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WHAT IS "OPEN DIALOGUE" AND IS IT THE ANSWER TO "POST-FACT" POPULISM?

Don Lenihan

"An important paper that convincingly sets up open dialogue as the most effective answer to populism. A must-read for policy-makers who want governments to make better decisions."

Graham Fox, President and CEO
Institute for Research on Public Policy

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"This is an insightful, provocative, and important contribution to the current discourse about dialogue and informed participation…"

Dr. Bruce Gilbert,
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International Association for
Public Participation (Canada)

"Governments need to flip the script on how we view citizen engagement… Lenihan reveals a path forward and takes an important step for open government practitioners."

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OPEN GOVERNMENT IN TRANSITION

SETTING THE STAGE

Data, it's been said, is to the knowledge economy what oil was to the industrial economy. In the early days of Open Government, some argued that if governments just opened their data vaults to the public, entrepreneurs would use their digital tools to refine the resource and enrich the community with new products and services. They called this plan **Open Data**.

With the creation of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) in 2011, the thinking took an ambitious turn.[1] The OGP saw Open Government more as a democratic movement than an economic strategy. Along with prosperity, Open Government was supposed to **strengthen transparency, empower citizens, and make policy and decisions more evidence-based**.

In the six years since, OGP membership has grown from the original eight countries to some 85 today, a remarkable success by any measure. Over the same period, however, populism has been on the rise in much of Europe and North America, arguably making politics more authoritarian, less transparent, and less responsive to evidence. As a result, some may wonder if Open Government has failed or, at least, if something is seriously wrong with the plan.

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[1] The Open Government Partnership is an international association of some 85 countries that have pledged to use digital technologies to promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption, and strengthen governance. https://www.opengovpartnership.org/about

This much seems clear: The ambitious goals above will not be achieved just by throwing open the data vaults. Data may be a critical resource for progress, but making huge amounts available is no guarantee that people, governments, or politicians will use it in ways that further these ends. So, what can be done to engage them?

We—in this paper, "we" is used to signify the personal views of the author—think this is less a matter of motivation than methodology. Lots of people support Open Government goals, but are uncertain or even confused about how best to use data and information to advance them. Experts often disagree. We need an approach everyone can understand and trust.

This paper is a step in that direction. The Open Government programs of Canada and Ontario provide the starting point. Both governments define their approach through three basic principles:[2]

- **Open Data** uses digital tools to make the government's data holdings available to the public

- **Open Information** uses online tools to promote new levels of transparency and accountability through easier access to, and a more proactive release of, government information

- **Open Dialogue** involves citizens and stakeholders more directly in planning and decision-making, increasingly through digital tools

These principles are merely the starting point. This paper goes further, looking at them in a new way.

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[2] For the Government of Canada, see: https://goo.gl/P41xRa; for the Government of Ontario, see: https://www.ontario.ca/page/open-government

We see them as three pieces of a puzzle.[3] Individually, each one contributes something critical to Open Government, but when the pieces come together — what we call "alignment" — they interact and remarkable things start to happen. **The whole is greater than the sum of its parts**:

Aligning the Three Principles of Open Government
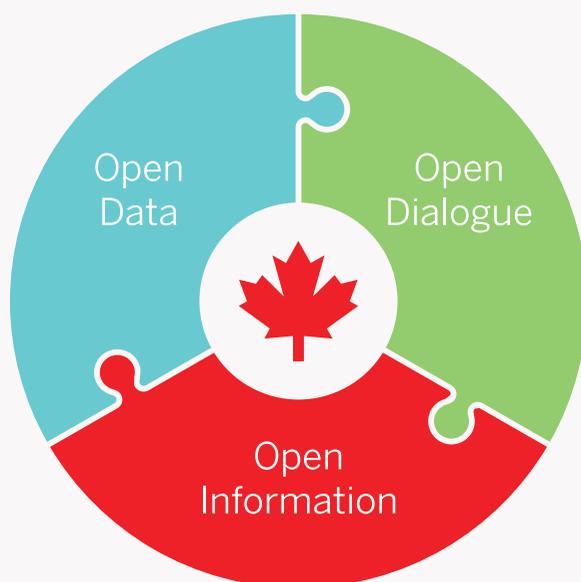
Thus, an earlier paper in this series looked at alignment through the lens of Open Data.[4] We showed how Big Data could raise evidence-based policy-making to a new level, greatly improving its effectiveness in areas like crime prevention or environmental management. We also noted that Open Dialogue (and Open Information) play a critical role in this.

[3] This idea was first advanced in an article in National Newswatch by the current author, Don Lenihan, and Suzanne Legault, Information Commissioner of Canada. See "Open Government: Toward a Pan-Canadian Vision," available at http://www.nationalnewswatch.com/2015/07/31/open-government-toward-a-pan-canadian-vision/#.WQ-WQmkrLIU

[4] *The Rise of Civil Analytics: How Big Data is About to Explode Policymaking As We Know It*, by Don Lenihan and Tom Pitfield, Published by Canada 2020, March 2017, available at: http://canada2020.ca/civil-analytics-big-data-policymaking/

This paper picks up that thread, shifting the viewpoint from Open Data to Open Dialogue. As we'll see, when aligned with the other two principles, Open Dialogue fires up a conversation between different people and organizations that gets them doing things together that they could not do alone. Open Dialogue thus is a catalyst for innovation and collaboration on Open Government:

> If data and information are the primary resources in a knowledge society, dialogue is the refinery that allows governments, businesses, and civil society to find and extract the value.

Overview of the Process and the Paper

In the fall of 2016, Canada 2020 launched a cross-country consultation to discuss these ideas with federal, provincial, and territorial governments. We held sessions in Victoria, Edmonton, Toronto, Ottawa, Halifax, Fredericton, Charlottetown, and Yellowknife. They included senior officials, academics, members of the business community, and representatives from civil society organizations.

These conversations introduced us to three ways that open dialogue is being used to gather, organize, create, and use data and information to advance Open Government goals:

- Open Dialogue as Storytelling

- Open Dialogue as Policy Analysis

- Open Dialogue as Civil Analytics

This paper discusses these three approaches, then goes on to show how they can be integrated within a single "hybrid" process. And *that*, we believe, holds the key to making some serious progress on citizen engagement, transparency, and evidence-based decision-making. We think it also provides an answer to the "post-fact" populism now spreading through North America and Europe.

We call this fourth option **Informed Participation**. Our roundtables suggest that Canadian governments are already experimenting with versions of it, but lack a clear statement of what it involves. Articulating and clarifying the concept is the primary task of this paper. The next step after that is to provide a methodology— a systematic and reliable way of putting the concept into practice. That will be the task of the third paper in this series.

DEFINING OPEN DIALOGUE

ENGAGEMENT:
A PRINCIPLED APPROACH

If populism has made a comeback in Europe and North America, it's because so many people feel powerless. They don't believe they have a meaningful voice in government or any control over what it does. Rather than making their lives better, globalization and the knowledge economy have brought underemployment and growing inequality. These people feel "left behind." Immigration is a further concern. Many fear the loss of jobs, the erosion of cultural identity, or the threat of terrorism. Populists play off these fears, telling people that government has been taken over by "elites," who use it for their own ends and don't care about ordinary people.

We think the poor state of public debate and consultation carry a significant share of the blame for this malaise. In a democracy, they are supposed to inform citizens and give them a meaningful voice on issues they care about. Increasingly, however, debate is polarized, formulaic, and unproductive. As for consultation, while good processes exist, in many other cases, things go wrong, especially on contentious issues: the process gets hijacked by interest groups, "managed" by government officials, or arrives at conclusions that baffle the public.

As a result, populism has become an attractive alternative to people who feel powerless. It offers them a way to feel they have some control over government and a voice in policy-making. The populists' solution is simple: put a "strong leader" into office who has the will and the courage to stand up to elites and make the kinds of decisions that will help ordinary people.

Almost everyone at our roundtables felt that informing and empowering citizens was important, but few, if any, saw populism as an effective way to achieve this. In Yellowknife, participants agreed that the actual challenge for governments is to turn their attention to consultation and figure out how to do it right.

The place to start, they said, was with a more methodical approach. Governments should adopt some basic principles that would make engagement processes fairer, more open, more transparent, and more effective. By the end of the session, they had already proposed the following principles, which they felt should be on such a list:

Basic Engagement Principles

1) Clearly define the objectives and engagement plan before the process is launched

2) Explain the objectives and process to participants at the outset

3) Ensure information that is essential to participants' roles is made available to them

4) Ensure the voices that get heard are not just the loudest ones

5) Define the place of Indigenous Peoples' traditional knowledge

6) Ensure the views presented are fairly considered at the decision-making stage

Let's call these **Basic Engagement Principles**. Participants in our other roundtables liked the idea and agreed that, as a reply to populism, it was a good start.[5] But they noted that engagement is not just about "getting a say." It is about getting the **right kind of say** — and that this will be different in different circumstances, as the following example shows.

Consultation vs. Open Dialogue

Suppose a province decides to build a new bridge across a river, but there are two towns with suitable building sites. How should authorities decide where to build the bridge? Participants agreed that starting a dialogue between these two communities would be unproductive. Dialogue aims at finding common ground, but this situation has little if any common ground. One side will win and the other will lose, so dialogue will almost certainly fail to bring them together.

However, participants thought that, even here, there were ways to engage and empower citizens, such as **public hearings where residents from each side had an opportunity to plead the case for their town**. Two conditions were discussed around making this work:

Success Conditions for Public Hearings
1) Government must help ensure the process is well-informed by providing the communities with quality data and information to help them prepare their case, such as data on traffic patterns, infrastructure, specific advantages/disadvantages of both locations, and so on.

[5] For a more complete list of basic engagement principles, see the Canadian Open Dialogue Foundation's Principles of Open Dialogue, available at: http://codf.ca/opendialogue

> 2) Government must ensure the process is principled. Drawing on the Northwest Territories' Basic Principles, government should listen carefully to the arguments (Principle 4), consider their merits when making its decision (Principle 6), and provide its reasons for the decision (Principle 3).

The conditions in the second bullet are especially important. If they are not met, citizens on the losing side might view the decision as arbitrary or, worse, the product of political manipulation and/or backroom deals — the work of elites. However, if they are met, the process is likely to be perceived as fair and the final decision should have considerable legitimacy.

Although many participants agreed that a public hearing would be the best process for reaching a decision on the bridge, they added that in other circumstances, dialogue, as distinct from public hearings, can make a huge contribution to the legitimacy and/or effectiveness of a process.

Consider the practice of participatory budgeting. It convenes groups of citizens to discuss and agree upon priorities for public spending. This approach has been used around the globe with considerable success, but it is quite different from public hearings.

While hearings give participants a chance to **present** their views to decision-makers, participatory budgeting allows them to **choose** some of the priorities. It gives them a direct role in budget decision-making. Participatory budgeting is thus a very different way of engaging participants and of "giving them a say."

We called these two options **Consultation** and **Open Dialogue**, and they were discussed at all the cross-country roundtables. Participants recognized that open dialogue rarely gives citizens or stakeholders an equal

say with government decision-makers and that the depth of their role in decision-making can vary greatly, ranging from a minor role to full-fledged partners. The point remains, however, **that Open Dialogue brings participants into the decision-making process — whether a little bit or a lot — and consultation does not**.

All our roundtable sessions agreed that combining the right basic principles and a clear distinction between consultation and open dialogue provides a sound starting point for improving engagement and providing an alternative to populism. But our discussions didn't end there; indeed, this is where they really got going. Participants still had a great deal to say about the role open dialogue can play in policy-making, where evidence fits in, and, ultimately, what this means for the future of our governments and our democracy.

Consultation	Open Dialogue
• Is guided by basic engagement principles • Gives participants an opportunity to present their views to decision-makers, provide evidence and arguments in support of them, and reply to opposing views • Decision-makers are duty-bound to assess these positions on their merits, but they are not obliged to accept or act on them • Decision-makers are required to provide the rationale for their decisions	• Is guided by basic engagement principles • The engagement plan sets boundaries for how far and in what way citizens and/or stakeholders will participate in decision-making • The process begins by giving participants an opportunity to present their views to decision-makers, provide evidence and arguments in support of them, and reply to opposing views • Once views have been presented, participants engage in **deliberative discussions** about the best solutions, subject to the boundaries and rules set by the plan • These participants are duty-bound to assess different options on their merits and adjust their views accordingly

OPEN DIALOGUE AS STORYTELLING

COMMUNITY NARRATIVES

At our Halifax roundtable, Danny Graham of Engage Nova Scotia gave an eloquent account of the deep and important connection between open dialogue and something we will call a **community narrative**.

Graham finds the roots of civic participation in **storytelling**. For millennia, he says, people gathered around fires, in town squares, and in church basements to share stories about their aspirations and challenges, stories that helped define their shared interests and clarify the tasks they needed to perform together for the common good.

In those days, quantitative data barely existed, and reliable information was sparse. Narrative or storytelling was the main source of information and ideas. The collective interest was forged from people's stories about their tribulations and goals as members of society.

Today, communities are often much larger, more diverse, and organizationally more complex. People are less able to gather face-to-face for this kind of exchange. New media have arisen to fill the gap — first radio, then television, and now the Internet.

Graham believes that, like the storytelling commons, these media shape our perspectives, but the relationships are less personal. There is an erosion of what political scientist Robert Putnam famously called "social

capital," that is, the social bonds that create trust, mutual understanding, and goodwill among community members.

The Internet is especially worrying. Rather than build or strengthen collective ties, Graham thinks it often accentuates individual interests. For example, there have been debates over whether social media create a so-called "echochamber," where users band together with others who hold similar views, thereby fragmenting, and even polarizing, community dialogue.

As the reach of the Internet grows, Graham fears the willingness — perhaps even the ability — of citizens to empathize with others is declining. The boundaries that shaped and formed the narratives of communities and countries are dissolving. Fragmentation and disagreement make it difficult to harness a public will around matters of collective interest. This is a growing challenge for policy-makers. As Graham concludes, "You can't plant good seeds in bad soil."

There is mounting evidence at national and local levels to support Graham's analysis, including Brexit in the UK, Donald Trump's election in the US, Ford Nation in the City of Toronto, and so on. The rise of populism, and especially populist nationalism, has polarized countries and communities across North America and Europe. Arguably, the success of these movements hinges on their ability to create a powerful narrative around people's grievances. An example from our Alberta roundtable helps us see how competing narratives can work to fragment communities.

Disconnect in Alberta: (Re)Building Community Narratives

Until recently, Alberta was the only province that lacked Workers Compensation Board coverage for farm and ranch workers. Bill 6 was tabled in the Alberta legislature in the fall of 2015 to extend coverage to workers on farms and ranches, a move the government thought long overdue.

In hindsight, the government's view reflected a largely urban perspective on worker rights, which failed to capture how differently family farms operate from conventional factories or other businesses. Specifically, family farms often use children or other family members to get the chores done.

Bill 6 alarmed farmers. Family farms are not businesses in the usual sense, they said, nor are children with chores "workers." When the government ignored their arguments, they took to the streets in protest. Over the following months, the demonstrations grew louder, angrier, and more confrontational, until, finally, the government retreated and agreed to amendments that exempted children and family members.

Now, normally, democracies resolve such differences through public debate and negotiation. Why did this disagreement end up in the streets? Graham's analysis is helpful here.

Community narratives fuse facts about a situation with the experiences and emotions of the people involved. Unsurprisingly, people often identify with these stories. The richer and more personal the stories are, the more deeply people feel these attachments. Indeed, people often become "captured" by a narrative to a point where it is difficult for them to see the situation otherwise. This seems to be what happened in Alberta.

When farmers voiced their concerns, the government could have sat down with them to discuss the differences between urban and rural practices, but it did not. Apparently, its urban narrative on workers' rights left no room for a discussion about family farms. This, in turn, closed off any chance of a compromise. Farmers felt they were left with no alternative, so they took to the streets and turned what could have been a manageable difference into an ugly confrontation.

There is a deep lesson here about the state of our political culture. Debate requires an openness to alternatives. In a society where key narratives are eroding or increasingly fragmented, openness gets difficult. The lack of a shared narrative makes it hard to listen to others; people start talking at cross-purposes and the capacity for meaningful debate disappears.

Organizations like Engage Nova Scotia want to rebuild trust and goodwill — social capital — by rebuilding community narratives. They create spaces for people to connect, talk, and work through issues together.[6] For them, open dialogue is a technique that gets people to reflect on their lived experience and to recognize the narratives at work in their own thinking.

Open dialogue challenges people to view debate less as a winner-take-all contest and more as a shared effort to find a coherent and inclusive story about the situation. It teaches them that complex issues rarely have simple solutions and that, when debate is cast as a winner-take-all contest between simple solutions, usually no one wins. This is the real lesson from Alberta.

[6] The dialogue on Edward Cornwallis is a good example. While Cornwallis is celebrated as a founder of the City of Halifax, Indigenous people remember him as the man who placed a bounty on local Mi'kmaq scalps. This has been a long-standing tension in how Indigenous and non-Indigenous people view the city's history. A dialogue between the two communities is now underway to rework these divergent narratives and retell the city's history in a way that will resonate with both sides.

Of course, as the bridge example showed, not every issue is a win/win. Some really do create winners and losers. But the penetrating insight in Graham's reflections is that **often what looks like a zero-sum or win/lose game can be transformed into a win/win by reconstructing the narratives around the issue**. This requires openness, trust, collaboration, and hard work, but it can be done. It is what the Government of Alberta failed to do.

Looking at open dialogue as storytelling is a powerful and important way of viewing it. We'll return to this below, but first we need to look at a different kind of open dialogue process. Open dialogue can also involve people in a rigorous and highly focused analysis of an issue. A second example from our Nova Scotia session — a debate over aquaculture — reveals this side of open dialogue.

OPEN DIALOGUE AS POLICY ANALYSIS

AQUACULTURE CRISIS IN NOVA SCOTIA: TRUSTING THE PROCESS

Bruce Hancock from Nova Scotia Fisheries and Aquaculture gave a thought-provoking presentation on Nova Scotia's aquaculture crisis. Aquaculture employs nearly 700 people across the province on both land-based and ocean-based farms. The fledgling industry already has annual revenues of more than $60 million, with excellent potential for growth.

Between 2010–2012, however, the industry was plunged into crisis. Suspicions had been growing that aquaculture was linked to a disappearance of wild Atlantic salmon in the Bay of Fundy. Although no direct scientific connection had been established, people feared the fishery could disappear, and their livelihoods along with it.

When the government approved a handful of new marine salmon sites, the already-tense situation exploded. Some 40 organizations banded together to demand a moratorium on fish farming. By the fall of 2012, public confidence in the regulatory regime had collapsed. The government needed a way to calm emotions and restore rationality to the debate.

In May 2013, it announced the Doelle-Lahey Panel, an open dialogue process to resolve the crisis. The aquaculture industry and coastal communities were invited to work with the panel to design a new regulatory framework.

From the viewpoint of government, processes like these are risky at the best of times. Dialogue requires a willingness to listen to opponents, seriously consider their views and solutions, and work with them to reach fair compromises. This takes goodwill, patience, time, and reflection — all of which were in short supply. In addition, at some level, government must be prepared to work with the results of the process, which makes decision-makers nervous.

By all accounts, however, the process worked well. Discussion proved to be orderly, respectful, mindful of the evidence and facts, and highly productive. In its final report, the panel proposed a detailed plan for a new regulatory regime. Its recommendations were well received and the government has since acted on them. What accounts for the success?

According to Hancock, in the end, it all came down to trust. Trust in the regulations, in the government, and between the stakeholders, was badly damaged. If there was to be an agreement, trust had to be re-built and this called for a very special kind of process, one that stakeholders from both sides would trust to treat them fairly.

But the government also had to trust the process to deliver recommendations it could work with. While it was willing to involve the public more directly in policy-making, it could not abandon its responsibility to ensure sound policy. The government met these challenges by basing Doelle-Lahey on three mutually supporting principles:

Setting the Gold Standard for Engagement

Evidence-Based Decision-Making

Basing decisions on evidence not only assured the new regulations would be sound, but that decision-making would be fair and impartial. The panel included two experts who were not identified with either side in the debate; and who acted independently of the government. They were thus able to make a credible claim that they would follow the evidence and, where evidence was unavailable or inconclusive, look for solutions that treated everyone's interests fairly.

Meaningful Engagement

The government promised that the new regime would be based on the Panel's report. Participants were thus assured the process would give them a meaningful say in developing the new regulations. Process meetings were tailored to different needs so that everyone could participate fully, ranging from sessions to educate the public to expert debates over issues with the science.[7] Important new mechanisms for **ongoing engagement** were built into the new regulatory regime.[8]

Transparency

Transparency guaranteed the integrity of the process. Where practical, the sessions were conducted in public; relevant documents were released; and the Panel members provided regular updates on the process. When the new regime was established, it included a new user-friendly website, as well as measures for the pro-active release of information, public notifications on licensing, and written decisions on key issues.

[7] The process included: 46 public meetings in 21 communities, roundtable discussions, targeted stakeholder meetings, science and traditional knowledge workshops, community dialogue and research, and individual contributions.

[8] These included a regulatory advisory committee with representation from industry, stakeholder groups, and municipalities; a science advisory committee; and a permanent consultation table.

These three principles, taken together, set the gold standard for engagement processes. Properly applied, they should satisfy any reasonable expectations that everyone's interests will be treated fairly and the results of the process will support sound, evidence-based policy. As a result, government and stakeholders alike felt they could buy into the process.

Moreover, by launching such a process, the government made clear that it would not favour one side over the other, so neither side had anything to gain by refusing to participate. Once the parties committed to participate, an evidence-based discussion became possible.

In a well-designed and well-executed process, dialogue leads to progress on the issues, which, in turn, builds trust. As the trust grows, so does the openness to evidence and reasonable compromise, which, in turn, leads to even more progress, and so on.

A well-designed process thus creates a virtuous circle where progress builds trust and trust enhances progress. When the gold standard is met and an open dialogue process gets going, this is the dynamic that emerges, as it did in Nova Scotia.

OPEN DIALOGUE AS CIVIL ANALYTICS

In an earlier paper, we gave the name **Civil Analytics** to that part of Open Government that uses data (especially Big Data) and analytics to achieve Open Government goals, such as evidence-based decision-making. We also noted that Open Dialogue is crucial to Civil Analytics.[9] This section provides snapshots of four interesting experiments across the country that show how open dialogue is helping governments develop and apply their capacity for Civil Analytics. The full versions of these cases can be found in the appendix at the end of this paper.

New Brunswick's Digital Lab: Supporting Innovation

Open Data is the spark that ignites innovation in the knowledge economy; often, though, even the most creative and capable people need more than data to turn an idea into a product. The Government of New Brunswick's nb+ Digital Lab acts as a pathfinder to help them along. It creates a hub for innovators who are looking to share ideas, meet new people, and find ways to advance their projects. While nb+ provides them with access to the primary resource (data), it also supports them with a collaborative, entrepreneurial environment that encourages dialogue and experimentation and links them into networks in the public and private sectors. The lab reflects growing awareness that building a culture of innovation takes more than data and creative people with ideas. It takes opportunities for mentoring, dialogue, and relationship-building.

[9] See *The Rise of Civil Analytics*, by Don Lenihan and Tom Pitfield, available at: http://canada2020.ca/civil-analytics-big-data-policymaking/

The Federal Geospatial Platform: Why "Where" Matters

Policy-makers often underappreciate the powerful story spatial data can tell. Consider how geospatial relationships have raised awareness on glacier melting. Or how the massive amounts of spatial data now being streamed by radar, satellites, and sensors can provide stunningly detailed information on the conditions at a specific location, such as the quality of the air or the composition of traffic flows. The Federal Geospatial Platform is a new, world-class data system that provides easy access to such data and a wide range of tools for using it. The mapping techniques it creates are not only powerful ways of representing data, but impressive enablers for collaboration. Data visualization, for example, allows people from different policy fields to work together to integrate complex combinations of data and make the results easily accessible through images. This is changing how policy-makers understand complex issues, such as poverty, crime, and social inclusion. It provides them with a new suite of tools that can facilitate and deepen multi-sectoral dialogue and help move evidence-based policy-making to a new level.

Ontario: The Secret Value in Datasets

In preparing two major datasets for release in Ontario's Open Data program, the Ministry of Housing turned to the Toronto Open Data Book Club for help. Conventionally, a dataset is viewed as an answer to someone's questions. But rather than tell Club members what the datasets contained, officials asked the Club members simply to look at them and report what they saw. This shift in perspective took the discussion in an unexpected direction. Instead of expanding on the original questions, Club members treated the datasets as a kaleidoscope of possibilities. All kinds of ideas started pouring out, revealing layers of meaning that were hidden in the datasets and waiting to be peeled away. This, in turn, gave officials a much richer understanding of the contents of the datasets, along with all kinds of insights into how best to collect, store, and analyze them. The project is a striking example of how the simple act of challenging a conventional assumption can transform our thinking and allow us to find new possibilities in everyday things — and how, when we do, remarkable things start to happen.

Busting Silos in BC?

Eighty percent of repeat offenders in BC suffer from mental illnesses and/or drug misuse. Proper care and treatment would significantly reduce recidivism and overall costs to the system. However, this would require cross-ministry dialogue and collaboration on a range of services. These, in turn, would have to be supported with reliable data, diverse skills and tools, effective communications, and the authority to make key decisions. Mounting such an effort quickly runs into a wall of organizational, legislative, and/or cultural barriers — *the silos.* BC officials discussed a promising strategy to scale the silo walls: **create special cross-ministry project teams — policy "SWAT" teams**. These would be small, nimble groups, made up of high-performing individuals from different ministries who would possess the right complement of skills, tools, and authorities to get a job done. Team members would normally be seconded for the life of the project. The team would have a mandate to access important data from appropriate ministries and team members would have the full support and cooperation of their home ministries to take the steps needed to achieve the goal.

In sum, we think these cases show that interpreting, organizing and using data (especially Big Data) requires collaboration and interpretation; and, as our participants in Charlottetown noted, collaboration requires constant engagement — open dialogue.

Moreover, as the geospatial data case makes clear, the effective use of data and analytics leads to new forms of collaboration and dialogue, which, in turn, leads to even better outcomes.

So, ideally, Civil Analytics creates a virtuous circle where dialogue and collaboration enhance the use of data, and better use of the data enhance dialogue and collaboration.

OPEN DIALOGUE AND EVIDENCE

Evidence-based decision-making is a constant theme running through this paper. It assures participants that a dialogue will be disciplined and that the decisions arising from it will be fair and impartial. Now let's note that evidence has been emerging as a complex concept. Our cases show that people look for it in different places in different situations. Drawing on what has been said so far, we can identify three main sources of evidence to guide open dialogue and to inform decision-making:

Three Types of Evidence for Open Dialogue

Narrative: This is the learning people acquire through lived experience. It can be extremely valuable, from tapping residents' knowledge of crime in their community to learning about their values, priorities, and customs. If lived experience is the basis of this knowledge, typically, it is captured and communicated through narratives.

Information: We can define this as: "facts arranged to convey meaning about a situation or thing." Information differs from narrative in that the facts it contains are more clearly distinguished from other content, such as emotion or values. However, the quality of information can vary greatly, from untrustworthy to excellent. Reliable facts — information — are essential to informed discussion.

> **Data and Analytics:** The line between information and data is blurry but data is usually quantitative, such as the numbers from a census. While data has been collected since ancient times, today, massive amounts of high-quality data are coming online, along with a remarkable new capacity for data analysis or, as data scientists call it, "analytics." As we argued in *The Rise of Civil Analytics*, these systems constitute a new and extremely potent source of knowledge and evidence. Civil Analytics is the part of Open Government that puts this resource to work in support of evidence-based decision-making.[10]

When confronted with these three sources of evidence, people sometimes see narrative as inferior to the other two, especially where evidence-based decision-making is concerned. Their belief is that facts define knowledge, while narrative is "tainted" by emotion and values.

Most of our participants agreed this was too simple. For one thing, narratives contain facts and information, though usually in ways that reflect how people have experienced these facts in daily life. Narratives integrate facts, values, emotions, and priorities within a single story in ways that reflect a person's or community's experience.

Data and facts, on the other hand, need to be **contextualized**; at some level, they need to be interpreted. While information usually includes some context for the facts it contains, this is more *des*criptive than *pres*criptive. The whole point of information is that it strives to separate facts from the evaluative aspects of lived experience, such as values and emotion.

While our participants agreed that informed decisions need clear facts, they also felt that findings based on
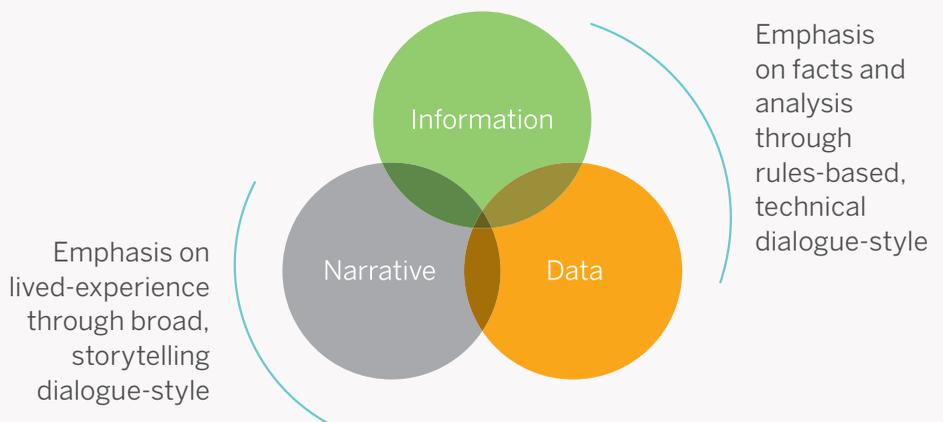
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[10] See *The Rise of Civil Analytics*: available at: http://canada2020.ca/civil-analytics-big-data-policymaking/

facts usually need to be reconnected with lived experience to arrive at a final decision or solution to an issue; for this, we draw on our human capacity for narrative or storytelling.

For example, in the Aquaculture case, one task was to examine the data and facts around the damage to the fishery and identify the causes. For this, the panel would have to stick to the facts. When considering how to respond to their findings, however, panel members needed to step back to ask how different options might affect communities in the region. This kind of scenario-building usually draws heavily on lived experience — narrative.

So, "contextualizing" is really a way of telling a story about the data and information that makes their broader significance clear, by connecting them back to lived experience. If facts point us to toward the truth, lived experience shows us why the truth matters. These three sources of evidence may look hierarchical but, in this view, they are better understood as over-lapping or interconnected:

Evidence and Dialogue-Styles

Information

Narrative

Data

Emphasis on facts and analysis through rules-based, technical dialogue-style

Emphasis on lived-experience through broad, storytelling dialogue-style

Open dialogue processes usually emphasize either the narrative or the data/information side of the diagram, depending on the topic and task. The process is then designed to support the appropriate dialogue style.

For example, if the task is to (re)build a narrative, the dialogue style is likely to be broad, open-ended, and encourage participants to engage in lots of storytelling. If it is to make focused policy decisions, the style likely includes more rules around discussion and decision-making, different discussions at different stages, an emphasis on facts and analysis, and a heavier reliance on data and/or information.

Nevertheless, in the end, a key lesson from this study is that **facts play a role in (re)building narratives and storytelling plays a role in interpreting facts**. Either one alone provides insight that is incomplete at best, and possibly misleading — or just plain wrong. Open Dialogue is a process that refines and aligns narratives and facts. What does this tell us about how we should use it in the context of Open Government?

OPEN DIALOGUE AS INFORMED PARTICIPATION: AN ANSWER TO POPULISM?

Looked at this way, we can see that a well-crafted open-dialogue process will likely rely on different dialogue styles at different points, as we suggested for the Aquaculture case. Another possibility, however, is that a process could have different deliberative discussions underway in different "dialogue spheres."

For example, the Aquaculture process included town halls in various communities across the region. Discussion at these events was likely more narrative than analytic, as this was a chance for ordinary people to tell their stories about how the situation looked to them.

Now let's imagine a process as complex and difficult as the Aquaculture strategy, but handled in a different way. Suppose a small working group had been created under the panel's leadership to fully vet issues, both from the narrative and analytical viewpoints. The group's membership would include expertise in narrative construction as well as policy analysis. It would also reflect other concerns, such as community representation.

Where appropriate, the group would rely on studies, data, and other evidence to analyze and deliberate over the issues. But it would also consider how the

findings align with different narratives around the crisis. The goal would be to construct a unifying narrative that had a good "fit" with both the facts *and* the values and priorities of the community (as found in the various narratives). The working group would provide regular public updates on its progress.

Now suppose the town hall meetings were not just a forum for citizens to say what was on their minds, but were designed to get people comparing their various stories to see how well they aligned with one another's experiences, or with the findings emerging from the working group updates. These sessions would be conducted very differently from a usual town hall.

For example, they might include breaking larger groups into smaller, facilitated table-discussions, then bringing them back together in plenary sessions to report on and discuss their findings. They might include some expert talks or information sessions. They might use techniques to prioritize options or find compromises between competing values, and so on. In other words, the format would get participants interacting and deliberating.

Planners for these town halls would also incorporate relevant findings from the working group updates into the discussions; and the working group would be informed of the results from the town hall sessions. So, while the two discussion streams would be relatively compartmentalized, they would interact. **Indeed, the main point of the process would be to combine the results of the narrative-building exercises in the town halls with the policy analysis (and narrative-building) in the working group**. This would make the narrative-building exercise more evidence-based, while ensuring the policy-analysis exercise reflected community values and priorities.

The process might even add a third sphere for online engagement. This would extend its reach and allow even more people to participate, but without over-whelming the process or the working group. An online moderator could pose questions and participants would use Facebook, Twitter, or other online tools to post their responses, comment on one another's views, and, possibly, engage in other exercises. The results would be gathered and analyzed, then circulated to the working group and the town hall facilitators. Overall, such a process might look like this:

Aligning the Three Principles of Open Government

Town Halls

Working Group

Online
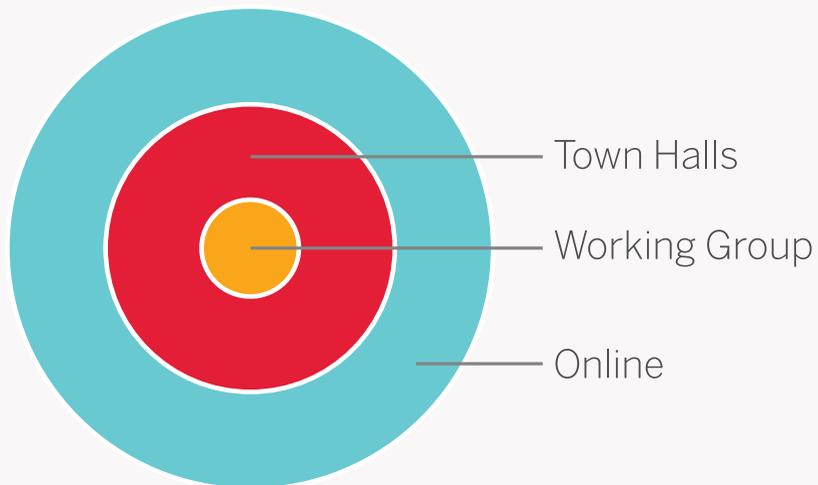
Hybrid Dialogue Model

Ideally, **a strong community narrative would emerge from this hybrid process; it would reflect participants' lived experience, but would also be supported by analysis and facts**. The working group's more analytical conclusions and findings would, in turn, be framed by this narrative.
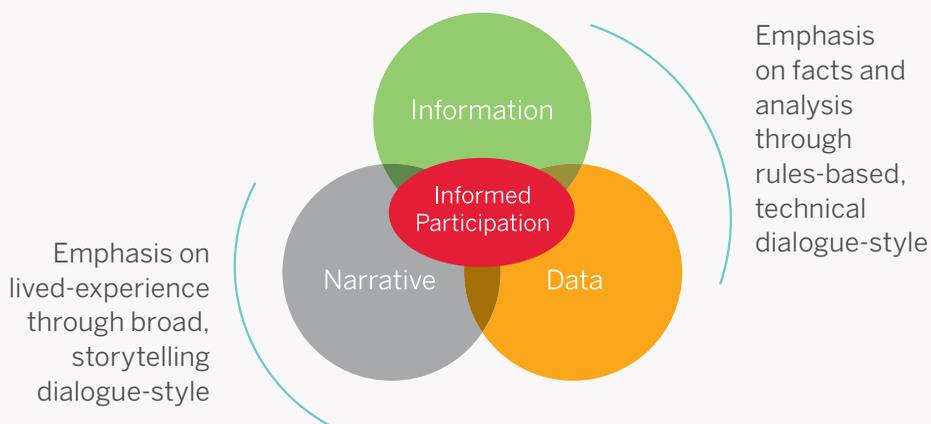
Moreover, popular narratives travel through communities quickly and easily and are absorbed by others as they do. So, as people inside the dialogue spheres began to tell their story to others outside the spheres, the story would spread, in the same way that populism has. The difference, of course, is that the narratives from hybrid processes would be grounded in evidence and facts.

Charges of elitism would be avoided because the dialogue in the outer spheres would be helping to shape the working group's discussions and because the narrative would be spreading through the community. Indeed, the process would create a sense of public ownership of the narrative, which, in turn, would help ensure public buy-in for the working group's conclusions.

Conceivably, elected officials could be charged with leading these town hall sessions, but only if they were willing and able to act as impartial facilitators and to abide by the three principles from the Aquaculture process (evidence, meaningful engagement, transparency). There would be no place for partisan politics in such a process. There could be a natural role here for Senators from the new, less partisan Senate.

In sum, the challenge — and opportunity — we see ahead for Open Dialogue is to combine the techniques of narrative-building with those of evidence-based decision-making to develop an engagement approach we will call **Informed Participation**. In effect, this kind of dialogue lies at the intersection of narrative, information, and data:

Informed Participation

Information

Informed
Participation

Narrative

Data

Emphasis
on facts and
analysis
through
rules-based,
technical
dialogue-style

Emphasis on
lived-experience
through broad,
storytelling
dialogue-style

If this sounds idealistic, it is not. We've tested processes like this one, with considerable success,[11] while some readers of this paper, we expect, are already experimenting with versions of their own. Indeed, our roundtables suggest that the engagement community is struggling with the issues raised in this paper and some members will already be testing different kinds of hybrid processes.

Nevertheless, these are the exception, not the rule. Moreover, most of this experimentation will be guided by intuition and informed guesses, rather than a clear methodology. While this is a normal part of learning, let's be clear: hybrid processes are complex. For the process to succeed, the dialogues in the different spheres must succeed and they must align with one

[11] See *A Case Study of Ontario's Condominium Act Review*, by Don Lenihan, published by The Public Policy Forum, October 2014, available at: http://www.ppforum.ca/sites/default/files/Case_Study_EN.pdf; also see *Healing Through Collaboration: A Case Study of the Nunavut Poverty Reduction Process*, by Don Lenihan, published by the Public Policy Forum, October 2012, available at: http://www.ppforum.ca/sites/default/files/Healing%20Through%20Collaboration%20-%20Don%20Lenihan.pdf

another across the spheres. This requires expert design and execution, which, in turn, requires a clear methodology.

Defining such a methodology is a major challenge, but it is achievable. As the cases in this paper show, much is already known about how to use Open Dialogue in narrative, policy analysis, and Civil Analytics. A methodology for Informed Participation would provide a systematic and principled way of bringing these together within a single, comprehensive approach. It would set out the principles, tools, and best practices needed to design and implement effective open-dialogue processes of this sort.

For example, so far, we have explained the second dialogue sphere using town halls, but this sphere could include many other kinds of events and engagement options. Which ones might be used, how and where? In addition, we must examine the prospects for innovative and expanded uses of online tools. In particular, can they support some degree of large-scale deliberation? If so, how and where?

The discussion here provides little more than a sketch of the basic ideas. For the moment, that is all space permits. However, the third paper in this series, to be published in October 2017, will provide a comprehensive analysis of Informed Participation, including a methodology for designing and implementing processes.

In the meantime, we close with a reminder that, if populist leaders have shown anything, they have shown that narratives can be constructed; and that a well-constructed narrative, effectively used, can exert a powerful influence on citizens.

In our view, the only real antidote to the appeal of post-fact, quasi-authoritarian populism is a more principled, disciplined, and effective approach to Open Dialogue. Stay tuned.

APPENDIX: CIVIL ANALYTICS CASE STUDIES

NEW BRUNSWICK'S DIGITAL LAB: SUPPORTING INNOVATION

The Government of New Brunswick's nb+ Digital Lab and Open Data Initiative foster innovation in the economy and government. They start from the premise that, in a knowledge economy, government's data holdings are a major asset that can be used to develop new products and services, both for government and the private sector.

But unlike the early days of Open Government, nb+ rejects the view that, once the data is available, entrepreneurs can be counted on to use it. On the contrary, experience teaches that turning a good idea into a product can be a difficult journey. Sometimes, even the most capable people aren't sure where to start.

The lab serves as a hub for innovators who are looking to share ideas, meet new people, and find ways to advance their project. They can drop in, sit down, and commiserate with other start-ups, as well as experienced innovators who may be able to help.

For example, developing a new idea often requires new relationships and/or building teams with special skills. The hub provides links. As a partnership between the government and TechImpact, a local technology

and business leaders' association, nb+ has a broad network in the private and public sectors that can connect innovators with new networks and people.

It also makes tools and resources available to help start-ups research ideas, experiment with options, or test prototypes. nb+ has access to the data resources in government departments, as well as other sources, including controlled access to special datasets, technology, and GNB applications.
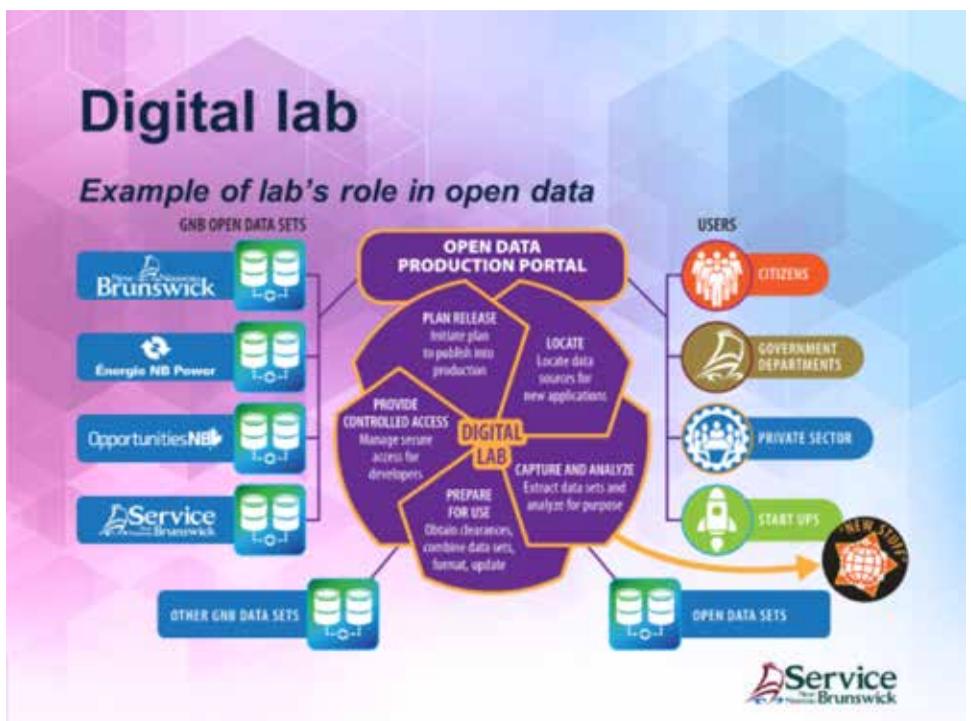
New Brunswick's digital lab neatly illustrates how the thinking around Open Government is evolving. The lab is part of a wave of change that aims, ultimately, to transform governments from bricks and mortar organizations into platforms for digital services in a digital society.

As such, nb+ is a pathfinder — a symbol of the growing awareness that the way to get people producing for a knowledge economy is to provide them with access to

the primary resource (data) and to ensure they are supported by a collaborative, entrepreneurial environment that encourages them to use the data in new ways.

Dialogue, relationship-building, and mentorship playa critical role here. As a safe space for start-ups to grow and learn-by-doing, nb+ is a fulcrum off which to leverage technology and data.

The Federal Geospatial Platform: Why "Where" Matters

At our Ottawa roundtable, Prashant Shukle from the Canada Centre for Mapping and Earth Observations, Natural Resources Canada, introduced participants to the new **Federal Geospatial Platform (FGP)**. Twenty-one departments have come together to build a world-class system that provides easy access to a vast range of spatial data. The site also provides tools to search, discover, integrate, analyze, and visualize the data.

According to Shukle, policy-makers often underappreciate the powerful story spatial relationships can tell. Consider how geospatial analyses have raised awareness of glacier melting or the disappearance of nesting grounds. This is the tip of the iceberg. Satellites, radar, and sensors are constantly streaming huge amounts of data, which provide highly accurate information on greenhouse gas emissions, vegetation on the surface of the planet, changes in sea ice, and so on. These data play a critical role in everything from policy discussions on climate change to planning smart cities.

Mapping techniques, too, have become incomparably more sophisticated and often serve as impressive enablers for collaboration. Experts can use them to

integrate diverse datasets in new and revealing ways. Data visualization, for example, can make complex combinations of data easily accessible through images. Patterns, trends, and correlations that are difficult to grasp in a text or tables become strikingly clear. Adding temporal references can allow policy-makers to monitor and even predict patterns of change, such as how a disease is spreading through a region and where it will go next.

The following illustrates the power of data visualization and the growing capacity for data integration. They combine numerous datasets to highlight the disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities in four key areas: education, housing, labour, and income:
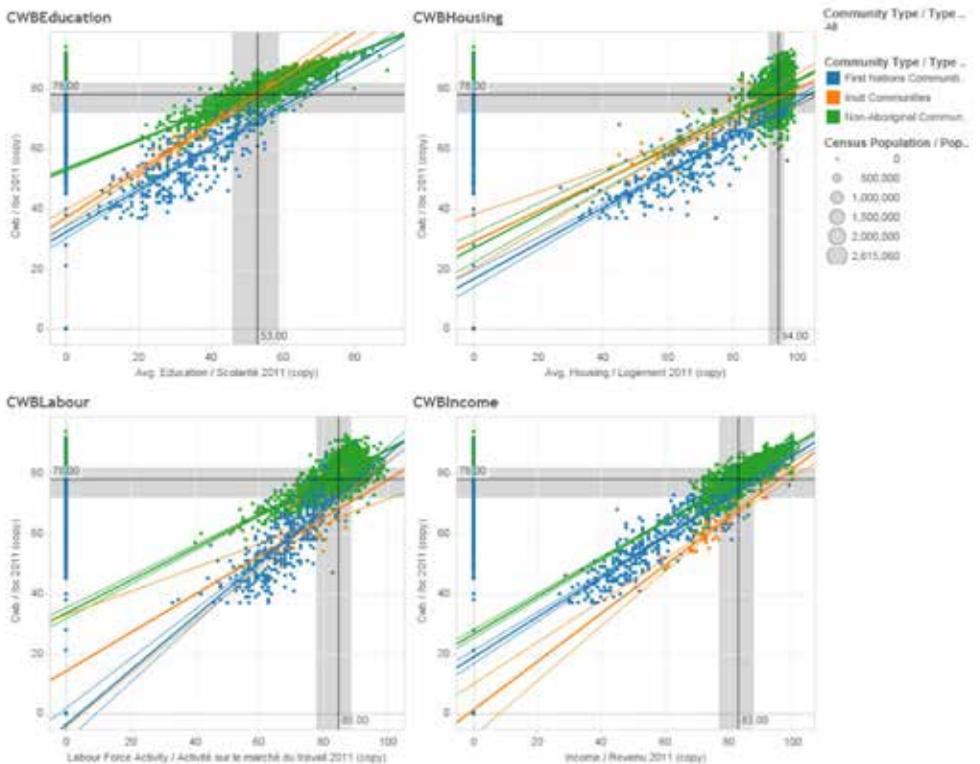
The slides reveal the extent of the social and economic inequality between Indigenous and mainstream communities in Canada with unnerving clarity.

Beyond map-making, policy-makers have been slow to recognize the great utility of spatial data. We can speculate why, but the best answer, says Shukle, is likely the easiest one: the tools and data simply have not been available. Systems like the FGP are moving this science to a new level. Policy-makers will be huge beneficiaries.

Indeed, a whole school of policy-making has already emerged around spatial relationships — so-called **place-based approaches** — where stakeholders work together to identify and map key "risk factors" within a geographic space, such as a neighbourhood or region, then align their efforts to manage these risks more effectively.

This open-dialogue approach is changing how policy-makers understand complex issues, such as poverty, crime, and social inclusion.[12] The FGP provides them with a new suite of tools that will facilitate, shape, and deepen these conversations, and move the policy discussion to a new level.

Ontario: The Secret Value in Datasets

When Ontario Ministry of Housing (MOH) officials Niklas Piepenbreier and Roy Thomas were charged with preparing the release of two major datasets, they wondered how to convey the data's value to the public. They decided to ask the Toronto Open Data Book Club for help.

The Club invites dataphiles to meet regularly and discuss open data. Typically, a dataset is selected and a "data

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[12] See "The Evaluation of Place-Based Approaches," by Teresa Bellefontaine, Policy Horizons Canada; and Robin Wisener, Myro & Partners, available at: http://www.horizons.gc.ca/eng/content/evaluation-place-based-approaches

steward" is invited to provide context around it. People then use it to build stories, apps, tools, or visualizations, which are presented to the Club.

Piepenbreier and Thomas took a different tack. Instead of presenting their datasets and telling members how they could be used, they turned the conversation around and asked Club members to think of unlikely questions that the datasets might answer.

To their surprise, the questions kept coming. They were genuinely startled by the range of topics and the apparent richness of the datasets, which seemed to have layers of meaning, just waiting to be peeled away.

The first round of meetings led to a second. Once the two officials had recognized the richness of the data, they started wondering how best to convey their discovery to users. They worked with Club members over several months to devise a presentation format that would help disclose the value of the data — a process they called "reverse engineering open data."

Two data tables emerged from these meetings, which provide prospective users with a more comprehensive introduction to the content. The tables were released at the Go Open Data Conference in 2016.

The officials still had a final lap to run. They wanted people to start using the data — to leverage it — so they went door-knocking to sell their product. They made a pitch at Ryerson University and GTEC (a showcase of technologies and services for the public sector), attended Open Data Day, and held a one-day hackathon related to improving data collection. They also collaborated with Sheridan College and the University of Toronto (Mississauga campus), where professors agreed to a plan to give students three weeks to come

up with prototypes based on the datasets and then present them to a panel of judges at the "Open Data Iron Chef."

The competition was an effective way to demonstrate the richness and value of the datasets. Products included mobile apps, maps showing distribution of affordable housing, and websites to simplify the application process in applying for affordable housing.

Four important lessons can be drawn from this imaginative and enterprising project:

- First, the defining moment came when the officials turned the Open Data Book Club's format upside down. Instead of telling members what was in the datasets, they asked them what they saw in the datasets, which transformed the project. Conventionally, a dataset is viewed as an answer to someone's questions, but by asking the Club what they saw in the data, the officials stopped looking at the datasets this way and began to see them as a raw and undefined resource. This, in turn, revealed a kaleidoscope of possibilities. If Open Data is all about culture change, this shift in perspective is a giant step in the right direction.

- Second, using the club members voices to "let the data speak" is a brilliant example of open dialogue in action. It shows how engaging people the right way can nudge them out of comfortable habits and get them thinking in new and creative ways — and that's when remarkable things start to happen.

- Third, the dialogue gave the officials a very different and much richer perspective on the data and provided new insights into how best to collect, store, and analyze the data. This is learning they couldn't have done on their own.

- Finally, by reaching out to the broader community and inviting them to begin using the new resource, the officials got people excited about putting the data to work doing things the datasets were never intended to do. They got leverage.

Busting Silos in BC?

At our BC roundtable, Leigh Greiner of BC Corrections and Carmen Zabarauckas from Public Service Engagement and Corporate Initiatives presented the findings from a 2015 study into repeat offenders.[13]

According to the data, 10% of offenders account for 46% of all prison admissions. As a yearly average, Corrections spends from two to five times as much — in the community or custody centers, respectively — on each repeat offender as on one-time offenders. The same ratio applies to the costs for this group's use of health and social services.

The reason is clear. More than 80% of them suffer from mental illnesses and/or drug misuse, which, in turn, contributes to recidivism and frequent use of health and social services. Other studies suggest that proper care and treatment of these individuals would

[13] The study was based on anonymized data drawn from the Ministries of Justice, Public Safety and Solicitor General, Health, and Social Development. Somers JM, Rezansoff SN, Moniruzzaman A, & Zabarauckas C. (2015). High-frequency use of corrections, health, and social services, and association with mental illness and substance use. Emerging Themes in Epidemiology, 12: 17. doi: 10.1186/s12982-015-0040-9.

significantly reduce recidivism, the use of health and social services, and overall costs.

This, however, would require cross-ministry collaboration on a range of services, which raises a vexing issue. Officials often know where the system is failing and even how to fix it, but then their efforts to do so run into a wall of organizational, legislative, and/or cultural barriers — *the silos.*

This is not new — the debate over the silos is decades old — but studies like this one give the problem a new urgency. As data get better and more available, officials are finding new ways to tackle long-standing issues like this one everywhere. But to fix them, first they need to solve the silo problem.

Our session included a lengthy discussion of a promising strategy for scaling silo walls: **create special cross-ministry project teams — policy "SWAT" teams — to tackle specific problems**. Solutions to issues like the repeat-offenders one require reliable data, diverse skills and tools, effective communications, and the authority to make key decisions.

These SWAT teams would be designed to meet these conditions. They would be small, nimble groups, made up of high-performing individuals from different ministries, who possess the right complement of skills, tools, and authorities to get a job done.

Team members would normally be seconded for the life of the project. The team would have a mandate to access important data from appropriate ministries and team members would have the full support and cooperation of their home ministries to take the steps needed to achieve the goal. The team thus would have the capacity to quickly scale silo walls to solve an issue.

Participants felt the approach could be tested through a series of carefully chosen **demonstration projects**. To qualify, the scope and purpose of a project would have to be clear and rapid progress on the goals feasible. Ensuring that repeat offenders get the care and treatment they need to reintegrate into their communities is a likely candidate.

Demonstration projects would allow the model to be tested and refined. They would also raise awareness of the approach among officials and inspire others to experiment with it. Success, after all, breeds success.

Of course, such an initiative could not be mounted without support from senior leadership. Roundtable participants agreed that the next step would be to reach out to the deputy-minister community to inform and engage them.

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