The Power of Data or Why Scholars Should Pay Attention to Policy
by Nadia Caidi, Siobhan Stevenson and Ted Richmond

EDITOR’S SUMMARY
The proposal to abandon Canada’s long-form census is one example of an alarming shift to cut production of and public access to authoritative scientific data, undermining formation of good public policy. This is contrary to official pronouncements since 1996 recognizing data and information technology as critical resources necessary to promote innovation, wealth, service delivery and global competitiveness. More ubiquitous technology and wider access to information have not translated into better quality of life and good government relations. National policy formation increasingly takes place without the benefit of valid information, in an environment where government transparency is blocked, information gathering is curtailed and access is restricted. From a political economy perspective, information serving capital accumulation is valued over that serving social welfare. Discussion of factors leading to information restrictions and the policy implications should be strongly encouraged among the populace, in academia and throughout social media.

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In a 2012 address, Tony Clement, president of the Treasury Board, proclaimed data to be “Canada’s new natural resource,” further stating “we want to make sure Canada is a leading participant in this game-changing movement” [1]. Despite political rhetoric to the contrary, contemporary information policy in Canada appears to be designed to limit the production of, and public access to, quality data. Examples include controversial changes undertaken in the area of science funding and policy; cutbacks to data-gathering organizations such as Statistics Canada or Environment Canada; tight communication controls being introduced that prevent federal scientists, academics and even librarians (under Library and Archives Canada’s new code of conduct) from speaking publicly on topics related to their subject expertise.

While there has been some popular protest and media attention to individual events and decisions, especially the cancellation of the long-form census, to-date there has been no sustained public debate over the deeper significance of the government’s policy agenda with respect to the social relations surrounding the production, collection, circulation, maintenance and destruction of information/data. Extreme cases include the elimination of programs that produce results that may be ideologically problematic for the government, such as the closure of a northern research institute, Experimental Lakes Area, which monitors the impact of human activities on watersheds and lakes [2].

In this article, the authors renew the call for a critical policy approach to questions of information policy in order to enhance our ability to not only interpret and respond strategically to today’s challenges, but also to support the adoption of proactive, rather than reactive, scholarship. A critical policy approach provides some historical context for the policy choices and...
Specifically, a political economy perspective provides the analytic/theoretical tools as well as the scaffolding that supports the work of uncovering the role of class power and struggle within the policy environment, thereby bringing order and historical continuity to bear on the seemingly contradictory nature of policy events. Communications scholar Vincent Mosco summarized succinctly the theoretical requirements of the approach under four headings: historical context, totality of social relations, moral imperative and praxis [3]. Thus, as an example, an analysis of Canada’s Open Data Initiative [4] demands that the analysis takes into account the following:

1. The wider historical context, for instance, recognizes the continuity between the G8’s commitment to developing a global information infrastructure (in the early 1990s), the G8’s Open Data Charter released in 2013 and Clement’s announcement of both the Open Government Action Plan and the Open Data Initiative.

2. The totality of social relations. This analysis requires situating the government of Canada’s Open Data Initiative within the context of policies developed within the international community, market developments (data as the new gold, scientific patent as the emerging source of wealth, both playing a future role in capital accumulation comparable to resource extraction today), as well as the increasing concerns among citizens and consumers about surveillance and breaches in privacy. In other words, a drastic change in context for how we interpret the particular.

3. Moral imperative requires our recognition that people are being hurt or values such as democratic strivings compromised as a result of contemporary policy initiatives, along with a recognition that negotiations and social struggles over these values are inherent aspects of the operation of capitalism as a system of social and economic integration.


Political regimes dedicated to the accumulation of capital have a long history. The welfare state that lasted from post-World War II into the 1980s was also a state strategy for the accumulation of capital, one based on social welfare entitlements, labor market peace and expanded higher education along with rising wages and mass consumerism. Contemporary policy changes include the state’s privileging of data and public information as a
source of capital accumulation over its value as a resource for social welfare. Clement’s description of the promises of open data and specifically open access to government data can in fact be read as a natural extension of, and completely consistent with, another historical government policy event, the 1996 plan for building Canada’s information highway as reflected in the twin reports of the Information Highway Advisory Committee or IHAC. Indeed, taking another step back, that plan grew out of an agreement on the part of the international community modeled on the United States plan for its National Information Infrastructure. Moreover, except for the emphasis on “data” over “information,” the discursive strategies employed are remarkably similar. In 1996, information (as “natural resource”) and information and communication technologies were going to improve democracy, enhance government accountability and simplify communication between the government of the day and the citizenry. Through deregulation and allowing (inviting?) industry to take the lead, information and information and communications technologies were going to create new sectors of wealth, generate good jobs, lead to innovation and enable Canada to compete globally.

Today, state discourses used to constitute data policies and related issues represent not something new, but rather a continuation, an increased stronghold over the meanings assigned to information, data and communication. Power that is both political (restriction of access to information about political decisions and processes) and economic (favoring markets, restricting access to public and scientific data) further signals the powerful alliance between government and global information capital.

In Clement’s recent announcement, the new magic bullet is data (a “natural resource”). Open access to storehouses of government data will spur innovation, generate jobs, create wealth, improve service delivery (health, education), promote government transparency, ensure Canada remains globally competitive and so forth. What does it all mean? How are we to interpret the endless contradictions in government speech and actions, and if history is our guide, the vague and largely unfulfilled promises?

Almost 20 years since the release of IHAC’s reports, a survey of contemporary economic conditions reveals that, although the technology has become ubiquitous and more people have more access to more information than ever before, the promised land of high-paying jobs, enhanced quality of life and improved government relations has not been realized. Indeed, the wealth gap is growing and public disenchantment with government has never been higher. Why will open access to data be any different?

The short answer is that data and information are the condition sine qua non of sound public policy and good government. As Battle and Toriman put it, “Without comprehensive and reliable statistics, policy making will be done in the dark” [5, p. 1]. During the public disputes over the federal government’s proposal to cancel the long-form census, the Save the Census coalition of community organizations, concerned academics and media personalities described the stakes of the debate as follows:

The decision by the Federal Conservative government to eliminate the compulsory long-form census threatens the fundamental source of information that all Canadians depend on to ensure that the decisions made by governments, non-profit organizations and businesses are based on fact, rather than guesswork or blind ideology. There is no other way to gather this information accurately in Canada at this time.

A growing number of Canadians are realizing that this is critical to our economic future, as well as to our health and well-being. Without the information collected through the long-form census, Canadians will be less healthy, less prosperous and less safe [6].

Similarly, contemporary public debates and conflicts over public access to information in Canada (which pre-date the recent orientation of the federal Conservatives governing in Ottawa) suggest some interesting trends. Examining the evolution and tensions in the interpretation and application of the Access to Information Act, Gingras [7] points to the growing trend towards centralization, control and secrecy within the state apparatus despite...
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continuing calls for transparency. Under federal Conservative governments in Canada since 2006, there has been increased control and greater conflict over disclosure of information, which has spread to a larger part of the state apparatus. Among the issues that Gingras documents are the limits and loopholes of the federal omnibus Accountability Act; the overly-burdened and under-resourced office of the information commissioner; and the increasingly strained relationship between the Prime Minister’s office and Parliament concerning access to information required for policy debates. Gingras concludes that in the tension between trends towards transparency and open government on the one hand and secrecy and restricted access to information on the other, it is the latter that continues to gain ground:

Had elected and administrative officials fully grasped the importance of the implementation of institutional counter-powers and civil society’s need for transparency... they would have implemented proactive disclosure from most government information – that is, “open government,” and protected politically sensitive information. Instead, the central apparatus of government has moved in the opposite direction and imposed mandatory consultations with the PCO [Privy Council Office] for almost all access-to-information requests, even those without any political fallout. This decision has caused major information jams and civil service frustrations. [7, p. 242-243]

To reiterate, we believe that access to information and to quality public data is a necessary condition for good public policy. Specifically, access to information and data is necessary to level the playing field, that is, to allow meaningful discussion over what evidence is valid and how to interpret the evidence. As citizens and as scholars, we ought to raise questions about what those trends are that would run counter to increased secrecy and restriction of data. Are the forces promoting open government actually any stronger in other countries and in other jurisdictions in Canada, or in those other countries and jurisdictions is it just sloganeering masking the same trends we see at the federal level in Canada? What about the explosive growth of social media? Will it, as many believe, provide a powerful counterforce for data access and public debate? Last but not least, the debate within (and outside) academia about the role and responsibility of the public intellectual in today’s society remains as crucial as ever.

Resources Mentioned in the Article


