Chapter One

Political Awareness and Symmetric Vision

Evaluating the Online Government Initiative Liquid Friesland from an Openness Perspective

By Simon Neuland

1 Introduction

In February 1980, the pilot of the popular British TV-series 'Yes, Prime Minister' aired under the title *open government*. In one scene, Sir Arnold vividly shares with the viewer his thoughts on the openness of government in a dialogue with Bernard Woolley: "My dear boy, it is a contradiction in terms: you can be open or you can have government" (Stanley, 2013). A clear statement, which however seems to have lost some of its truth during three decades; indeed, facilitating greater openness seems to have become a quasi-panacea for some of the maladies of contemporary western democracies – a growing political resentment amongst citizenries and a related alienation from the work of elected officials. A common element to most approaches to openness of governments – may they be theoretical or practical – is the idea of transparency. More precisely, one element inherent in the openness of governments is understood as the degree to which citizens are able to monitor and scrutinize the work of governments (Meijer et al, 2012). Well in line with this conception, attempts to facilitate a greater openness of governments – from the United States to Europe and from supranational to community level – revolve around making political decisions and processes more visible and hence more comprehensible for citizens. And indeed, reviews of such initiatives suggest their positive effect on trust and confidence in the political realm as perceived by citizens (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006).

A critical remark this essay makes in this respect is that openness of governments is rarely understood in terms of citizens' visibility, that is, the degree to which elected officials are alert and aware of the needs and wants of citizens. A practical value of perceiving openness from this stance is to enable governments to govern closer to the people. The issue is then to assess in how far governments are open towards citizens' input, in contrast to

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citizens' scrutiny. Consequently, the author suggests a more symmetric conceptualization of openness, which takes into account both modes of visibility: the advantage of such an approach is that openness facilitated along these lines would not only foster confidence, but also awareness of citizens, thus addressing democratic legitimacy from two sides.

When it comes to the implementation of a holistic approach to openness, it must be realized that both angles of visibility require different measures in practical terms. Openness aimed at enabling citizen's examination of governments necessitates channels which enable governments to become transparent, for example via information policies. In contrast, greater awareness of citizens demands first and foremost channels via which politicians are able to monitor the deliberations and concerns of the public. Many governments have already successfully implemented solutions which enable the visibility of their work. Often, these initiatives rely on the internet, as access to the web becomes increasingly widespread and common in western countries. Following the authors' vision of a symmetric structural implementation of openness, the already existing online patterns for government visibility are ideally complemented by web-based solutions for citizens' visibility.

Liquid Friesland is one such initiative, an online citizen participation platform in the municipality of Friesland, Germany. Via the platform, citizens are given the instruments to engage in debates about local topics of their concern. Through adopting features of social networks, Liquid Friesland displays a new and innovative design to better comprehend and illustrate deliberations of the local citizenry. In this sense, Liquid Friesland could bear the capacities to move from a one-sided approach to openness of government to a two-dimensional structure, when implemented in addition to information platforms. Related to this is the core of this essay; it is to be assessed whether or not Liquid Friesland is efficient and sustainable in making citizens visible to elected officials. Given the novelty of the initiative, an answer to this problem is interesting especially for governments attempting to complement existing structures of openness and visibility with a channel for citizens. Even though the test-phase of Liquid Friesland has not ended with the finishing of this essay, a preliminary evaluation will already allow conclude insights about the practical functioning of the initiative and its feasibility as a role model for future designs.

The first part of this chapter will provide the reader with a more nuanced insight into the notion *openness of government*, and explore its relation with ideas from the field of transparency theory. Building upon these insights, a symmetric conceptualization of the notion will be developed. Exploring the benefits of symmetry over asymmetry with regards to the citizens-governments-visibility relationship will be the subject matter of the subsequent section. For the purpose of the case study, a thorough description of Liquid

Friesland will be provided, prior to the assessment of the initiative. Regarding this last part, Anttiroiko and Malkia (2007) provide useful stipulations for an evaluable formulation of efficiency and sustainability.

2   Open Government

The openness of governments has become an increasingly frequent buzzword amongst the nucleus of academic literature on transparency (see for example Meijer, 2012; Wei, 2000; Coglianese, 2009). Simultaneously, also the political world seems to have re-discovered the importance of the concept; as part of his 2009 electoral promises, Barack Obama issued a memorandum as introduction to his open government initiative, advocating that "openness will strengthen [US] democracy and promote efficiency and effectiveness in government" (Obama, 2009). In a similar vein, the German government has recently launched an open government project. Just as in the American counterpart, efficiency and effectiveness are the two keywords emerging from the rationale behind the initiative. In the view of the German government however, these advantages are complemented by the promise of improved solidarity amongst all societal groups (Bundesregierung, 2013). These differing views suggest that the openness of governments is not a straight-forward concept when it comes to a definition or its possible effects. It is thus helpful to take a closer look at the term, and see how it can be conceptualized from a theoretical perspective.

At first sight, the notion of open government may appear as a more ideologically biased than an objective concept, an abstract term trying to encapsulate the desirability of governaning close to the people – as Abraham Lincoln famously put it in the Gettysburg Address, "government of the people, for the people, with the people" (MacNamara, 2013). Within democratic systems, the openness of governments can thus be understood as a form of normative continuum; towards one side, openness diminishes and governments act increasingly autonomous and in isolation of their demos. Towards the other end, governments come closer to Lincoln's ideal, through increased interaction with, but also awareness of citizens. Consequently, the openness of governments is not a static notion but more of a dynamic concept, with the implication that the design of government allows for movement along this continuum. To realize such movement in the direction of greater openness, it is necessary to elaborate in greater depth on the notion of open government and how it can be conceptualized for an operational approach. This way, one can grasp which factors affect openness, and hence which variables can be manipulated in order to

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achieve a more open government and greater transparency to the public. To recall, Meijer (2012) provides insight in this regard by conceptualizing openness as comprising of two constitutive dimensions, namely vision and voice. The second dimension, vision, requires a more detailed deliberation for the purpose of this paper, with a brief excursion to basic transparency-related literature. The reason for this is that, along the lines of Meijer, vision refers to the ability of citizens to monitor the actions of governments (ibid). Combined with voice, Meijer arrives at the definition of openness provided in the introduction to this volume. Yet as will be suggested in the course of this essay, this definition grasps vision only from one possible dimension. A comprehensive definition of open government should ideally pay tribute to the fact that vision is a more nuanced notion.

3   A Symmetric Framework for Openness

When considering to the notion of openness of governments along the lines of Meijer (2012), it can be seen that a distinction has to be made not only between the two constitutive dimensions vision and voice, but also about the direction of the vision component. This suggests that enabling vision can have distinctive effects, depending on whether it is facilitated in an upwards or downwards manner. Ultimately, both directions would bring governments closer to being 'open' – either towards the scrutiny of citizens; or towards citizens themselves, that is, their thoughts, ideas and concerns. From this insight, the argument can be outlined, that in order to foster openness of government in a cohesive manner, there must be channels that enable for both upwards and downwards transparency. This situation, where vision is bi-directional on the vertical axis is referred to as "vertical transparency" (Hood & Heald, 2006). Given that dialogue ideally is in both directions, it can be argued that the vision dimension of open government should ideally be realized upwards and downwards; in other words, visibility should be facilitated from the citizen's and from the politician's point of view. A consequently adjusted definition of openness of governments – building upon Meijer et al. – would thus refer to:

The degree to which government encourages and facilitates the visibility of citizens, and the extent to which citizens can monitor and influence government processes through access to government information and decision-making arenas.

Designing open government approaches along these lines would foster accountability, trust and confidence on the one hand, while politicians would equally be strengthened in

their ability to more closely monitor and respond the wants of their citizenry. As is clear from the above, the visibility – or transparency – of citizens is an essential factor in this respect. Intuitive reactions triggered by the notion of a 'transparent citizen' may have a fairly negative bias and remind us of surveillance and control. Orwell's scenario in *1984* appears as a foreshadowing of recent CCTV trends in retrospect. Also the recent revelation of Prism, a software utilized by US intelligence agencies to extract, collect and surveil private user data from social networks has refueled debates about citizen's transparency (Biermann, 2013). Yet the Janus face also holds true for transparency, and suggests that despite the negativity and suspicion often attached to citizen transparency, it can – to a certain degree – be seen as a prerequisite for responsiveness. Responsiveness in turn can be perceived as an indicator for the legitimacy of politics in a democratic system – as Fox and Miller (1995) vividly envision with regards to greater openness towards citizens: "government[s] will continue to govern [...] but the more authentic the encounters with citizens will be, the less will government be 'they' and the more will it be 'we'" (p.128).

4   An Ear on the Ground

Consequently, for any democracy, communication and dialogue between citizens and politicians is an absolutely crucial element. Despite the trusteeship of the electorate, politicians should ideally be continuously attentive towards the wants and needs of citizens, which may alter more swiftly then the four year election cycle allows to express. Related to this is the focus of this essay, which is on the means by which politicians and governments can become more aware of citizen's concerns and ideas – and consequently more responsive. In the words of Hobolt and Klemmemsen (2005), political responsiveness is defined as the "congruence of collective political attitude towards political issues with the policy preferences and actions of elected officials" (p. 380). This conception suggests political responsiveness in the context of a vast public opinion on a certain topic or problematic. Responsiveness is likely in cases of general gravity and concern, given that irresponsiveness to the public deliberations may well result in so-called electoral sanction (ibid). Yet political responsiveness must also be considered on a smaller scale, where citizens have more nuanced and specific input and ideas, which might not initially find attention due to a lack of platform.

The importance of responsiveness is not only related to the social contract with citizens, but more pragmatic, also to the efficiency of politics. Not responding to the stipulations of citizens means losing a valuable partner and source of inspiration, and prevents

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governments from utilizing the "widely scattered knowledge of society" (Bundesregierung, 2013), for example with regards to the design, shaping and implementation of new legislation and local projects (Cooper & Bryer, 2006;). And while citizen input in general is an important factor to take into account, there are voices which argue that the facilitation of means to include citizen's expertise is ever more pressing in today's environment:

"[The] assumptions of representative democracy, where citizens elect one of their own to represent their voice in government, 'may have been more meaningful in smaller communities faced with relatively slow change'. Modern society is now confronted with rapid change and complex issues and there is an increasing difficulty for elected representatives to manage effectively the diverse social, environmental and economic interests of their local constituents. This suggests 'the need to include a wider range of knowledge in decision making' (Cuthill & Fien, 2005, p.64, citing Bloomfield et al. 1998:8) Extending the range of input more to citizens than existing structures allow for should thus be seen as a desirable goal, not only from a political-philosophical, but also from an administrative point of view. To be sure, trends amongst governments to enhance citizen participation and information are not solely explicable through ideological deliberations or the increasing complexity of our contemporary world. Attempts on the side of authorities to render administration more cost efficient have certainly contributed to the prominence of means to include citizens more closely in the governing process. Co-production designs for example usually combine citizen's input with the partial delegation of certain public services such as neighborhood security to the local citizenry, and have long been realized in the United States (Levin & Fisher, 1984). Economic deliberations are thus also part of more contemporary approaches to citizen's inclusion. Even though directing greater attention towards the opinions and ideas of citizens is not comparable to US coproduction initiatives in that there is no delegation of physical tasks, costs may be reduced for instance at the planning stage of legislation, where citizens contribute by virtue of their "time, expertise and effort" (Linders, 2012, p.446, citing Horne & Shirley, 2009).

The question remains how to channel input, both collective and individual, to the political realm. Generally, visibility can be approached from two sides; on the one hand, citizens themselves may take the initiative, for example by forming interest groups, starting offline petitions or approaching politicians in person. Yet rallying support of fellow citizens for an idea or concern, for example through classic citizen's initiatives, may be a cumbersome undertaking. At the end of the day, it is not only signatures that are to be raised, but prior to that, fellow citizens have to be alerted to a petition in the first place, prior to being informed about the factual background of an initiative. Alternatively, citizens have the opportunity to contact elected officials personally, for example via email,

telephone or in person. While this certainly offers *individuals* the chance to share their cause, there is little pressure and necessity to act for the politician when it is not clear that similar concerns are shared amongst the *collective* citizenry. Again, hand-signed petitions or comparable evidence of shared concerns or support are a necessary supplement to underline one's matter more clearly – and again, the realization is likely cumbersome, and might put off interested and engaged citizens due to the sheer organizational burden. On the other hand, visibility of citizens can be facilitated on the side of governments, by creating formal and streamlined opportunities for engagement. Vigoda (2002) points to the fact that "the needs and demands of a heterogeneous society are dynamic" (p.528), and thus to the urge of "develop[ping] systematic approaches to understanding it" (ibid). Following this statement, it seems plausible to facilitate a coherent and systemic approach on the side of governments to enhance citizen's transparency.

5   Putting Openness into Practice

Following the 'fashion' of openness, many governments have already adopted initiatives to foster vision and voice. A review of the relevant literature reveals that the majority of respective projects within a timeframe of approximately the last decade rely on the internet as a means to establish both dimensions (Linders, 2012; Silcock, 2001; Tat-Kei Ho, 2002; Irani et al, 2005). This utilization of the internet seems to come as the result of the general popularity and reach of the web; merely from 2007 to 2011, the average number of households in the EU with internet access has risen from 54% to 78% (Seybert, 2011). Thus, within mere decades, the internet has entered societies in a myriad of ways, thereby creating unprecedented opportunities for interaction and becoming an essential part of the lives of millions. One of those opportunities is certainly the easier and more comfortable possibilities to communicate with other people, compared to alternative means - in real time and without any geographical limitation.

Especially when translated into the political realm, the advantages of internet based communication solutions between citizens and politicians seem evident (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008). Given the amount of households with internet access, the creation of for example online information platforms seems as an almost logical decision in our age. With regards to citizen's visibility and participation, neglecting contemporary technical developments and the potential they bear for creating a systemic approach to upwards transparency would not only mean to close one's eyes in the light of progress. It would also imply to ignore contemporary trends within civic society, where people

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increasingly have become used to being heard and seen, and to raise their voice. Thus, instead of lacking behind contemporary technical and societal developments, these could be perceived as a stipulation to "'rethink traditional boundaries between individuals, the public, communities, and levels of government' in ways that 'dramatically alter how the public and government interact, develop solutions, and deliver services'" (Linders, 2012, p.446, citing Bertot et al, 2010).

In this respect, the literature review also suggests that the majority of scholars as well as government initiatives approach openness of governments – more specifically the vision dimension – from a downwards perspective. It seems as if up to now, the internet is in many cases first and foremost utilized for the purpose of achieving greater accountability and the reconciliation of trust in governments (Jaeger & Thompson, 2003). Notwithstanding this impression, there are indeed various initiatives which come closer to a bi-directional model of open government, by establishing vision in a vertical manner or by allowing for more direct participation (Saebo, et al, 2010). For these initiatives, the particular advantage of online solutions is that they "eliminat[e] the constraints of time and space" and allows users to "view, support, build from, and collaborate with the comments of others, resulting in a far more interactive process that significantly deepens and enriches stakeholder dialogue" (Linders, 2012, p.448, citing Carlitz & Gunn, 2002). Ideally, this resolves many of the primary issues associated with classic forms of channeling input which were briefly addressed before. Easing the process of providing input and drawing a more accurate picture of public opinion might encourage citizens to make stronger use of their abilities to express concerns and ideas to politicians.

The problem is however that these initiatives are often conducted on a national level, where, due to the mere scope of consideration, only major issues become visible and can be addressed. Comparable initiatives on a local level, where citizens input might be taken into account more immediately, and results might be more feasible for citizens remain scarce. As a result, there is an equal scarcity of literature on examples where the vision dimension of open government is realized through upwards transparency, creating a need to evaluate such approaches in terms of effectiveness and sustainability.

One such initiative, which aims at complementing downwards transparency with upwards transparency, is Liquid Friesland. The initiative is a pilot project by a local governments, taking place in the administrative district of Friesland in northern Germany. In the words of local politician, the major advantage of Liquid Friesland is that "it provides us with public opinion [...]. We cannot hire Forsa every time we want to know whether a proposal finds support or not" (Klug, 2012, cited in ZEIT, 2012). The project was initiated in November 2012 and runs for one year (ibid). Through enabling citizens to voice their

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opinion on existing proposals, or initiate their own, local authorities in Friesland have implemented a tool which potentially allows them to govern more open towards the needs of their citizenry.

Given that downwards transparency in Friesland is already enabled through the publication of relevant documents and information online, Liquid Friesland can be seen as an attempt to complement this status quo with a channel for upwards transparency, resulting in a bi-directional structure of open government in this particular district. Evaluating the pilot project will show whether or not Liquid Friesland is an efficient approach for enabling such a symmetrical form of openness, specifically by elaborating on its potential to make citizens visible. Prior to an evaluation, it is helpful to arrive at a fully fledged description of Liquid Friesland and its peculiarities. Firstly, describing its setup will illustrate how Liquid Friesland attempts to create a solution for citizen visibility from a theoretical point of view. Moreover, understanding the structure and the mechanisms behind the initiative is a precondition for assessing its performance from a practical point of view as the next step. Another advantage is that a thorough initial description makes it possible to conduct future comparative studies with regards to upcoming initiatives.

6   Liquid Friesland

Linders provides a descriptive framework, where he suggests that for a "robust typology" (ibid), it is useful to assess which type of "provider versus beneficiary" relationships a particular solution aims at establishing (ibid). Transferred to the idea of open government, this is interesting with regards to the distinction between upwards and downwards transparency; it shows, in this case, who provides information to whom, and how this is realized in a practical environment. This will illustrate how the two dimensions of openness, vision and voice, are realized in Liquid Friesland.. The main purpose is to give citizens an opportunity to raise awareness of their local representatives, as well as providing an additional channel for participation in the local political realm. In this sense, Liquid Friesland resembles the two constitutive dimensions of openness, vision and voice. To embed Liquid Friesland in a provider-beneficiary typology, it is first of all necessary to consider its specific design and execution.

At the heart of Liquid Friesland is an online forum, quite similar to Liquid Democracy, the internal consensus instrument of the German pirate party. The front page of the forum is divided into six topical sub-forums, which provide some preliminary structuring for all further contributions. Sub-forums include for example "Economy, Tourism, District

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Development and Finances", "Environment, Waste and Agriculture" and "Education, Sports and Culture"(Liquid Friesland, 2013). As can be seen, the formulation of topics is broad enough to include proposals from all aspects of local concern. Within each sub-forum, participants have the option to address a topic through posting a proposal, which, once submitted, passes through three phases; the first phase is termed the "neu-phase" (ibid). Newly raised topics and their related proposals must reach a quorum in order to move on to the "discussions-phase" (ibid). Here, participants of Liquid Friesland have the opportunity to comment on a given proposal, or propose amendments themselves. This can for example take the form of submitting an own, new formulation, or simply adding thoughts. The idea behind this phase is "to contemplate alternatives, improve proposals, and render them to majority appeal" (Meinen, 2013).

Moreover, participants are given the possibility to signal support for a proposal already during the discussion phase, if they anticipate their consent during the voting phase. A particular feature here is the option to give conditional support; a user can formulate a suggestion to the existing proposal, which either *should* or *must* be fulfilled for the participant to eventually consent. These suggestions in turn can be either supported or rejected as well by others. Even though the initial proponent is not bound to incorporate possible suggestions for amendment, there is some pressure to respond to other opinions, given that any user may create an alternative initiative next to the existing one, addressing the same topic. Alternatives that are raised will be attached to the initial proposal, and are not treated as a wholly new proposal. This way, a user who views a certain proposal will have an overview over the initial idea as well as all subsequent alternatives and amendments by others. Ideally, this structure fosters a dynamic evolution of proposals and the accompanying dialogue, while providing a platform of expression for the differing concerns and voices regarding a particular issue. Once the discussion phase is closed, the initial proposal together with all potential alternative proposals is frozen, that is, no further amendments are possible. In the frozen phase, participants can still view a topic, and within the topic the initial proposal as well as all subsequently submitted alternatives. Participants can than signal support for the proposals they prefer the most. All proposals of a topic that have reached a quorum of supporters move on to the voting phase. Here, users can vote for one proposal, or submit a preferential order for more than one proposals. This way, the risk of wasting a vote is minimized (Gallagher et al, 2011). Participants can furthermore signal which proposal they feel indifferent about, or vote negatively for proposals.

Eventually, the proposal to a particular topic having received the most votes is taken up by the district council for discussion. This leads to the execution of Liquid Friesland,

which is steered by the same body. Generally, the council has decided that only eligible voters who are citizens of Friesland are admitted to the platform. Since the aim is to create a solution for local open government, this seems plausible. On the one hand, it is the local citizenry that is to become visible to their authorities, and it is their concerns that shall be taken account of. On the other hand, this is also a necessary decision from an administrative point of view; if Liquid Friesland is to be implemented in existing political structures, only the local citizenry is allowed to decide upon their matters. Another executive decision related to participation was to implement a real name requirement instead of widely established nicknames to prevent the occurrence of internet trolls.

Evidently, one of the most notable mechanisms inherent in the design of Liquid Friesland is the possibility to interact directly with the content of other participants. Liquid Friesland thus seems to try to incorporate features that are already familiar from social networks such as Facebook, where the whole idea of 'liking' and bonding with fellow-minded individuals is a crucial element. Also the idea of commenting directly on others is a common practice, both in social networks and classic online forums. Adopting established practices bears the advantage of presenting users with an already familiar and thus arguably more intuitive environment. The question is now how the overall structure of Liquid Friesland – its design and execution – can be embedded in the theoretical insights provided by this essay. With regards to open government, and more specifically vision and voice, Liquid Friesland appears to resemble a combination of both dimensions, and thus bears the potential to foster greater openness. On the one hand, users can participate in the political realm, by submitting concrete solutions to topics they themselves identify.

While they do not have immediate access to the ultimate decision-making on a given proposal, citizens collectively are given the tools to decide which proposals they deem worthwhile to be forwarded for decision to the local council, and are thereby granted a certain degree of access. It is important to note in this regard that the outcomes of Liquid Friesland are meant as a stipulation and illustration of public opinion, and are thus not binding for the council (Baars, 2013). This means that a proposal, despite finding much support, may well be rejected on the final level. This explains why Liquid Friesland is first and foremost considered an instrument for visibility and not for decision making in this essay; factually, Liquid Friesland does not empower citizens to take a political decision. Yet participation through the formulation of topics and related proposals give politicians an impression of the recent concerns of their citizenry. And while this could be said for other e-participation initiatives, the particular design of Liquid Friesland greatly enhance its potential to make citizens' opinions transparent. Compared to other initiatives, politicians are not merely presented with a final proposal to decide upon. Instead, the

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system of supporting, commenting and amending allows for comprehending the entire discourse that led there; this means that apart from the outcome proposal, politicians can view all voices, opinions and considerations that have been shared during the discussion phase. This is especially important with regards to the quorum system, which acts as a preliminary filter to ensure that only proposals with actual majority appeal proceed to a decision stage. If politicians would only see the final result, this system would imply that less popular proposals, including related comments and deliberations become invisible.

Applying Linders' typology, it becomes clear that amongst "Do it yourself government" and "Government as a platform", the idea behind Liquid Friesland seems to suit best the idea of "Citizen sourcing", where "the public helps governments to be more responsive and effective [...] influence[s] direction and outcomes [and] improve[s] the government's situational awareness" (ibid). In terms of provider/beneficiary dimension, this category constitutes a "citizens to government" relationship, and is thus generally in line with Hood and Heald's concept of transparency upwards (ibid). Citizens provide insight into their experiences and views, while politicians benefit from this information in terms of their capacities to govern. Next to voice, Liquid Friesland thus enables transparency in an upwards manner, since the focus lies on surfacing a picture of the public opinion on matters they raise opposed to providing information from the side of government. Vision and voice thereby seem to follow a synergistic relationship (Meijer et al, 2012); participation enhances visibility, and visibility in turn ideally fosters governments to be closer to the wants and needs of citizens.

7   Evaluation

From a theoretical stance, Liquid Friesland has been shown to constitute a means for enabling vision in an upwards manner. In this, and by complementing existing channels for downwards transparency, it could be an instrument for arriving at a vertical, bi-directional structure of open government in Friesland. The question remains however if Liquid Friesland is an *effective* and *sustainable* approach in this respect; although effectiveness and sustainability are two closely related notions here, both aim at investigating distinct problems. The former is intended to assess, quite simply, if Liquid Friesland is successful in achieving its designated purpose. Specifically for this case, and building upon the previous description, answering this question requires to critically analyze if the initiative facilitates citizens visibility not only from a theoretical point of view, but also in practice. Regarding sustainability, the primary question is whether or not "the initiative provide[s]

a durable and generalisable approach to achieving the desired outcomes" (Anttiroiko & Malkia, 2007). Thus, answering the latter question builds upon the insights of the former; if Liquid Friesland fulfills its purpose in a practical environment, can it function as a role model for other administrative districts? And, is its success or failure likely to be temporary or of steady nature?

As has been stated throughout the essay, the purpose of Liquid Friesland is to gain an insight into the deliberations of the local citizenry, by creating a channel for participation through concrete proposals and discussions. The primary prerequisite for the practical functioning of the platform is thus active participants. As of the 10th of May 2013, 472 users were registered with Liquid Friesland, that is, have requested an access key to the platform (Liquid Friesland, 2013). This number is contrasted with 79,922 eligible voters in the district of Friesland as of the 31st of January 2013 (LSKN, 2013). As is evident from these numbers, there is a substantial gap between the size of the local citizenry and the number of people active on Liquid Friesland. With regards to citizen's visibility, the question of whether or not this constitutes a problem is a normative issue; if the initiative is to be understood as merely yet another channel for input, a representative picture of the citizenry via this medium is not necessarily required. The picture drawn by Liquid Friesland would then function as an addition to the overall perception of politicians regarding the needs and wants of their citizenry.

On the other hand, the issue of representativeness can be viewed more critically. Liquid Friesland grants citizens a certain agenda setting power for the local council, given that debates that subsequently proceed through the forum may eventually be taken up on the political level if they find enough support from amongst the user base. From this point of view, the relatively insignificant number of users becomes more problematic. Liquid Friesland could function as an instrument for some to direct political attention towards their matter, while potentially critical voices amongst the citizenry are simply not shown due to a lack of participation. From a democratic point of view, this would be a bearable situation if the lacking participation was solely explained through a lacking willingness of the remaining citizenry to participate. As Vigoda (2002) underlines, it is certainly no surprise that the introduction of innovative government initiatives is "frequently accompanied by lower willingness to share, participate, collaborate and partner with citizens" (p.528).

With regards to online openness approaches however, the situation is not quite as straightforward – the equality of access is a sensible issue in this respect (Anttiroiko & Malkia, 2007). Some people for example encounter no difficulties regarding their ability to use internet solutions, and are consequently in a good position to use Liquid Friesland for

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their cause. For others in turn, using the online platform can be highly problematic. This so-called digital divide can have various explanations; age for example is an important determinant to explain varying skills amongst societies regarding the use of the internet (Hilbert, 2011). Accordingly, young generations who grew up amidst contemporary technology prove to be more adept than older generations for whom computers and the internet have not necessarily become part of their every-day life (Hargittai, 2002). The initiators of Liquid Friesland try to respond to this issue by offering workshops through the local community college, aimed at providing interested citizens with a 'crash course' about the platform (Reinbold, 2012).

Yet not only age determines who may or may not capable of using Liquid Friesland. Much more fundamentally, entire villages remain without internet connection (ibid). Even if citizens are willing, they would be inevitably excluded from using Liquid Friesland from their homes. Although the problem of the digital divide is not a new phenomenon, its gravity increases in an environment where an intensive dialogue with participants from all societal, cultural and geographical would be desirable to draw an adequate cross-section of public opinion. If utilized primarily by a kind of 'technological elite', the picture drawn of public opinions, ideas and concerns in Liquid Friesland is likely to be biased towards the particular perceptions of this group. Upwards transparency continues to exist, yet certain doubts should be raised about the actual utility of this picture for politicians and their ability to respond to the deliberations of the citizenry at large.

Ignoring for the moment the lack of participants, it is found that the functioning of Liquid Friesland as such confirms the positive impression outlined in the description. Citizens have used the platform to point out topics and submitted concrete proposals. Moreover, users have utilized the possibilities to show their support, indifference or opposition towards the ideas of others. Also, alternative proposals and amendments to existing proposals have been made, thereby illustrating the expertise and deliberations of the participants. On the 9th of June 2013, the platform www.liquid –friesland.de shows that two topics have reached the discussion phase, one the frozen phase and one topic the voting stage. Moreover, a total of 33 topics have been voted upon, each resulting in one winning proposal. Eight topics were aborted for not having reached a quorum in the new phase. The topics which were addressed mostly cover local issues, and demonstrate a wide array of interest and engagement of the participants: the issues reach from suggestions about the public announcement of radar controls to requests about free access to the beach for locals. As is evident, participants who submit concrete proposals associated with the various topics use this opportunity to give concrete expression to their expectations or concerns.

Apart from creating topics and proposals, users also take the opportunity to comment on others and voice their own opinion on matters, which might differ from participants. As was anticipated, this creates are more nuanced and thus more valuable picture of public opinion for politicians. An example can be found for example in an initiative for local foodstuffs and consumer protection. A user takes up position on several points raised by the initiator of the topic, thereby critically yet constructively engaging with the matter. In terms of efficiency, Liquid Friesland thus currently yields a two-sided result. On the one hand, the innovative design of the platform fulfills its purpose, by drawing an interesting picture of the various opinions and ideas amongst the citizenry. Politicians have promised to consider finalized topics during the regular council sessions, where the stipulations of citizens have already led to a number of decisions, which is a positive signal from the political realm (Landkreis Friesland, 2013). On the other hand, participation of the citizenry in absolute numbers is in the per mille range, which raises doubts about the representativeness and hence the accuracy of this picture. With regards to sustainability, it is questionable whether Friesland will continue to finance the platform after the pilot has ended. Costs for the first year amounted to 11,400 €, a sum which is to be contrasted with a lacking achievement of the desired outcome. Already now, local politicians have voiced themselves critically in light of the low participation. Nonetheless, Liquid Friesland appears to be a worthwhile project, which demonstrates the new ways governments and citizens may take in the future. Once the issue of participation improves, both efficiency and sustainability of the approach will appear in a more positive light.

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8   Conclusion

As has been shown, a theoretical approach to openness of government with a focus on the vision dimension can rest either on a symmetrical or asymmetrical structure of visibility. The idea of transparency upwards and downwards illustrates this matter, and suggests that structures for both directions may complement each other for the sake of vertical transparency. From a more practical stance, online initiatives for openness of governments often resemble an asymmetric design, and seem to be concerned mostly with the establishment and maintenance of trust and confidence in politics. As was shown however, making citizens visible to their elected officials bears advantages for both citizens and politicians. Especially on local level, where citizens are likely to have very concrete ideas, concerns or opinions about political issues, the facilitation of upwards transparency can be a valuable asset. At the same time, politicians may profit from the expertise and the insights of their citizenry in day-to-day matters. Overall, it can well be argued that a symmetric implementation of open government structures in terms of visibility is mutually beneficial for both the citizens and the political realm.

By virtue of its organization, Liquid Friesland is an online initiative which provides a structure for upwards transparency in this respect. In addition to existing structures for information dissemination, it thus enables – in theory – a symmetric system of openness in Friesland. Inspired by social networks, the design of the initiative offers a number of innovative features, aimed at drawing a dynamic picture of public opinion. By virtue of supporting and commenting on topics and proposals, a vivid picture is drawn of the differing views and deliberations which surround the interests of the local citizenry. Moreover, the ability to make concrete proposals or amendments enables citizens to share their expertise on certain issues with the responsible politicians, and thereby function as a direct source of input for the legislative process. Again, the mutual scrutiny of proposals through citizens via comments or concrete amendments or alternative suggestions enables politicians to sense the views of their citizenry on potentially delicate topics. Theoretically, this allows for a greater responsiveness to citizens than would be possible through classical means of communication.

Despite the theoretical strengths of Liquid Friesland, the case study has also surfaced a practical weakness of the initiative. When defining its desired effect as drawing a picture of the citizenry within the municipality, a critical observer must conclude that this is not the case. Recent figures suggest a user base of roughly 500 participants, in relation to approximately 80,000 eligible voters in the particular administrative district. In other words, the discussions on Liquid Friesland are far from representative for the citizenry

as a whole. In Friesland, this is seen as a minor problem (Bierman, 2012). The initiative is a pilot, and in the current state of affairs seen as an additional instrument of picturing public opinion rather than the one and only solution. Given the low number of users, the fact remains however that the platform itself is apt to draw a biased pictures due to a lack of dialogue amongst a representative sample of citizens. Moreover, a fundamental issue is that not all citizens have equal opportunities to participate in the forum, even if they wished to. Moving away from Friesland and towards a general applicability, Liquid Friesland is not a wholly efficient instrument in making the local citizenry visible – and in consideration of the annual expenses, also not a sustainable approach.

This finding requires some qualification nonetheless; this is because Liquid Friesland in itself indeed gives the impression of a promising concept, both in terms of idea and design. The problem of participation does not appear to be directly rooted in the peculiarities of the initiative. Much rather, the lacking participation merely seems to reflect the passiveness of a society which is either not used, or not motivated to engage in local matters. On the one hand, this might be explicable through particular political cultures. The spirit of civic engagement in the local political realm which Tocqueville so excitedly describes in his writings about America is not necessarily something that has developed in European nations to an equal extent. This should however not discourage the efforts of governments to subsequently open up channels to their citizenry. Societies are dynamic, and we might gradually witness a change in attitude, and a greater level of public participation and engagement with politics. Liquid Friesland – in theory – constitutes a promising instrument to achieve upwards transparency; the issue of participation is not inherent in the initiative, and will likely be experienced with other approaches as well. In this sense, the initiative may have the potential to convince Sir Arnold that the contradiction of openness and government is not so contradictory at last.

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