

NASA's Open Government Plan Shoots for The Stars

April 15, 2010

What makes a good open government plan? Specifics. As I noted in a [guest blog post at GovFresh](#) [1], many open government plans are short on details outside the sections dealing with their [flagship initiatives](#) [2] - those projects slated to be started immediately. Missing from many plans are, well, plans - what agencies will be doing over the next year, the next five years, or ten years to follow through on promises to become more open. There are aspirational promises of openness, but hoping and wishing will not make it so. Agencies need to have a well-developed plan for how they will increase transparency, participation, and collaboration in the next few years in order to enable their success and the success of the [White House Open Government Initiative](#) [3].

While most Open Government Plans lacked the specifics that allow implementation, some plans were exceptional both in content and detail. For example, after reading the NASA plan, I was excited and energized by the level of care that had been put into each section, and felt that NASA had the tools to implement their plan. Instead of promising to “explore” using social media or the ways that people could participate, NASA outlined the structure and operations planned for their Participatory Exploration Office, intended to make NASA missions more participatory and collaborative. Granted, this office dates back to the 2008 NASA Reauthorization Act, but it is still an ambitious and well-developed plan for engaging the public in NASA’s mission and includes new projects.

NASA has long understood that the public likes space. It’s an easy sell to the public - even I was sucked into their [“Be A Martian” tool](#) [4], which engages the public by letting us help NASA map planets and moons. To date, they have used social media and shared scientific data sets with the public without the need for an executive order. They’re well on their way to using outreach tools within the policy boundaries (they’re [archiving their social media](#) [5], for instance) and pressing for more openness in their operations. They already made much of their data available on their own website, and operated a cloud computing initiative used by other agencies. They already has a comprehensive policy governing (rather than prohibiting) how NASA scientists and experts interact with media and the public.

The Open Government Directive required agencies to describe many aspects of how the agency will conduct it’s work - but some agencies interpreted a description as simply stating that their work would be transparent. Instead, the NASA plan put forth concrete performance goals for the next three to five years - in the introduction, no less. Similar timelines for projects are scattered throughout the plan, making it clear that those drafting the plan wanted to ensure that these projects were deasible and well-developed. And, almost as if to make it easier for open government advocates like me to evaluate the plan (CDT is working with [OpenTheGovernment.org](#) [6] and others to evaluate all open government plans independently of the White House review), NASA included a matrix explaining how they believed they had completed most of the requirements of the Open Government Directive within their plan. Very useful - and it made it easy to go check and see whether I agreed with their self-assessment.

Since NASA already does an impressive job of engaging the public, their open government plan could have been a relatively small set of continued projects without many new initiatives. Instead, they have set forth ambitious goals and concrete projects that they are going to use to further engage with the public and streamline internal collaboration. This is what an open government plan should be - and what I hope to see in the next iteration of agency plans.

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[1] <http://govfresh.com/2010/04/flagship-initiatives-shine-in-open-government-plans/>

[2] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/open/documents/flagship-initiatives>

[3] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/open>

[4] <http://beamartian.jpl.nasa.gov/>

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