

The limits of a good practice:
*On the need for an intercultural critique of open data
and its social construction in the global south*

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This paperⁱ is born out of a concern with open dataⁱⁱ understood as a global agenda that aims to affect societies, both in the Global North and the Global South. It comes from a preoccupation with the risks involved in conceiving of open data as a universal solution: a practice that should benefit all societies equally, across the board. My main argument, however, is not that open data is not *inherently good* — a point explored by several other scholars on different grounds (Johnson, 2012; Gurstein, 2013; Kitchin, 2013)— but that concentrating on its inherent goodness may distract us from constructing a global agenda for open data that recognizes, includes and is modified by the diversity of political cultures that exist in the world today, those sociocultural realities that press against more normative conceptions of statehood and democracy across the globe.

My concern stems from observing that attempts to measure, standardize and benchmark open data practices, all of which are of course important goals, tend to drive our attention away from the construction of conceptual frameworks and strategies to configure open data agendas that effectively reflect and address a world that is not by any means structured exclusively according to the aspirations, parameters, and cultural realities of Western liberal democracies. My main objective with this paper could be read as an attempt to shape and raise a polemic, namely, that the open data movement appears to lack a clear and explicit intercultural dimension and that the implications of this absence are important.

This polemic, however, is first and foremost an effort to push for a conscious digression, away from an exclusive emphasis on measuring impact to one that assesses and strengthens the cultural relevance of open data practices in non-western contexts. My suggestion is that an intercultural approach can benefit the global open data agenda by expanding our understanding on the factors that make an open data initiative more successful in a particular social and cultural setting. An intercultural critique could also help us avoid falling into certain vices of eurocentricity that have plagued the intersection of technology and politics throughout history (Prakash, 1999; Mitchell, 1988). Without an intercultural critique we run the risk of falling into technological universalism and of imposing a particular political ontology of open data on societies that may not necessarily conceive of “the power of open data” in the same terms, viewing it at best as a fad and at worst as another foreign imposition.

My interest in this topic began a couple of years ago, after reading an exchange between Rob Kitchin and David Eaves on the subject of open data critiques. Kitchin (2013) had published an excellent post with “four critiques on open data initiatives”. Eaves (2013) responded to Kitchin’s post, examining his ideas and discussing those that he thought “deserved deeper dives”. His text began by presenting an image (See Figure 1). “Once you have these people talking about things like a G8 Open Data Charter you are no longer on the fringes. Not even remotely”, Eaves stated and suggested: “we — open data advocates — are now complicit in what many of the above (mostly) men decide to do around open data” (2013).



Figure 1. The G8 Summit at Lough Erne in Northern Ireland
(Source: The Telegraph, 18 June, 2013 in Eaves, 2013)

I could not agree more with this statement. However, I am concerned not only with the mostly male (and mostly white) composition of this group. My attention drifts primarily towards its mostly Western makeup and what this means for the rest of the world. I become even more concerned with this issue when I confirm that all nations represented at this table have been – and some continue to be – imperial powers. The fact is that while the G8 Open Data Charter was at least rhetorically offered “for consideration by other countries, multinational organizations and initiatives” (G8, 2013) it represents a dominant discourse on open data crafted exclusively by the West. While I won’t go into a visual analysis of what it means to have these leaders appear in informal attire at a gathering of this sort, it is crucial to acknowledge that the global open data agenda is not one led by non-western countries.

Is this an important issue? Why and how is it important? I want to argue that understanding the cultural configuration of this particular dominant discourse, as Eaves (2013) called it, is key because it can help us denaturalize open data as universal practice and discover the specific ideological and cultural components that lay behind its current form as an object and practice of governance. This should not be read as an attempt to draw lines between good and bad, or as a denunciation of the West oppressing the South through technological means, yet again. What I want to do is problematize an open data agenda that, in my opinion, does not account for cultural difference and its political implications with enough clarity and strength.

In order to accomplish this, I will propose the concept of *intercultural translation* as a tool to structure an intercultural critique of open data. This approach will bring us closer to debates on a politics of knowledge rather than centering our conversation on the incommensurability of cultures. Intercultural translation can also help us neutralize a push for technological universalism and western triumphalism. This approach aims to complicate more normative analyses on the role and impact on open data in non-western societies by paying attention to alternative ontologies — other ways of being in the world (Clammer et al, 2004) — thus making us better prepared to understand how open data can provide for democratization across different contexts and cultures.

To be sure, I am not suggesting that the open data movement is essentially Western. Nor that there is no work from the South informing open data practices of societies in the North. What I aim to show is that a global agenda involving nations across the world is not necessarily and intercultural one, and that this perspective could in fact expand the repertoire of open data initiatives, focusing on culture and interculturality as important dimensions of work with and through open government data.

Towards an intercultural critique of open data

As an idea, interculturality has different versions. For example, in recent years a well-established version of interculturality dominates the debate on cultural diversity among supranational bodies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the European Union (EU). From this perspective interculturality is conceived as a tool with which member states can promote social cohesion (Aman, 2014) and as a method of facing the cultural challenges of every multicultural society by uniting around “universally shared values emerging from the interplay of these cultural specificities” (UNESCO, 2009). McDonald (2011) has argued that this version of interculturality reifies difference and is built from an assumption that cultures exist separate from one another “rather than regarding all cultures as already intercultural, unfixed entities, every aspect of which could potentially transform the others without ever settling into a final pattern”.

Aman (2014) has studied out how *interculturality* as seen in West is not the same as the notion of *interculturalidad* as used and understood in the Andean region and specifically in Bolivia. In this other context, *interculturalidad* does not refer to a situation in which all cultures are already being interrelated and mixed with one another; but rather, it is conceived in terms of the fact that some cultures are recognized by the state while others are not. In this version, *cultura* works as an ideological position that aims to bring about a new model of society through a different vision of development, nation and identity: a vision that is not dependent upon or structured by the imposition of one ideal society on another (Aman, 2014).

There are very specific sociopolitical circumstances under which these two somewhat conflicting versions of interculturality came to be. There are several other genealogies of interculturality used in education (Coulby, 2006), in policies regarding the right to indigenous consultation (Schilling-Vacaflor & Flemmer, 2013), or in specific models of nationalism (Blad & Couton, 2009). Like all invocations of interculturality, the version I want to use in this paper is a contingent one. It responds to the need to account for cultural variations and interactions in the work with open data, but also to go beyond straightforward claims to non-Western difference. The goal is to surpass an obvious argument, namely, that we live in a world of different cultures and that open data initiatives should be aware of this. Instead, my point is another: I want to argue that cultural difference should be used in favor of bettering open data practices by denaturalizing them; opening them up for critical inquiry without assuming their inherent universality and a priori condition as a product of common sense. The question could be reframed as: How can other languages, ways of being and associational forms (Foley & Edwards, 1996) help us better understand how open government data —understood as a technological object and set of practices —can provide for more democratic societies?

In order to address this question I want to focus on the concept of *intercultural translation* as understood by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014). Santos proposes intercultural translation as an alternative to both to the abstract universalism that grounds Western-centric general theories and to the idea of incommensurability between cultures (212). For Santos these two aspects are related and account for the two “non-relationships” of western modernity with non-western cultures, namely, destruction or assimilation. For Santos, intercultural translation takes us in a different direction:

As understood here, intercultural translation consists of searching for isomorphic concerns and underlying assumptions among cultures, identifying differences and similarities, and developing, whenever appropriate, new hybrid forms of cultural understanding and intercommunication that may be useful in favoring interactions and strengthening alliances

among social movements fighting, in different cultural contexts, against capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy and for social justice, human dignity or human decency (212).

Sousa (2014) conceives of intercultural translation as a living process that aims at reciprocity instead of worrying about source cultures and target cultures (214). It is also a form of inter-political translation, a procedure that promotes the inter-movement politics at the source of counterhegemonic globalization. The notion of “translation” is meant to undermine the idea of original or pure cultures and stress the notion of cultural relationality (217).

Intercultural translation is not simply a nod towards liberal political correctness. Instead, at its core it aims to shift a power balance that today rests primarily in the hands of Western worldviews. The shift is not meant to neutralize or to attack, but instead to interrelate and complement. As understood by Santos, intercultural translation forms part of a larger epistemic framework that has as main procedures intercultural translation and the “ecologies of knowledge”: the idea that different types of knowledge are incomplete in different ways and that raising consciousness of such reciprocal incompleteness (rather than looking for completeness) will be a precondition for achieving cognitive justice (212). We may situate the claim for greater cognitive justice as close to the notion of information justice developed by Jeffrey Alan Johnson (2014), yet foregrounding it by introducing the element of cultural variation in the formulation of what a justice of this sort may look like.

Johnson (2012) argues that open data itself can actually exacerbate inequalities and that a theory of information justice is needed to counteract this possibility. I want to argue that a theory of information justice without an intercultural dimension runs the risk of replicating the injustices it aims to eliminate as well. An intercultural approach to information justice may also overcome the problem of understanding information justice in almost strictly distributive terms (Johnson, 2014). Understood as a process of interaction with the intention of forging alliances, intercultural translation may help an information justice agenda move towards considering a “politics of recognition” that goes beyond identity politics (Fraser, 1996). It can also serve to address the problems of approaching civil society as a singular political body, or as a conceptually coherent object when in fact several scholars have already described its great variability across regions and cultures (Foley & Edwards, 1996).

The push for greater cognitive justice as part of intercultural translation is also important because it helps us complete an epistemic picture we tend to naturalize as we subsume our aspirations to supposedly universal ideas on governance and democracy. Wendy Brown (2015) has recently argued that while not originally tied to neoliberalism, *governance* has matured to become neoliberalism’s primary administrative form, the political modality through which it creates environments, structures constraints and incentives, and hence conducts subjects. For Brown (2015: 128), governance works as an epistemology that fundamentally re-conceptualizes democracy as distinct or divorced from politics or economics; a specific mode of governing that is evacuated of agents and institutionalized in processes, norms and practices. From this perspective, the ideas behind modern governance are responsible for turning democracy into something purely procedural, essentially an exercise in problem solving (Brown, 2015). Part of this procedural ethos includes working with “best practices” and benchmarking. A critical reading of these reveals the normative work they do, achieved by their ostensibly generic applicability and by their formally neutral status as practices, rather than purposes and missions (136).

An important point is that benchmarking practices stem from a *market episteme* that can be felt, sometimes subtly other times forcefully, in the frameworks we use to analyze the impact of open government data practices. While understanding demand and supply forces on open government data is important in helping us making sense of a particular information economy and political landscape, it is a language that homogenizes both forces, turning them into technical terms devoid of politics and power, driving us away from a level of analysis that may in fact provide us

with important insight as to why people and collectives relate to government data and information the way they do.

Power and precarity of Lima's Open Data Portal

The experience of Lima's Open Data Portal (ODP) can help us shed light on what I suspect is a particular condition of open government data in the Global South. This is a situation that can be described in terms of a friction between open government data's great *rhetorical power* and its *material precarity*. While we cannot generalize from a single case study, the example of Lima's ODP will help illustrate this friction and to propose how in this context intercultural translation may emerge as a contingent strategy of civil society collectives aiming to engage with a uncertain open data ecosystem. Further studies will be needed to confirm if this situation — related to the political impacts of open data initiatives, which are very difficult to measure (Keseru, 2015) — is in fact pervasive in developing countries.

Developed during the government of mayor Susana Villarán (2011-2014), Lima's Open Data Portal received a lot of attention since its creation in 2012, including its recognition as "Good Government Practice" by the Civil Society Committee in charge of Peru's Open Government National Action Plan. Initially containing at least 61 datasets pertaining to administration and finances, public safety, investment projects, mobility and transport, emergency response, health and tax administration issues, today Lima's ODP appears to have been effectively abandoned by Luis Castañeda Lossio, the new mayor of Lima, four years after its original conception. As Miguel Morachimo (2015) reports, the new transparency section of the Municipality's website shows only 3 PDF documents and a link to the standard transparency portal, one that does not manage open government datasets. While Lima's ODP can still be accessed through another non-official URL, datasets have not been updated since December of 2014 and there has been no mention of this project and its future by the new authorities. Indeed, several transparency mechanisms instituted during Villarán's government — like live-streaming Municipal Council meetings, for example — have been deactivated. Castañeda's autocratic ways came to light during his first 100 days in office and attracted international attentionⁱⁱⁱ. The abandonment of the open data portal was only one of many reversals in local governance experienced in the first few months of the new municipal administration.

But Villarán's ODP was not perfect. The portal was not conceived as part of a comprehensive municipal policy for open government, nor as part of a strategy to conceive of Lima as a "smart city" (Casas in Patiño, 2014). In fact, Lima's Regional Plan for Concerted Development 2012-2015 (Plan Regional de Desarrollo Concertado de Lima 2012-2015) does not include any mention of open data. According to Casas (in Patiño, 2014) officials in charge of the plan considered that a digital agenda should not be thought of as a bottom-up strategy, but a top-down effort. They believed that technologies "where already been used to govern", which explains why the municipality did not design any policies to promote civic engagement through ICTs and why the team of experts responsible for making Lima ODP had to justify the need for this portal using the National Modernization Policy rather than one crafted by the metropolitan government^{iv}.

This background may also explain why it was so easy for the new municipal government to abandon Lima's Open Data Portal. For Morachimo (2015), the failure behind this well-intentions public effort can be explained in a couple of ways. First, the previous municipal government did not concern itself with a strategy to guarantee its continuity. The publication of open data sets was first an idea, then a "good practice" but it never turned into a legal obligation (Morachimo, 2015). Second, there is the responsibility of the citizens that were involved with the open data portal:

As a community we did not manage to request the necessary data or use the existing data to develop critical and effective apps for a representative quantity of people from Lima. Since the data in Lima's ODP did not feed any application that was used daily or that really meant a betterment in the quality of life of citizens, it was easy for the new administration to stop using the platform without anyone, except for a small group of activists, becoming aware of this (Morachimo, 2015).

Nevertheless, the appearance of Lima's ODP was hailed as an innovation from the beginning, no questions (or very few questions) asked. Part of the reason why this was possible has to do with the rhetorical power open government data has. Rosenberg (in Gitelman, 2012) has described how the term "data" serves a different rhetorical and conceptual function than do sister terms such as "facts" and "evidence." In contrast to these other terms, the semantic function of data is specifically rhetorical allowing it to stand as the premise for argument (14). I would argue that the semantic function of open government data has even greater rhetorical power in the context of neoliberal governance, as information becomes depoliticized, turned into a raw material lacking politics by itself and placed at the service of the citizen, even if the quality of the data itself is not the best.

Described by the Municipality as "a tangible example of the political commitment to share information in its most basic and simple form, so that it can be used and transformed in creative ways, making information more comprehensible, or re-used for the development of apps", there is a lot more to say about the quality of the information provided through Lima's ODP. According to a review of the datasets in 2014 (Casas in Patiño, 2014), these complied with only 4 out of the 8 principles of open data. The principles that were not complied with describe a particular relationship a citizen can have with this data. First, the portal does not provide the original data (without modifying them or aggregating them)^v. Second, it forces the use of proprietary software in order to access the datasets. Third, data is not complete (not all data sets are available to the public), and finally, data is not frequently updated, an issue that discourages use of the datasets provided across the board.

I understand the precarious materiality of Lima's Open Data Portal as having to do with these limitations but also with other relational dimensions. For the purposes of this paper I conceive of materiality as the physical character and existence of objects and artifacts — in this case digital objects — that makes them useful and usable for certain purposes under particular conditions (Lievrouw in Gillespie et al, 2014: 25). The precarious materiality of open government data comes from the portal existing outside a comprehensive open data policy and legal backing that can guarantee it remains updated and complete. Then, there is the issue of how incomplete and outdated datasets *stand for* a repository of potential representations and engagements with a governance process — even when these datasets are not used. Some experts have started to refer to this kind of open government data as "Zombie Data", "a marauding mass of data that isn't much good, creating no meaning etc. and not living up to the promise of #opendata" (Burall, 2013). Finally, the arbitrary publication of municipal data sets generates a third level of material precarity that skews data in relation to a particular political interest: what a government feels comfortable publishing or is able to put together for publication.^{vi}

In other words, open government data is not demand-driven, but is a consequence of whatever information is available; often found "laying around" the institution. Data in this case is published haphazardly, without confirming if someone is really interested in it. This goes against basic quality management processes in which the identification of an interested public or audience is key. It follows that open government data's materiality is precarious because it is always in a situation that undermines its power to represent knowledge faithfully and flexibly, unable to respond to the political needs not only of those who are in power, but of those who aim to advance alternative political representations and novel processes of political engagement.

As Janssen et al (2011) have pointed out, one of the main criticisms of current open data initiatives is that they are largely supply-driven. Demand-driven research and initiatives have not been developed and studied with equal depth, even though open government data portals are often described as interfaces for civil society to interact with data. Cross-cultural study of interaction with and through open data portals will become important as research on the open government data movement moves forward, a process that will necessarily imply studying diverse peoples, groups and spaces that relate to these infrastructures in various ways.

Capitalizing uncertainty: Precarity as Exploit

Work with open government data does not only take place at the level of public institutions. In Lima, one of the most important sites for work with open government data from the perspective of civil society has been Escuelab, a non-profit organization located in the historic center of the city. Escuelab has been in charge of organizing all hackathons and hackathon-like events that have taken place in Peru and primarily in Lima in the last 4 years. This list includes two events organized in Medellin (Colombia) and Arequipa, a city in the south of Peru. It also includes two hackathons organized as part of the “Developing Latin America” project, a regional initiative of networked hackathons promoted by the Chilean NGO Ciudadano Inteligente. In all of these hackathons, Escuelab has served as a site for innovation, introducing the notion of civic hacking or “hackerismo cívico” in the local and national digital cultures of Peru.

Kiko Mayorga, an engineer and Escuelab’s Director of Research and Development, explains that the possibility of organizing hackathons as part of Escuelab’s work was considered as an opportunity to bring together different people already interested in technology and social issues (See Figure 2) ^{vii}.



Figure 2. First Meeting of “Hackerismo Cívico” at Escuelab 2012.

Against the normative discourse on the purpose of hackathons, Mayorga stresses that hackathons in Lima do not really have applications (apps) as main and direct result, since several factors play against app development in this context. First, there is a great lack of interest from companies and the private sector to provide important awards or fund potential app startups based in the demos developed during the hackathons^{viii}. Second, there is the Municipality’s inability to provide direct economic stimuli for this kind of work. The few times that the Municipality offered to provide a financial award for the Hackathon’s winner, the group that developed the app had to select a representative who would then had to be hired by the MML under a short-term contract in order to provide the funds. This also meant that the intellectual property of the product (the app) had to be kept by the Municipality. The last factor identified by Mayorga as a factor that limits the

creation of apps has to do with legislation on open government data that is not crafted by experts in data or technologies but by lawyers or transparency NGOs that are not acquainted with what he understands as “the new quality of information flows in society”. This situation limits legal and administrative frameworks that may sustain and facilitate app development.

We may consider civic hacking as understood by Escuelab as more than the instrumentalization of hacking for civic purposes. When asked about the concrete results of the hackathons organized by Escuelab, Mayorga emphasizes that the most important outcome is the community that has been formed through these events, the relationships between people that generate new windows of possibility, for other projects and tech-driven initiatives:

A hackathon is a party. One in which people meet up, code a little bit; some may get excited and code a lot, but in essence this is a celebration of being together (personal communication, Feb. 20, 2014).

This is why Escuelab has started to use the term “Data Raymi” to refer to Hackatons or Hackathon-like events. “Raymi” is a Quechua word that means party, feast or celebration. The “Inti Raymi”, or feast of the Sun is the most important celebration in the Andean Sun calendar. In an attempt to generate a useful hybrid, Escuelab inserted a term that refers to a cultural context, but also to an ancestral legacy of science and Andean technology (See Figure 3). The “Data Raymi” could be read as direct intervention (or hacking) of what Irani (forthcoming) describes as a hackathon’s “bias to action” which organizes time and demands. We could also use Escuelab’s approach to Hackathons to expand pessimistic critiques like those by Gregg and DiSalvo (2013) who argue that US hackathons normalize failure.



Figure 3. Data Raymi digital flier (Escuelab, 2013)

Hackathons promoted by Escuelab move away from the “genres of accomplishment” (Gregg and Disalvo, 2013) structured by app development completely. It follows that the narratives of progress, success, ownership, and normative ideas on the “civic” nature of hackathons in the South need to be reassessed. In Data Raymis, the civic dimension has more to do with relationships between citizens rather than with the State/Civil society dichotomy. Further research in Peru should explore the configuration of intersubjectivities through these kind of social infrastructures, a perspective that could use the idea of intercultural translation to explore those “isomorphic concerns” mentioned by Santos (2014), as issues that may have nothing to do with open data and civic hacking themselves, but with other social problems. Identifying these other logics for collective work with open data may in turn benefit global open data agendas as they situate

themselves *in dialogue with* and not *as prescription for* work that aims to democratize public institutions and forms of government.

Escuelab's work should be understood as using the current hype of open government data to its favor, using hackathons to strengthen a local community of developers. Civic hacking is only one part of the political repertoire of the local community and Escuelab's work cannot be understood as blindly conforming to the global open data doctrine. Put differently, the "political subject" (Irani, forthcoming) of hackathons in Lima cannot be reduced to the mandate of a global open government agenda. Greater insights may come from understanding Escuelab's identity as space for innovation in relationship to other local alternative techno-cultural references like Paruro, Malvinas and Wilson, informal and second-hand informal markets of technology in the center of Lima (where Escuelab is located), places where one may find recycled and stolen computer parts; where innovation is not centered on a Silicon Valley philosophy but gives praise and honors a tradition of circumventing (hacking) social, economic and political limitations. Uncertainty in this context is not foreign or external; it is central to understanding the condition of technological development, one that is met by creating networks, collaborating; considering failure as the norm and contingency as the guiding and structuring spirit.

In her recent study of micro-narratives and situated stories around IT and innovation cultures in Peru, Chan (2013) argues that heightened scholarly attention to the creative engagements in digital culture at the periphery is warranted. This is also the case with open government data. Work with and through this kind of data in countries like Peru can challenge universalist assumptions on how it actively constructs a transparent and democratic order, providing us with a more complex understanding of how potential data-driven futures are configured through local practices and limitations; how global agendas are appropriated in part but assessed critically and framed as opportunities to accomplish other results which may be not the priority of the centers of power pushing for global agendas like open government.

The current situation of open government data in Lima could be read as one defined by a context of precarity and institutional limitations. However, it can also provide us with insights into the way civil society negotiates a type of information work (Chan, 2013) in contexts of uncertainty, focusing not exclusively in app-development but on the constitution of communities. An analysis of the current open government data portal in Lima shows that these efforts have initially been the consequence of external pressures but also of the work by small groups of dedicated individuals, concerned with providing access to public information. Just as we have reached an inflection point at the global level with an open government movement that is no longer at the fringes, it is time to turn our attention to more contextual analysis of open government data use and re-use, the politics behind the generation and maintenance of datasets and the way data can be produced in relation to actual demands and the interests of groups that have coalesced through intercultural translation into a vibrant community aimed at conducting information work through other innovation paradigms.

Conclusion

While the future of Lima's ODP remains uncertain, there are many lessons to be learnt from its experience, some of which are being considered in current open government data initiatives. For example, the Municipality of Miraflores launched its open data portal on February of 2015, only after institutionalizing a Municipal "Open Government Charter", the first of its kind in the country. The Open Data Portal of Miraflores is only one component of a comprehensive policy aimed at defining municipal responsibilities towards civic engagement, elevating standards of professional integrity and ethics of public officials and promoting new technologies as part of their open government policies, among other obligations (Miraflores abre, 2015). The missing piece continues to be a comprehensive intercultural strategy that complements the design of open data platforms;

mechanisms that can bring together citizens and collectives to define the data they require, but also to identify and develop strategies to overcome the barriers that may keep them from using this data for social change.

Today Open Government Data Portals are central features of contemporary governance both at the national and local level. While there is a general recognition of the importance of linking hackers and civic organizations to open data efforts, the terms of this relationship and how these groups contribute towards greater data reutilization, the sustainability of open data efforts and the overall democratization of public institutions and practices, are not being explored with sufficient depth. Moreover, the relationship between civil society and open data initiatives tends to be contextualized solely in terms of “demands” from a singular political body called civil society, without paying attention to issues of power and cultural difference that pattern that supposedly unified mandate.

Preliminary evidence shows that groups that engage with open data initiatives in cities like Lima often deploy strategies of intercultural translation in their civic hacking practices, in order to activate alliances and dialogues on different topics of social concern, and in spite of the severe limitations they may face as organizations trying to work with a precarious open government data ecosystem. The uncertainty and precariousness behind these infrastructures often serves as exploit: a vulnerability-turned-opportunity to strengthen a network of agents interested in coming together for social good. Understanding these processes beyond the normative perspective that subsumes all of this into a singular demand for open data is important. It is a move that is essential to initiate a process of re-politicization of the relationship between open government data and society, considering the experiences, viewpoints and agendas of societies in the South.

Today, open data initiatives can be understood as part of an “art of government” or governmentality (Foucault in Burchell et al, 1991), directly shaped by the influence of a neoliberal rationality that focuses on governance *as a version* of democracy. Generating novel avenues to rethink the relationship between peoples across cultures with open government data represents a key horizon for research and implementation in the future. Contextualizing open data practices as part of particular governmentalities that take place in the South, can help us identify their relationship to Western epistemologies, neoliberal rationalities and the depolitization of democracy (Brown, 2015). Additionally, the market episteme that structures open government data practices needs to be questioned and problematized. Failing to go beyond this epistemic reflex implies settling for a homogeneous model of democratization that relegates issues of power and cultural difference, to the detriment of the needs and aspirations of peoples and communities across the globe. One of the most powerful reason to address what I would refer to as “open data governmentalities” in the South is that — as Jean and John Comaroff (2012) have identified — it is the South that often is the first to feel world historical forces, and a place where radically new assemblages of capital and labor are taking shape, thus to prefigure the future of the global north.

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NOTES

ⁱ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of my original abstract submitted for consideration to the 2015 Open Data Research Symposium. Their comments were very helpful and challenged my original approach to this subject matter.

ⁱⁱ As in many projects related to open government, this paper uses the term “open data” and “open government data” interchangeably. In both cases it is used to refer to data produced or commissioned by government or government controlled entities, which is open as defined in the Open Definition – that is, it can be freely used, reused and redistributed by anyone. See more at: <http://opengovernmentdata.org>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Castañeda’s first actions included ordering the street art created during Villarán’s administration to be painted over, abandoning important transport reforms and scrapping the ambitious “Rio Verde” (green river) program which included the relocation of a large Shipibo-Konibo indigenous community into new housing infrastructure (Collyns, 2015).

^{iv} Leonardo León, personal communication Feb. 21, 2014.

^v As Denis and Goëta (2014) remind us, this “most basic and simple form” of data is in fact already the product of complex and invisible processes of exploration, extraction and “rawification” which ultimately determine the open dataset we will interact with. Even before being uploaded onto the portal, the dataset has already undergone a process of configuration imbued with politics.

^{vi} Casas mentions the case of a specific dataset with information on municipal contracts from 2009 to 2011 (personal communication, Feb. 26, 2014). The dataset was made available when the portal was launched but removed months later. Today the same dataset includes information about previous administrations, but not about the current one. The original dataset was quite interesting: it showed how there was an exclusive yet informal contract with a *single* gas station in the city, one that provided the fuel for *all* vehicles managed by the municipality. The dataset also showed how a single person, acting as a one-person business, was the only one in charge of providing catering services for the municipality, making more than 2 millions soles or 700 thousand USD in any given year.

^{vii} Personal communication, Feb. 20, 2014.

^{viii} The prices offered in the 2013 Hackathon of Lima gives us a better idea of the financial incentives at play: the first place received 1,000 Soles (roughly 360 CAN) and a Samsung digital camera, the second place received 500 Soles (almost 180 CAN) and the same camera and the third place only the camera.