

From Data to Civic Engagement

■ indicates to advance the slide, it's a note to self

Hi there. I'm Josh Tauberer, I'm the co-founder of POPVOX.com and also the proprietor of GovTrack.us.

■ Okay you all know refrigerator poetry right? Magnetic words and you arrange them on your refrigerator to say something deep, right? So one day I'm out in a store buying a pack of refrigerator poetry. And I get home, and I open the pack, and the words are already glued together. It's already been put into a poem and you can't rearrange it. Didn't make any sense. Now the poem was great. It touched me. It was this poem on the slide. It's deep. But gluing the pieces together locked away the joy I could get out of the 40,319 other poems I could make with these eight pieces.

Refrigerator poetry is a lot like data. Data is building blocks. It has limitless potential for new applications, and our government produces a heck of a lot of raw data that can be used for civic projects of all kinds. ■ Open data from the Census Bureau on the nation's roads, satellite imagery from the U.S. Geological Survey, and GPS signals from government satellites have been turned into the online maps we use every day. The National Weather Service fuels our country's weather reports. Demographic data has been used to choose appropriate locations for charter schools in Baltimore, and data on reading proficiency lead to the creation of a Chief Reading Officer position in a county in Tennessee. All of these applications are based on what I call "data as civic capital." Government spreadsheets, databases, and other digital records solve real problems in our lives when they get into the hands of entrepreneurs, journalists, programmers, designers, statisticians, and researchers in the private sector.

And of course that's hardly even to speak of applications for civic engagement. Seven years ago I launched my first attempt to solve a problem using government data. GovTrack.us was the first website to present to the American public a unified account of what Congress was doing, along with tools to track future legislative activity. The site includes bill status, voting records, and biographical information on Members of Congress. And from maps like these [driving directions] ■ I built maps that show congressional district outlines that you can zoom in to street level which helps people figure out who actually represents them in government. And the site has RSS feeds and provides email updates --- which you might remember as having been cool seven years ago. At the moment the site is in some sore need of updates.

■ Now, what's the point of all of this? Government transparency is a part of it. But I'm actually pretty cynical of transparency these days because as much as you try to shine a light on what our government is doing, the real decision-making always moves to just off stage. That's upsetting at first, but when you accept it as a fact of life you find other applications of government data much more rewarding. So the first category of open government data applications I've already talked about --- that's data used as what I call civic capital, and that helps us make practical decisions in our everyday lives and makes the things we do each day better.

GovTrack is the sort of open government application that I'd put in the category of "democratizing primary legal materials" because it gives wider access to the basic building blocks of law. That promotes civic education, reduces the cost of regulatory compliance for small businesses, and provides wider access to justice. ■ And that civic education component is really important. I like to think that when a bill number --- like H.R. 3200 --- is said on air during a late night TV show that I might have contributed to the greater public consciousness of the legislative process. These are episodes of the Daily Show and Late Night with Jimmy Fallon when they've dug into legislative

matters in surprising detail for a late night now. And it encourages me --- it says the American public wants the details and wants to be involved, but they want their government information in the right format. That's a huge opportunity for us programmers who can take government data that consumers don't want and transform it by rearranging those refrigerator poetry pieces into something consumers do want and can use.

■ The last sort of open government application is the open government business. Here I mean companies whose mission is to use government data in the furtherance of an open, transparent, or collaborative government. So I have a business like that. It's called POPVOX.com. ■ And the basic idea is that Congress is overloaded. Congressional offices receive more than 300 million emails a year, per day that's around 300 to 2,000 emails for each congressional office. Now knowing this number, you could imagine that these communications clog email in-boxes. ■ Congressional offices only have a few staffers to process the incoming letters and to write bulk responses. Some offices tally the constituent opinions in the letters, but no one is really reading the letters, and again it's not that no one cares. Congressional offices really do want to hear from their constituents. At the least it's important for them to know what their voters care about. But they get so much mail they couldn't possibly read it all. That's really unfortunate. Americans put in a lot of time into writing these letters.

But we know what makes a letter most effective, and we created a website to help the public be their own personal advocates without wasting their time. On POPVOX.com you can weigh in on any bill currently before Congress. ■ Here [on the slide] we're also featuring proposals the Super Committee is likely to be considering. ■ We'll deliver your letter to Congress electronically --- and we're working with Congressional staff on modernizing their mail systems --- but what makes POPVOX more effective is that your letter is public and becomes a part of the POPVOX bill report. ■ Our report shows support and opposition on a map, we have charts, and you can read what others are saying. And not just you, but the media can see it. And you can see what Congress sees so you know what the public is really saying, not what some press office wants you to think the public is saying.

What really excites me about POPVOX is that we're addressing the needs of three groups who need to get on the same page about what advocacy works. The public. Congress. And advocacy organizations. ■ For advocacy organizations, we built the coolest widget you can place on your website to drive your membership to write letters to Congress.

We launched in January and in this short time we've delivered hundreds of thousands of messages to Congress, and many of those messages have gotten replies that make our users feel like they are a part of the government process --- which is how American government should be.

So what's this all about? This is open government meets ■ Big Data. Big Data is two things. First, it's data at scale. So we're dealing with data not just on one bill but on all ten thousand bills before Congress, not just one letter to Congress but hundreds of thousands. That opens up new opportunities. The second crucial part of Big Data is that it changes the way we think about the subject of the data. At scale, we can talk about disruptive technology, disintermediating lobbying, making individuals their own advocates, and changing the way government decision-making works. It's not just that we have more data, but that we're transforming the data in ways that changes how our society works.

■ And this is the open government data movement, and if you're interested in getting more involved you can either let me hire you, or join me at an open data hackathon next month, or come to the Transparency Camp conferences.....