA), a side project for Map Kibera involved developing an online mapping application to monitor the status of projects funded by the Kenya Constituency Development Fund (CDF). Individuals could submit photographs and reports on the real status of projects, contrasting those with official government reports. Information was also provided on the amount of funding allocated, the contractor involved, and geographic location. Unfortunately, there was limited time for training with the web application, and the collection of evidence was not well organised. When the tool was presented at a community forum on local budgets, some of the reports were shown to be out of date, which weakened confidence in the tool more broadly.¹⁴ Reflecting on the project, one of the developers, Mikel Maron, suggested that limited time and resources were substantial constraints to building capacities and structures for long-term engagement.¹⁵

Short-term funding is a major issue for many technology projects, and can prevent the development and maintenance of essential structures. At a recent workshop hosted by the Bridging Transparency and Technology partnership, one participant described how a well-planned project fell victim to a 12-month timeline, which focused on results over longevity.¹⁶ Funding was a major issue for most of the projects examined by Global Voices, with much of the work done on a voluntary basis by only a few dedicated developers.¹⁷

Language is another aspect of soft infrastructure that, if overlooked, can significantly restrict the impact of technology-driven transparency. In compiling best practices for ICTs, Talyarkhan notes the importance of addressing local language needs before developing communication strategies.¹⁸ This is particularly important given recent calls for more online content in local languages in countries such as South Africa.¹⁹ Moreover, many people prefer to receive information orally at face-to-face meetings, which allow for demonstrations and follow-up.²⁰ In Malaysia, the coordinators of Penang Watch used face-to-face meetings to collect citizen complaints, train participants and build interest in the project.²¹

Privacy and security

The potential for transparency to threaten the security of marginalised communities and to reinforce existing power inequalities carries no small risk. Governing authorities may garner international legitimacy and attract funding while at the same time exerting increased control over communities through greater understanding of local conditions. As information is gathered by state or external authorities, it is reduced to standardised pieces of information that allow citizens to be easily managed.²²

In her 2011 report on the opportunities and challenges of open ICT for vulnerable and marginalised communities, Evangelia Berdou highlights tensions and risks associated with the open provision, collection and dissemination of information in the context of under-resourced and politically contested spaces. The results of an in-depth study of Map Kibera in the first six to eight months of the project revealed persistent barriers to accessing information and risks of project participant exploitation due to increased visibility. Young mappers received requests for collaboration by external actors on a number of occasions, some of which were judged to be exploitative,²³ revealing a need for structures to train and protect participants from abuse. In November 2010 Map Kibera developed a trust, which provides an important organisational framework, including structures for processing external requests.

12 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Infrastructure#Types_of_soft_infrastructure

13 Maron, M. (2012) Personal communication.

14 groundtruthinitiative.org/2011/11/29/revealing-transparency-and-its-relation-to-community-empowerment

15 Maron (2012) op. cit.

16 www.revenuewatch.org/news/blog/building-bridges-between-policy-and-tech-transparency-camp

17 transparency.globalvoicesonline.org

18 Talyarkhan, S. (2004) *Connecting the first mile: A framework for best practice in ICT projects for knowledge sharing in development*, Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG).

19 lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/session13/ZA//JS4_UPR_ZAF_S13_2012_JointSubmission4_E.pdf

20 Talyarkhan (2004) op. cit.

21 transparency.globalvoicesonline.org/project/penang-watch

22 crookedtimber.org/2012/06/25/seeing-like-a-geek

23 Berdou (2011) op. cit., p. 17.

At the same time, online privacy, censorship and secure communications present new challenges to technology-for-transparency projects. This includes dangerous restrictions to freedom of expression and access to information by marginalised communities. For example, in July 2012 the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority banned a watchdog website that documented violence against Shi'ite Muslims in the country, citing the propagation of religious views as reason for the suppression.²⁴ There are also substantial risks to the privacy of online communications in many countries, as online surveillance continues to be touted as a tool for combating issues from online piracy to terrorism.²⁵ Technology-driven transparency projects need to be cautious in how they collect and use data, and ensure that participants know how to protect their right to privacy online.

Collaborative learning networks

Online tools provide an important opportunity for “collaborative transparency”, where the users of data create and shape information content, allowing for a level of interactivity not present in offline transparency projects.²⁶ At the same time, as this report has highlighted, there are a number of obstacles to achieving effective collaborative transparency, including the very real danger that intended users do not have the capacities to understand and use disclosed information. There are often substantial communication, trust and knowledge gaps that exist as a result of low engagement and a lack of infrastructure.

Collaborative multi-stakeholder learning networks provide an opportunity to bridge these gaps. In conducting her research on the impact of online tools, Berdou found that non-profit technology companies and open source technology entrepreneurs play a significant role in supporting the uptake of online tools by activists and organisations. By sharing skills and knowledge, these partnerships can improve the design and impact of technology-driven transparency. Concluding her report, Berdou asks the important question of how partnerships and networks can be constructed to promote learning and support the successful use of online tools and platforms.

The partnerships and networks developed around transparency in the extractive industries provide some insight into this question. Publish What You Pay (PWYP), a global network of 650 civil society organisations, works with multi-stakeholder initiatives such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) to advocate for and implement disclosure of information on extractive industry revenues and contracts.²⁷ In 2010, Ghanaian PWYP members issued a statement to the national government, based on consultations with community and faith-based organisations from all ten regions, as well as media and development partners.²⁸ Among the recommendations was a call for the development of a public oversight committee, which was subsequently established in 2011 under Section 51 of the Petroleum Revenue Management Act.²⁹ In May 2012 the public oversight committee published a report indicating discrepancies in funds paid and received by the national oil company. Mass media picked up the story, and as a result the government released new documents which confirmed the discrepancy and disclosed the location of the missing funds.³⁰ PWYP network members are also part of Ghana’s multi-stakeholder EITI steering committee, which regularly reviews government receipts and disbursements of revenues from the extractive sector.³¹

These two coalitions contribute, along with international NGOs like Revenue Watch and Transparency International, to greater oversight and accountability in resource-rich countries, fighting corruption and contributing to sustainable development. Like many multi-stakeholder initiatives these actors still struggle to effectively engage and empower citizens on a broader scale. However, by creating spaces where all stakeholders can participate in the design and implementation of transparency, PWYP and EITI contribute to a culture of participatory governance.

As technologically driven transparency continues to grow, these same structures of multi-stakeholder collaboration must develop. In some areas this is already occurring, such as the newly formed Bridging Transparency and Technology project,³² which has hosted a number of workshops

24 Ahmad, S. and Zafar, F. (forthcoming) Internet rights in Pakistan, in Global Information Society Watch Special Edition; tribune.com.pk/story/409505/ban-on-shia-website-police-disperse-protest-rally-in-karachi

25 giswatch.org/en/freedom-association/internet-intermediaries-new-cyberpolice

26 Fung, A., Graham, M. and Weil, D. (2007) *Full Disclosure: The Perils and Promise of Transparency*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK.

27 www.publishwhatyoupay.org/about

28 www.oxfamamerica.org/publications/ghanas-oil-readiness-report

29 www.piacghana.org

30 www.revenuewatch.org/news/blog/ghana-citizen-oversight-report-yields-debate-disclosures

31 Dykstra, P. (2011) *EITI 2011: Learning from success and challenges*, Revenue Watch Institute. www.revenuewatch.org/EITireports

32 www.revenuewatch.org/news/blog/building-bridges-between-policy-and-tech-transparency-camp

and meetings to discuss how online tools can best be utilised by transparency projects. Although it is not clear yet how the recommendations and strategies from these meetings will be implemented, the project provides a vital space for continued discussion and partnership building.

Conclusion

This report has highlighted a number of threats that arise from technology-for-transparency projects, including issues of trust, privacy and security of local data. Bringing together a diverse set of actors, collaborative transparency networks can work to overcome these threats, and can capitalise on open technology to encourage accountability in governance. In particular, pre-existing relationships with the various actors and an understanding of local economic, political and social issues mitigate many of the dangers that arise from technology for transparency projects.

At the same time, the development of collaborative networks does not guarantee that technology-for-transparency projects will be successful in the long run. Short-term funding, low engagement, and a lack of infrastructure are only a handful of the obstacles facing technology-for-transparency projects. Corruption does not simply disappear when it is exposed. In truth, disclosure without effective response may only serve to embolden corrupt officials and dishearten those who struggle against them. The process of achieving greater accountability in governance is long and complex. Online tools can contribute to this process, but that contribution is not guaranteed, and is almost certain to fail if implemented without substantial consideration of and engagement with relevant stakeholders and structures of governance. ■