Open Data Indices: Good and Evil

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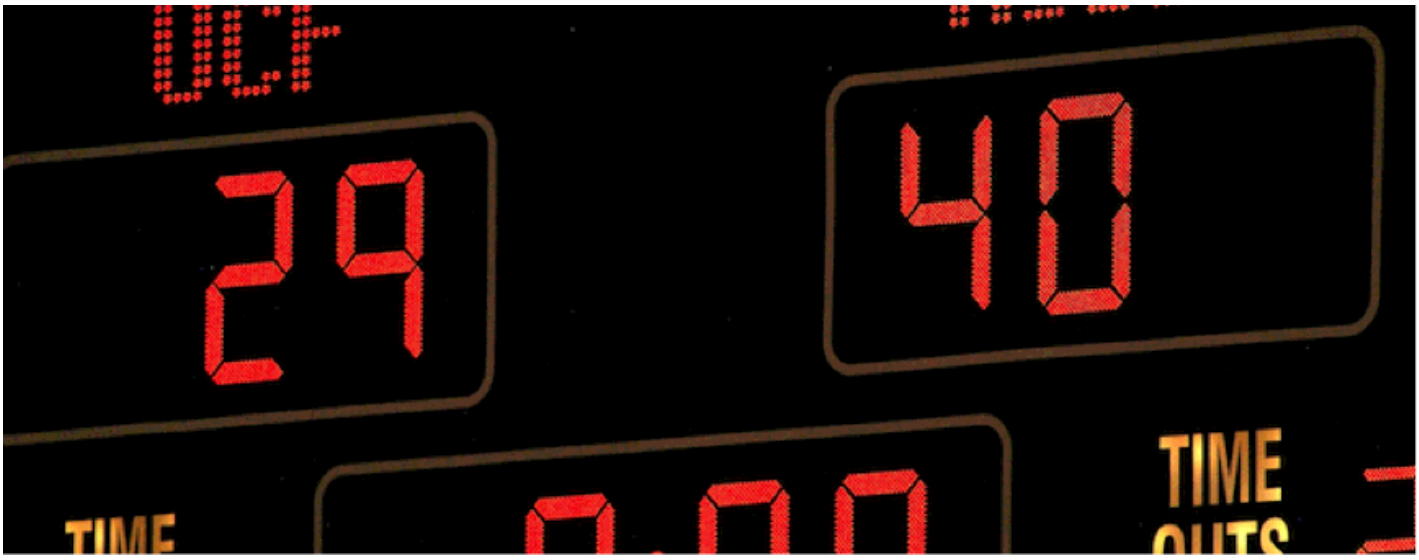
Monitoring is one of the crucial aspects to make Open Data initiatives grow. Although the exact measure of the openness level of governments is almost impossible, there are some initiatives that show an overview of the interest in Open Data in different countries around the world.



We can highlight some popular Open Data rankings, measuring different things but sharing the same goal. In February 2012, we launched the first version of the **PSI Scoreboard**, our *crowdsourced* initiative to measure the status of PSI re-use throughout the 28 EU countries; in 2013, the World Wide Web Foundation started to analyse open data readiness, implementation and impact across 86 countries on the **Open Data Barometer**. In the same year, the Open Knowledge Foundation also launched the **Open Data Index** monitoring the global state of open data (now with information on 97 countries).

It's quite useful to have an overview of what is happening in various places, both for external users (e.g. lobby/transparency groups), for national politicians and for PSI providers themselves. So in that sense, indices are really helpful, especially in a young field where things are starting up. (Comparing the maintenance state of roads can be much less interesting). But we should be careful not to see the results of these types of scoreboards as the "real" situation. The score is always going to be biased, first because the scoreboard has selected a number of criteria and metrics that are often supply-based (i.e. measure what a country provides) and not so much effect-based (i.e. measure what the achieved benefits are), and second because a lot of it is based on what the scorer sees, and that may not be a complete picture.

An example of this is the differences between the Open Knowledge Foundation's Open Data Index and ePSI Platform's PSI scoreboard - these are an indication that **any ranking can only be based on a set of metrics, and there is no agreement in what those metrics should be**. For instance, Greece scores poorly in the OKFN Index (54) but scores well in ePSI Platform (4). Now let's ask which countries have a law stating that government contracts with their suppliers are only valid if they are published. If that were a metric Greece would be in a very short list of leading countries. Rather than assess which countries publish postcode data, switch the question to which countries publish their address file: UK would drop below Denmark and the Netherlands... and so on. It is clear that there is not a perfect methodology to follow.

Comparisons can play a very important role for advocacy work, and it also can help focus attention on certain datasets or indicators. But they can also be used as a stick - "***we spent all that money on open data and look how far down the list we are***" was the story from one EU region that very nearly cancelled its whole open data programme as a result.

There is a good example of how responsive government can become after a negative comparison. In 2013, after the publication of the Open Data Index, OKF Germany was immediately notified by the Ministry of the Interior regarding some adjustments in the index. According to the officials the score was not precise, and they provided additional sources and input to the first evaluation (related to some indicators the independent researchers were not aware of).

One interesting aspect is that people have the tendency to focus on the bad –i.e. saying, oh, country *A* is doing really badly on criterion *X*– while it is also possible to concentrate on the good –i.e. country *A* has a good score on criterion *Y*. Related to that, rankings are almost always misused; they can lead to the wrong reaction: **if a country is high on the list, they may become complacent, while a country low on the ranking might start questioning the methodology**. Sometimes it is better to look at changes over time than at the score at a particular moment (e.g. country *C* has improved on criteria *X* and *Y* over the last year).

This blog post has been written by the ePSI Platform Advisory Board members: Makx Dekkers, Phil Archer and Martin Alvarez-Espinar.
(Photo credit: Adan Baker)