When the Door Shuts: Loss of Open Data

TREO Talk Paper

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Abstract

In 2009, then new US president Barack Obama put forth the US Open Government Initiative (Veljković et al. 2014). The program stated its desire to provide an unprecedented level of openness (Bertot et al. 2014). A major aspect of this initiative was the launch of data.gov, a repository of machine-readable data spanning thousands of datasets, organizations, and topics (data.gov 2017). In 2015, the Global Open Data Index ranked the US in 8th place worldwide for government openness, which was a drop from second place in 2013 and reflects the improvements in openness by nations around the globe (Open Data Index 2017). Eight years later, 2017 marked the beginning of a new presidential administration in the US, one with antithetical views from the previous administration, particularly in regards to transparency. As part of the transition to the new administration, open data was removed or redacted on numerous government websites starting as early as the presidential inauguration on January 20th, including the White House visitor logs, the Environmental Protection Agency, Data.gov NASA CO2 logs, and US Department of Agriculture animal abuse records. While there has been considerable study on the benefits of open data and its role in open government, few scholars have examined the deliberate removal of open data, how it is achieved and its consequences. I propose to examine open data removal and demonstrate how data removal exists along a continuum with differing levels of eradication. Data removal is exemplified in five 2017 occurrences of expunged US government open data. I expand on knowledge hiding theory (Webster 2008; Connelly et al. 2011) to aid our understanding of the examples, utilizing a framework that includes rationalization, evasiveness, playing dumb, and silence. I contribute to research on open data and e-government with insight into the various types of open data removal and subsequent consequences.

References


