



# ICTs and Democracy. Open Government Experiences in Argentinean Cities

**Abstract:** *In traditional representative democracies, vote has been and is the way in which society made a group of representatives legitimately act in the name of common interest. Participation then was limited to the right of vote. However, in this century of ICT growth, in particular the Internet, and where mediation spaces are constantly questioned, Open Data and Open Government, as supported by ICT potential, have come back to face the great challenge of giving new life to the relationship between government and citizens. This paper presents four cases of open government policy implementation in Argentinean cities, which, although still in their initial stages, show in a way the path to be taken by Argentina regarding governmental transparency and greater citizen participation in public affairs.*

**Keywords:** *Open Government, ICTs, Open Data, Democracy, Argentina*

## 1. Introduction

In current “representative democracies”, citizens take part in public affairs through representatives chosen by vote in popular elections and intermediate institutions such as political parties. The elites reserve the right to political deliberation, entrusting the people with the task of voting their representatives and withdrawing meekly until the next elections (Coleman, 2003).

Vote certainly is, as stated in Rosanvallon (2007), the most visible and institutional expression of citizenship. It is the act that has for a long time been symbolizing the idea of political participation and civic equality. In the golden age of electoral participation, this globalizing and condensing dimension of vote was the manifestation of a collective, rather than individual, preference. This type of democracy, visibly eroded, is the one the author calls “elective”.

However, despite being the most widely accepted system of government for most countries, Colombo (2007) states that “... current criticism aims at a reduction in democratic quality; at this model being too rigid and far from citizens’ interests and consequently, negatively affecting the image citizens have of this model”.

Likewise, Coleman (2005) studies the multiple possible causes that would explain the distance between political system and citizens: “... the political institution’s decline in power in the context of globalization; the emergence of less ideological and more consensual politics; the rise of a citizenship that is more active, better educated, less submissive and more demanding with political and administrative instances; and the extension of a more individualistic and consumerist culture that has eroded collective political identities”. He also considers that “... the main causes are far from exogenous, instead to be found in political institutions unable to reform themselves and make citizens feel they are being properly represented”.

It is in this context of crisis of the system of representative democracy, with so much apathy and mistrust in politics among citizens that ideals seem to rise once more belonging to 5 B.C. Athenian

direct representation or similar experiences from countries such as the 18th and 19th century United States of America, which after gaining independence from the British Empire engaged in participative practices in the context of local communities through village assemblies; or Switzerland, in which citizens of many cantons have made decisions in public assemblies from medieval times.

However, in this paper we agree with Bobbio (2000) in the folly of assuming that it is possible to encourage systems in which all citizens participate in public decisions that affect them in societies as complex as the ones we live in, in the style of Rousseau's thinking, and have the State govern through constant appeals to the people.

Bobbio (2000) reinforces this idea: *"... it is clear that direct democracy is not enough when we consider that there are two institutions of direct democracy in the true sense of the word: assemblies of deliberating citizens without mediators, and referendums. No complex system as that of a Modern State can function with only one or the other, not even with both together"*.

Along the same line, Kelsen (1995) considers it unfeasible that the present world feature a system of direct democracy *"... such an organization is possible only within small communities and under simple social conditions. Even in the direct democracies that we find among the Germanic tribes and in ancient Greece the democratic principle is considerably restricted. By no means all the members of the community have a right to take part in the deliberations and decisions of the popular assembly"*.

What these authors do believe and we agree to is that certain adjustments need be made to the representative democratic system through the complement of mechanisms and instruments that allow citizens to participate actively in certain public affairs matters; that modern elements of popular participation need be introduced and innovated on – popular initiatives, recall elections, referendums, public hearings, etc. – that encourage an improvement of the current system and help citizens become more and better involved in public affairs.

Habermas, as cited in Colombo (2007), states that *"... political decisions must be taken in a consensual way and with intense communication between governed and governor. Representative democracy cannot be allowed to imply a political delegation that will arrive at generating distance between citizens and political representatives"*.

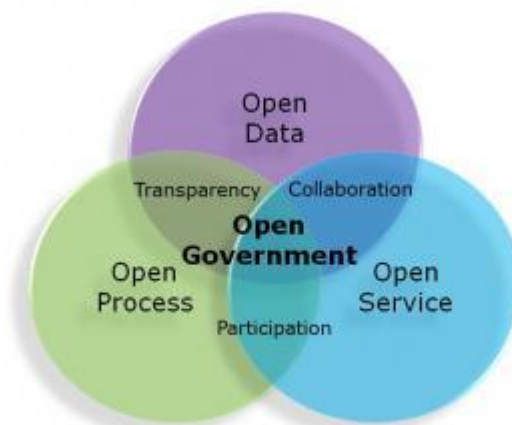
Font (2000), as quoted by Pedro Martin (2012), justifies the growing need for administrations to support their work in citizen participation by means of an imbalance between a rapidly evolving socio-political reality and representative democratic mechanisms which have been barely renewed since their institution. Brugué (2003) points out how the last few decades have seen the development of a citizenship that is more active, better educated, less submissive and more demanding toward political and administrative instances, which *"while being fully supportive of democracy, has less and less respect for authority"*.

## **2. ICTs and Open Government: a Healthy Relationship**

As stated in the beginning of this paper, it seems materially impossible, at least in current times, to expect all citizens to participate actively in all public decisions, as this would go against the speed at which governmental decisions should be taken on urgent and important matters. However, with the advance and massification of ICTs, we believe it is indeed possible and necessary for governments to, quoting Chapman y Hunt (1987), *"open the windows of the public sector to citizen scrutiny"*.

Lately, and in particular since the beginning of Barack Obama's presidential term in the USA, with his efforts to modernize the federal administration, there has been a worldwide rededcovery of the concept of open government within the public sector. This was crystallized with the release of the Transparency an Open Government Memorandum where the three pillars supporting the strategy and the sense of this concept were defined. President Obama himself said of this: *"My Administration is committed to creating an unprecedented level of openness in Government. We will work together to ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration. Openness will strengthen our democracy and promote efficiency and effectiveness in Government.."*

Open Government presents itself as a renewed paradigm for the reformation of the State and the modernization of the public administration as a new way of articulating initiatives of **transparency, citizen participation and collaboration** (Figure 1) by multiple actors for the co-production of public value (Ramírez-Alujas, 2014).



**Figure 1: Open Government**

We agree with the conceptualization of Open Government provided in Calderón and Lorenzo (2010): *"... it starts a conversation with the citizens in order to hear what they say and request, it makes decisions based on their needs and preferences, it facilitates collaboration between citizens and administrators in the development of the services it provides and it communicates everything it decides and does openly and transparently "*.

However, it is necessary to point out that, although the concept of Open Government does not mean a new technological development but a true philosophy of how to govern, we are convinced that the great advance of technology, ICTs in particular, is and will be the preferred mechanism for public administrations wishing to transform their relationship with their citizens, as well as internal organizational aspects.

Oszlak (2014) emphasizes the importance of ICTs in open government implementation policies, as *"an Open Government hosts a two way relationship between citizens and state, enabled by availability and application of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) that facilitate multiple interactions between social and state actors and are translated as more transparent, participative and collaborative links"*.

In other words, those governments interested in adopting these ideas into their administrations will have to hold strong convictions and political decisions that will allow for the generation of a new institutionality (new "game rules") in the relationship between citizens and government. Opening "the windows of the public sector", as Chapman and Hunt (1987) said will first require a solid political will to break and transform the current and obsolete decision scheme, which for many reasons modern administrations continue to refuse to encourage.

The process said governments should follow will include the adoption and adaptation of the available technology in order to facilitate fluent communication between citizens and government; opening multiple and varied communication and interaction channels with citizens to seize potential contributions to decision-making processes, and to controlling and monitoring the public administration; and generating adequate mechanisms to motivate citizens in the use of such communication channels that will allow for increased and improved involvement by citizens in public affairs.

During this open government policy implantation process an essential step and usually the first is opening public data. Noveck (2012) states that open data are the basis for public innovation, not only for the implicit proposal for sharing state information and its accountability component, but fundamentally because data serve as a linking channel between private and public agents to integrate them into the solution of complex problems within governmental spheres.

Not only do we look on this process as part of the active transparency of the State, but fundamentally from a new platform for the generation of civic and citizen value by integrating new actors in public processes. Data become an interface through which public and private are linked with the goal of building new solutions, new products and new approaches to problems faced daily by the government in its administration. In this framework, Argentina has recently launched the open public data portal<sup>1</sup>, joining the set of similar portals<sup>2</sup> already existing in Latin America.

It is also worth pointing out that not all data can be considered open for the simple fact of being available to be read or downloaded from the Web. Open data can be used, reused and redistributed freely by any person and are at most subject to a request for attribution and sharing as they appear.

These data must be entirely available and within reasonable cost for reproduction, preferably available for download from the Internet. Likewise, the information must be available at a convenient and modifiable way, they must be provided under terms that allow for their reuse and redistribution, even integration with other data sets; they must all be available for use, reuse and redistribution of the information. No discrimination should apply in terms of effort, persons or groups. "Non commercial" restrictions that would prevent commercial use of the data, or use restrictions for certain purposes (e.g. "educational use only") are not allowed.

When proposing an open data publishing strategy, it will also be necessary to take into account the scheme devised by Berners-Lee (2009), the creator of the World Wide Web, for determining how "open" and "usable" the data offered really are. This scheme classifies data into 5 stars. The lowest rank (one star) is granted to data published in any format even if they are difficult to manipulate, as is the case with PDF files or scanned images. Likewise, the highest rank (5 stars) is granted to data that can be linked with other people's, which provides context. Among these two extremes are structured data (in privative formats, such as "Excel", or free, like CSV<sup>3</sup>) or data using URIs to identify things and properties by means of standards such as RDF<sup>4</sup>.

In this context, Argentina has recently launched its open public data portal<sup>3</sup>, joining the set of similar portals<sup>4</sup> already existing in Latin America, providing the possibility of downloading data

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<sup>1</sup> <http://datospublicos.gob.ar> (Argentina)

<sup>2</sup> <http://dados.gov.br> (Brasil), <http://datos.gob.cl> (Chile), <http://datos.gob.mx> (Mexico)

<sup>3</sup> <http://datospublicos.gob.ar> (Argentina)

<sup>4</sup> <http://dados.gov.br> (Brazil), <http://datos.gob.cl> (Chile), <http://datos.gob.mx> (Mexico)

mostly in CSV format, which, according to the scheme devised by Berners-Lee (2009), would rank it 2 stars.

### 3. Cases of Argentinean Cities

Worldwide there are countries that are setting the course where Open Government policies must be focused. Aside from the aforementioned case of the USA, other countries are pioneering in these matters. It is particularly necessary to mention certain European initiatives that are studied with special attention by many Latin American authors in order to replicate them locally. Especially noteworthy are the open data portal in Spain<sup>5</sup>; the excellent Basque governmental initiative<sup>6</sup>; Great Britain and its open data portal<sup>7</sup>; the Open Ministry in Finland<sup>8</sup>; and multiple private and public initiatives usually based on open data provided by the State<sup>9</sup>.

It is in this worldwide context of implementation of multiple varied Open Government policies, particularly Open Data Opening, in which Argentina is beginning to walk its path, perhaps in a disassembled way at first, but with the firm conviction that these are reforms the State must make.

We believe it is the local governments that provide the space most appropriate for Open Government policies to have a better impact, as they are the administrative instances that interact with citizens the most and have the best capabilities for solving daily problems. In this part of the paper we will briefly analyze four cases of Open Government implementations in Argentinean cities. The following cities were chosen due to their population and because they are the most advanced in this regard: Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (large city), Bahía Blanca (medium-sized city), Mercedes (medium-to-small-sized city), and Rivadavia (small city).

#### 3.1 Buenos Aires Case

Buenos Aires is the federal capital of the Republic of Argentina, with an estimated population of 2.900.000 inhabitants.

This city is an exception in the institutional fabric of the Argentinean State as it was granted autonomy from the federal government in the 1994 reformation of the National Constitution, by which it acquired the status of a province.

Buenos Aires has a Public Information Access Law (Law No. 104) that guarantees the responsibility of the State to address in a **complete, truthful, adequate and timely** manner any request by the people regarding governmental actions.

In late 2011, the ministries of the city were reorganized and the Ministry of Modernization was created to work on four main axes: strengthening and training governmental human resources, developing a plan to modernize the public administration, advancing in the construction of an intelligent city and implementing a government information opening strategy through data bases.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://datos.gob.es>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.irekia.euskadi.net>

<sup>7</sup> <http://data.gov.uk>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.avoinministerio.fi>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.wheredidmytaxgo.co.uk> (Great Britain), <http://opencoesione.gov.it> (Italy), <http://fixmystreet.irisnet.be> (Belgium), <http://quehacenlosdiputados.net> (Spain), <http://www.crimeinchicago.org> (USA)

It is during the year 2012, by means of decree No. 156/2012<sup>10</sup>, that law is passed regulating Open Government policies to be implemented by the city.

Section 1<sup>o</sup> of the aforementioned norm states *“the implementation of the site at <http://data.buenosaires.gob.ar> as a platform that will facilitate the search, discovery and access to the public sector sets of data that will contribute to promoting transparency, encouraging participation and collaboration of citizens in governmental affairs and stimulating innovation and social, economical and cultural development within the City of Buenos Aires”*.

Again in 2012 the public Buenos Aires city data portal is set into motion<sup>11</sup>, where daily government activities are registered in formats that facilitate their reuse.

Within the Ministry of Modernization a General Direction of Open Government and Information is created to *“generate, integrate and use information that is precise, timely and relevant to the citizen, which will allow for the development of a transparent, collaborative and participative government policy”*<sup>12</sup>.

Thus, the city government became the first Argentinean institution to include an area within its structure devoted to the implementation of Open Government policies.

The path to public data opening in the city of Buenos Aires began with a group of professionals in the digital area gathering a set of data. On this basis, the first data were built and later published in reusable formats.

Currently, the Open Government team includes a multidisciplinary team of experts, some devoted to cleaning, refining and building data bases, and others to promoting Open Government culture in the public administration, while still others are in charge of a laboratory where civic innovation projects are developed and tested.

The Buenos Aires Data portal uses CKAN<sup>13</sup> technology and has so far published 113 data sets, in multiple formats, with information from 10 out of the 12 ministries of the city and most of its secretaries of government.

Aside from opening public data, the Government of the City has promoted multiple initiatives involving various actors that can benefit from making use of the public data. Thus, in 2012 it organized the first *hackathon*, as a contest, which hosted participants developing applications based on the data published by the government and public servants responsible for the publication of the data.

Another interesting initiative has been the *Hacks Hackers Buenos Aires Media Party* which is a global community that brings together journalists with developers and designers in order to integrate multiple disciplines for the generation of a new model of digital journalism with data as a main axis. The 2014 Buenos Aires chapter<sup>14</sup> hosted over 30 speakers from around the world and included over 1200 participants from the media, technology and open data fields. The session features workshops, training sessions and demonstrations of technological tools and their application to the media industry (Zentner, 2014).

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/gobierno-abierto/decreto-gobierno-abierto>

<sup>11</sup> <http://data.buenosaires.gob.ar>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/gobierno-abierto/direcci%C3%B3n-general-de-informaci%C3%B3n-y-gobierno-abierto>

<sup>13</sup> <http://ckan.org>

<sup>14</sup> <http://mediaparty.info>

### 3.2 Bahía Blanca Case

Bahía Blanca is an Argentinean city located in the south of the Province of Buenos Aires, with a population that exceeds 300,000 inhabitants.

It is another one of the pioneering Argentinean cities in the implementation of Open Government practices that encourages data opening and complete dissemination of public data every citizen has a right to accessing, through its Municipal Agency for Innovation and Open Government<sup>15</sup>. This Agency, created by decree No. 110-7235/2012, will have the following main goals:

- Establishing a digital roadmap incorporating the multiple technological and digital innovation projects that link government organizations, the private sector, civil organizations, entrepreneurs and neighbors.
- Proposing, designing and implementing Open Government projects with the goal of making government information transparent, and encouraging participation and collaboration with the various actors of civil society.
- Designing and implementing open data standards with the goal of promoting convergence between governmental applications and third parties.
- Proposing and implementing an innovation policy to improve communication with neighbours, widen channels and systematize processes.

In 2012, the Municipal Agency for Innovation and Open Government launched the Bahía Blanca Open Government Online Portal<sup>16</sup>, whose goal is to articulate and implement the three pillars of Open Government: transparency, collaboration and participation. Currently, this portal contains many public data organized into 15 categories (Affidavit, Environment, Incomes of the Municipality, Wages, Health, Acquisitions of the Municipality, among other), a section for requesting public information through an online form<sup>17</sup>, as well as the possibility to make enquiries<sup>18</sup> which will be addressed directly by the Mayor.

There have been numerous private initiatives for using the data published by the government of Bahía Blanca. A project particularly worth mentioning is “Gasto Público Bahiense”<sup>19</sup> (Public expenditure of Bahía Blanca) which monitors in detail all the purchases made to municipal suppliers.

Another interesting project has been the development of a software platform<sup>20</sup> that allows for environmental monitoring of measurements obtained from the Polo Petroquímico, industrial establishments and treatment systems for urban raw sewage whose final destination is the estuary in Bahía Blanca.

This city was recently awarded in the fourth edition of the Smart City Congress in Barcelona<sup>21</sup> due to its Open Government policies.

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<sup>15</sup> <http://gabierto.bahiablanca.gov.ar/la-agencia>

<sup>16</sup> <http://bahiablanca.opendata.junar.com/home>

<sup>17</sup> <http://gabierto.bahiablanca.gov.ar/acceso-a-informacion-publica>

<sup>18</sup> <http://gabierto.bahiablanca.gov.ar/despacho-abierto>

<sup>19</sup> <http://gastopublicobahiense.org>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.quepasabahiablanca.gov.ar>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.smartcityexpo.com>

### 3.3 Mercedes Case

Mercedes is a medium-to-small-sized city located around 100 kms away from Buenos Aires. To date, it has an estimated 64.000 inhabitants.

Decree No 825/2009 was sanctioned in 2009 allowing for the creation of the Subsecretary of Reformation and Modernization of the State, which launched the “Mercedes Digital” program<sup>22</sup>.

The “Mercedes Digital” program has two goals. First, the incorporation of electronic government aspects that improve the quality of the services provided and help reduce the digital divide. Technology was added to sensitive areas such as health, security, education and government, and articulation policies were generated with the “Conectar Igualdad” national program<sup>23</sup> in order to achieve better digital insertion in low-income social sectors.

Another important goal of the program was taking the citizen closer to public affairs. Thus, several open government policy implementing strategies were devised. Measures were taken to guarantee transparency and accountability and communication channels were created to facilitate citizen participation. As an example, the “Mercedes Colabora” mobile application<sup>24</sup> was developed to allow citizens to make anonymous complaints about any kind of incident on the street.

The “Mercedes Digital” program was granted 5 awards:

- Frida Award to technological innovation
- Participation in the Kenya 2011 Governance Forum.
- Digital City Motorola Ranking in Argentina
- Prince and Cooke consulting agency award to digital cities
- CIPPEC Foundation award to web sites.

### 3.4 Rivadavia Case

Rivadavia is a small town located northeast of the Province of Buenos Aires with an estimated population of 12,000 inhabitants.

In September 2014 the mayor passed decree No 1346/2014<sup>25</sup> whereby the executive power is urged to implement a platform to facilitate the search, discovery and access to the public sector sets of data that will contribute to promoting transparency, encouraging participation and collaboration of citizens in governmental affairs and stimulating innovation and social, economical and cultural development within the City of Rivadavia.

The decree also includes in its body that the multiple secretaries and subsections of the public administration will have to identify the data that are candidates for publishing in the aforementioned platform and commit to their adaptation and maintenance.

In late September 2014 the first version of the Open Government platform is launched where the first public data are published and divided into 6 categories: Economical Activity, Health, Participatory Budgeting, Program RED<sup>26</sup>, Officials Pay Cheque, and Information of the Official

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.mercedes.gob.ar/digital>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.conectarigualdad.gob.ar>

<sup>24</sup> <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=info.modernizacion.mcolabora&hl=es>

<sup>25</sup> <http://munirivadavia.gob.ar/gabierto/descargas/decreto.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> [http://munirivadavia.gob.ar/gabierto/data\\_red.html](http://munirivadavia.gob.ar/gabierto/data_red.html)



Record. The data are presented in multiple formats to encourage not only their dissemination but also their reuse.

A section was also developed where any citizen can request public information through a web form.

## 4. Conclusions

Anttiroiko (2004) points out that although ICTs have the potential to restructure the government, strengthen democracy and create a closer relationship between public administrations and citizens, a certain general maturity is required in the organizational and social environments in order to fully apply ICTs to public governance.

Together with the undeniable benefits Open Government brings, risks have been observed. An increase in citizen participation can lead to the perverse consequence of growing social inequities in ICT use and access. A recent poll (United Nations, 2012) reveals that citizen participation through the use of these tools is not equal and, to the contrary, deepens social differences in that socially disfavoured sectors lack access to them as well as to the cultural training required to do so.

There are also technological, legal and cultural obstacles that, according to Kossik (2004), will surely stand in the way of an ICT-based participation model. Regional inequities in Internet access, weak digital culture, low levels of trust in the legal and technological security of online transactions are combined with low levels of public awareness regarding the participation of citizens in political life. These may also be the causes of the existing differences in the degree of advancement of the Open Government initiatives we have analyzed for the various Argentinean cities. We have been able to prove empirically that cities with more and better resources, be them human, technological or economic, offer citizens more complex and better quality technological tools and host cultural events (workshops, congresses, *hackathons*, etc) around those proposals, that open a path for citizens to adopt and become involved with these new initiatives.

However, the authors of this paper are optimistic that, although as previously stated, the adoption of Open Government policies should not only be considered a technological innovation but also a cultural change in the way in which governments relate to citizens and other organizations, it is technology that will drive the undeniable tendency towards governments that are more open and proactive to social demands, more efficient in their administration and, fundamentally, more legitimate in the view of an increasingly demanding society that is more aware of its rights. And that it is possible in cities with less resources to implement concrete and coherent Open Government strategies if the political will and conviction are strong and the people share and encourage these initiatives.

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