

CIVIC TECHNOLOGY ♦ A CRITIQUE

Dashboards Are Not Doors

For twenty years, civic technology has been very good at one thing: helping people see what their government does. It has been almost useless at the other thing, the one that actually matters. Letting them do something about it.

Tomer Rozenberg

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The thing everyone already knows

Let me start by conceding the point this essay is named after. In its plain form, it isn't controversial at all.

Transparency is not participation. Seeing what a government does is not the same as shaping it. This is not a new insight, and I won't pretend otherwise. The civic technology field has understood it for the better part of two decades. [Jonathan Fox](#) argued back in 2007 that transparency is necessary but nowhere near enough to produce accountability. [Tiago Peixoto](#) later put a sharper edge on it. Disclosure, he showed, is only the first link in a chain of at least four.² Information has to be released. It has to reach the people it concerns. Those people have to be able to act on it. And officials have to respond, or be made to. Most of what we built stops at link one.



FIG. 1 The minimal chain from disclosure to accountability, after Fox (2007) and Peixoto (2013). Open data and dashboards deliver step one with great efficiency. The three steps that actually produce accountability are left to someone else.

The frame is older still. In 1998, [Michael Schudson](#) described the modern citizen as *monitorial*.¹ Someone who scans the environment the way a parent watches the water at a pool. Apparently passive, but poised to move the instant something goes wrong. The watching was always meant to serve the moving. **The scan exists for the sake of the dive.**

So if the argument here were just “watching isn't acting,” there would be nothing to write. Everyone serious already agrees. The interesting question is the one the field rarely asks itself out loud.

If we have known for twenty years that transparency is only the first link in the chain, why did we spend two decades perfecting the watching and almost none of it building the acting?

The answer is not that we didn't know better. The answer is incentives.

II

Why watching won

Transparency is a *unilateral* problem. You can release a dataset without anyone's permission. You can build a vote-tracker, a scorecard, a budget portal, and ship it on a Friday. It works the moment it exists. It works whether or not a single official ever looks at it.

Participation is a *bilateral* problem. It only works if the person on the other side responds. You cannot ship one half of a relationship. A team of three on a grant can build the most elegant tool in the world for telling your representative what you think. The day it launches, it does nothing. Because **being heard requires someone whose job it is to listen**, and that someone has not agreed to anything.

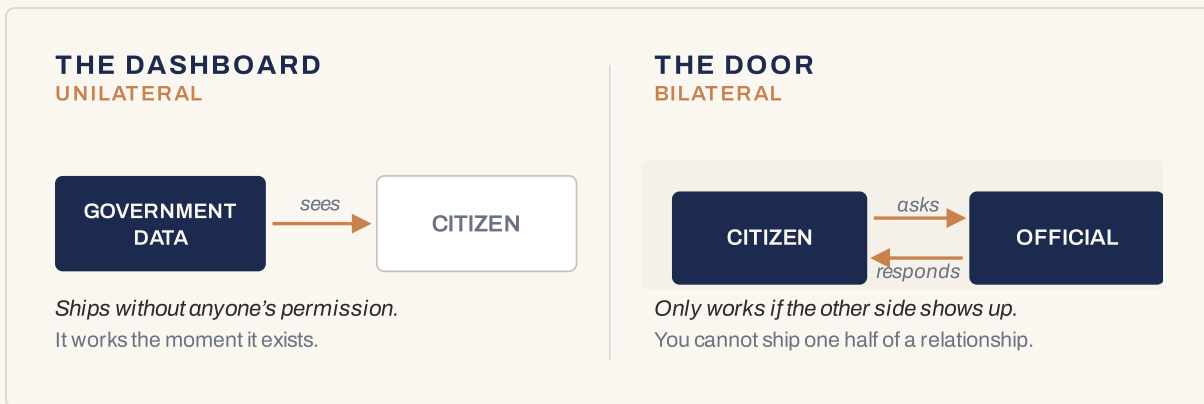


FIG. 2 The structural difference the field optimized around. A dashboard is one-directional and self-sufficient. A door requires a second party who has agreed to stand on the other side, which is exactly the part that is hard to build and impossible to fake.

◆
You cannot ship one half of a relationship.

Put those two problems in front of a small team with limited money, and the field chose the one it could actually finish. Not because anyone believed watching was the bottleneck. Because watching was buildable, fundable, and demoable. Acting was none of the three.

The graveyard proves it from the other direction. The tools that tried to build the acting side mostly died, or mutated into something unrecognizable. Brigade is the clearest case. It was backed by Sean Parker, raised more than nine million dollars in its



first round, and was one of the most serious, best-resourced attempts at mass citizen participation anyone has made. It pivoted to a feature it called “debates.” It then discovered that open citizen-to-citizen argument produced personal attacks and drove its most thoughtful users away. Its technology was eventually folded into a legislation-tracker, and its founder later named the debates pivot as the fatal wrong turn.

That is the recurring shape of the failures. Participation tools that left citizens talking to *each other* became social media with worse moderation. Participation tools that needed officials to *show up* starved on the supply side and collapsed into venting rooms. Meanwhile the pure-watching tools, the GovTracks and OpenStates³ and open-data portals, survived comfortably. They required no one’s cooperation to function.

None of this makes transparency a mistake. This is the part the angrier version of this essay gets wrong. Open government data built real things. Investigative journalists hold real power to account with it every day. A more legible state is a genuine public good. The error was never building the dashboards. **The error was treating the easy half of the job as if it were the whole job**, and then being surprised, year after year, that the gap stayed exactly as wide.

III

Watching worked. It still didn't close the gap.

Give transparency its due. There is more government data freely available today than at any point in history. By its own stated metric, the movement won.

But look at who actually used what it opened, and the victory turns strange. The portals are used, overwhelmingly, by professionals. Journalists, researchers, businesses, advocacy staff. In one [study of open-data portals](#), fewer than half of *computer-literate* participants even knew such a portal existed. And the people who were aware of them were almost entirely the same people using them for work. The casual public barely arrives at all.

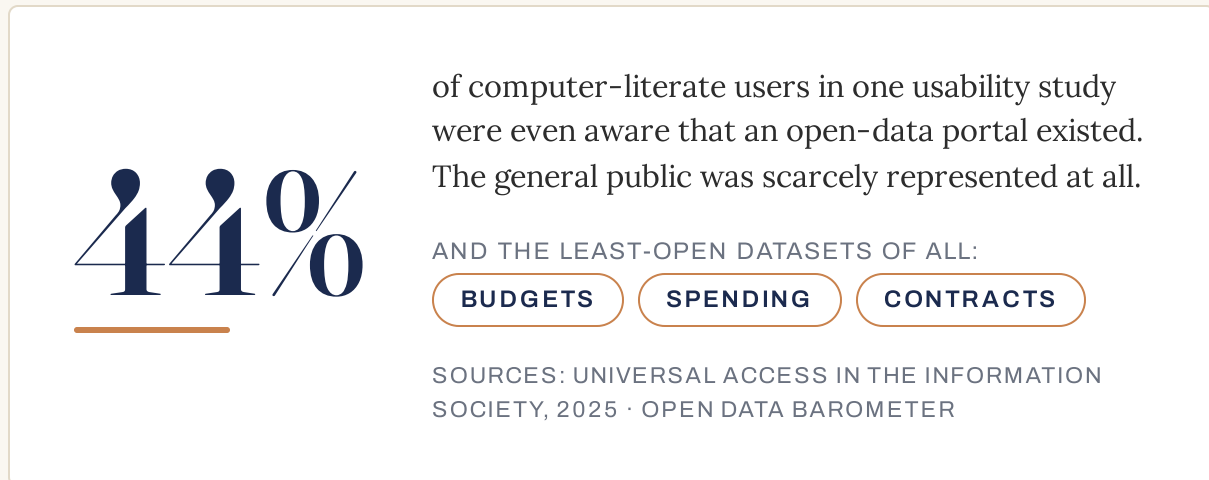


FIG. 3 The data the public would need to hold power to account, the budgets, the spending, the contracts, has consistently stayed the hardest to get at.

So here is what twenty years of transparency actually produced. We built a watchtower, and **handed the keys to the people who were always going to climb it anyway**. The ordinary citizen got a dashboard they never asked for and mostly cannot read. The decisions that shape their street, their school, and their taxes went on being made behind a door they still cannot open.



The quieter harm

AN ARGUMENT, NOT A FINDING

Now the part that is genuinely an argument, rather than settled fact. I'm going to mark it as such, because the difference matters.

The standard, generous story is that transparency is a *partial* good. The necessary first link, worth having even when the rest of the chain is missing. I want to put a harder possibility on the table. One the field rarely says out loud. That watching can *displace* acting, not just fail to add it.

The mechanism is uncomfortable because it's familiar. A well-made dashboard discharges the very impulse that might have become participation. You look up how your representative voted. You feel informed. For a moment, you feel like a citizen who did their part. And that feeling quietly stands in for the thing itself. The monitorial citizen was supposed to scan *and then mobilize when alarmed*. We built superb instruments for the scanning and almost nothing for the mobilizing. **We polished the binoculars to a mirror finish and never built the door the parent runs through when the child goes under.**

I can't prove this at scale, and I won't pretend to. The evidence on whether transparency raises or lowers downstream participation is genuinely mixed.⁴ Anyone who tells you it's settled is selling something. So treat the displacement claim as what it is. An argument, not a finding. But notice where the burden of proof has been sitting all along. The field built as if watching reliably feeds acting. As if the dive follows the scan on its own. It does not follow on its own. It may not follow at all, unless someone builds the thing that lets it.

v

What a door actually is

It's worth being precise about the distinction the title trades on. "Door" is easy to wave at and hard to build.

A dashboard changes what you can see. A door changes which side of the decision you stand on. That is the whole difference, and nearly everything follows from it.

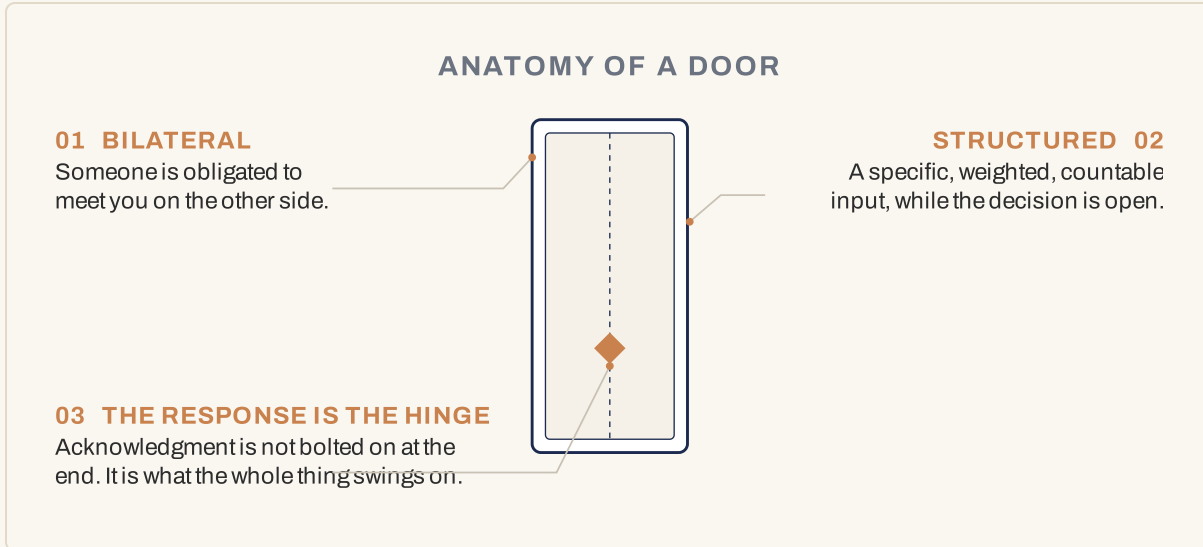


FIG. 4 A door, in this sense, has three properties a dashboard lacks. Each is hard for the same reason transparency was easy: it requires the other side of the relationship to be present.

01 IT IS BILATERAL

Someone on the other side is obligated to meet you there. A tool that only organizes citizens among themselves, however well, is a bigger waiting room. Not a door. The hard, unavoidable work is on the supply side. Getting the people with power to stand on the other side of the threshold.

02 THE ACTION IS STRUCTURED

Not a comment box. Not a debate thread. Not a like. A specific, weighted, countable input, attached to a specific decision, while that decision is still open. Unstructured voice is what we already have far too much of. It is the noise, not the signal.

03 THE RESPONSE IS PART OF THE CONTRACT

Input poured into a void is not a door. It's a window painted to look like one, which is worse, because it teaches people that trying is pointless. The acknowledgment, the "received," the "this changed the vote," none of that is a courtesy bolted on at the end. **It is the hinge the whole thing swings on.**

Each of those is hard for the same reason transparency was easy. A door is the bilateral problem the watching tools were built to avoid. Which is, in the end, why the dashboards are everywhere and the doors still mostly don't exist.

Closing that gap is the problem I now spend my time on, under the name Agora. I've made the fuller case for it, including why I think this moment differs from the ones that produced the graveyard, in the Agora manifesto, [Between Elections](#). This essay is the narrower argument underneath it. That the absence is not an accident of will. It is the predictable result of building the tractable thing instead of the necessary one.

The room is still locked

Twenty years of dashboards. The data about the room is, by now, exquisite. Real-time, searchable, downloadable, free. You can watch the room from a dozen angles. You can chart its history and predict its weather.

The room is still locked.

The next twenty years of civic technology won't be judged on how clearly we let people see inside. That problem is, more or less, solved. They will be judged on one harder question. The one we spent the first twenty years building elaborate reasons to postpone.



Did we ever build the door?

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Notes & Sources

NOTES

- 1 The term *monitorial citizen* is Michael Schudson's, from *The Good Citizen* (1998): a citizen who keeps watch over public life and acts when something requires it, rather than participating continuously.
- 2 The four-link framing draws on Jonathan Fox's distinction between "soft" accountability (officials having to explain themselves) and "hard" accountability (officials facing consequences). Peixoto's contribution is to show that disclosure, on its own, guarantees neither.
- 3 GovTrack and OpenStates are long-running US transparency projects that aggregate bills, votes, and legislator records. Both still operate, sustained largely by journalists, researchers, and advocacy staff rather than the casual public.
- 4 The empirical record is genuinely divided. Some studies find that transparency raises engagement and trust; others find it lowers both, or changes nothing. The honest position is that the direction is contested, not settled, which is why the displacement claim is offered as an argument rather than a finding.

SOURCES

- 1 Jonathan Fox, "The Uncertain Relationship Between Transparency and Accountability," *Development in Practice* 17, no. 4–5 (2007): 663–671. Transparency as necessary but insufficient for accountability; the "soft" versus "hard" accountability distinction.
- 2 Tiago Peixoto, "The Uncertain Relationship Between Open Data and Accountability," *UCLA Law Review* (2013). Disclosure as one link in a multi-step chain to accountability.
- 3 Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (New York: Free Press, 1998). The "monitorial citizen"; the obligation to scan and mobilize when alarmed.
- 4 World Wide Web Foundation, *Open Data Barometer* (4th edition). Accountability-relevant datasets — budget, spending, contracting — tend to be the least open of those published.
- 5 "Usability considerations for open data portals," *Universal Access in the Information Society* (2025). Among computer-literate participants, fewer than half were aware an open-data portal existed; use concentrated among professional users.
- 6 Josh Constine, "Sean Parker's Brigade Joins Countable," *TechCrunch* (May 2019); Matt Mahan, "Brigade Joins Countable!" (2019). Brigade's funding, the "debates" pivot, and its founder's account of why it failed.

