



COVID-19: The challenges and opportunities for Canadian interoperability and open government

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As we engage our networks, including provincial and federal governments, to understand the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a range of data issues are coming to light that have repercussions on Canadian open government practices, namely: coordination, standardization and communication of data. This is also Canada's opportunity to assert leadership globally and to demonstrate the application of open government in support of its crisis response.

COORDINATION AND STANDARDISATION

Coordination and standardisation of data has long been a challenge in Canada, particularly with its federated form of government and its multiple levels of jurisdiction. These issues are well known to the Canadian government - the Privy Council Office addressed them recently through its [Data Strategy Roadmap for the Federal Public Service](#), which sets out recommendations on coordination and collaboration between federal agencies and other Canadian governments, as well as non-government sectors. One of the issues outlined is the **intragovernmental sharing of data**.

The open government community in Canada has been spurred to revisit key issues such as data availability. A brief look at health surveillance forms reveals **different formatting across provinces** (for example, see forms from [BC Centre for Disease Control](#), [Manitoba Public Health](#), [HSS Northwest Territories](#), and the [federal government](#)). They appear to be designed for completion in analogue form, with similar questions framed with different field types.

Variations in requirements to report information (such as the person's origin) or even formatting of fields (such as dates), bring into question certain data practices: What standards are being used and complied with at the provincial level to support data sharing? How accurate do records remain when they may need to be updated and corrected over time?

Other elements of the pandemic response, such as **government inventories of medical stockpiles and how they are distributed**, are also key data issues that require standards and documentation to improve data sharing (and thus coordination on resource allocation).

✓ **A central online repository that presents a single interface to data could help improve data accessibility:** The Government of Canada provides a centralised public health [website](#). However, the resources contained within can be difficult to navigate or search through, with the main page's structure differing from subpages, and resources confined to static lists of links.

Standardising access (with regular updates) to disparate data sources, websites, and software, could significantly improve coordination of efforts and increase transparency on the availability of data and information resources. This can help governments with their decision making and coordination, especially when they know what their neighbours have implemented. The [EU Digital Response to COVID-19](#), hosted on the EU's [joinup](#) platform is a key example of this type of initiative. However, their implementation requires significant manual effort in integrating and sorting information provided by the public.

✓ **Further integration of Canadian national and provincial reporting practices:** Standardised COVID-19 reporting forms that utilise the same field definitions and are accompanied by document tracking will go a long way to helping governments combine data for analysis.

A review and improvement of reporting mechanisms could benefit government coordination efforts. Standardised mechanisms for reporting COVID-19 that are enforced nationwide would support government coordination, while standardised forms for organisations in the public/social and private sector to report on their inventories and capacity (e.g. production capacity, mask stockpiles, availability of shelter) would help provide a better picture of where resources are and where they are needed. Some of these mechanisms may exist already, such as Canadian government surveys of private sector firms.

COMMUNICATING THE DATA

Making data open and accessible is but one part of the job. **Explaining the data** is another.

The Federal Government is providing some basic analysis of the pandemic in Canada, but gives little room to draw deeper insights. While it does provide analysis related to certain demographics, the federal government website does not break it down by province. This is perhaps a consequence of the differentiations in reporting mechanisms of each province. At the moment, a researcher would have to download and join up data from each province one-by-one, or go directly to individual health centres themselves, in order to develop a more detailed picture of what is happening across the country.

✓ **Sharing insights on data, collections methods, and revisions:** While this federal government [epidemiological summary webpage](#) is being updated daily, it is primarily the figures that are updated, not the analysis. A series of written analyses, rather than a single webpage or dashboard with charts, can help communicate the data more clearly to viewers. Dashboards with daily statistics are important, but can be difficult to keep track of when the situation is changing rapidly. Because of this, documentation on how the data or analysis has changed may also be useful.

Finally, understanding exactly how a statistic, map, or chart, came into being can set public expectations of the data and what we may conclude from them. While revealing data collection and processing methods can be a scary prospect (a side effect may be exposure of weaknesses in government data), it is really about [building trust](#) through transparency.

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We work with a wide diversity of innovative and connected public administrations and community stakeholders to build their efficient, ethical, and collaborative use of data and technology to solve complex problems. We sustain global peer-to-peer networks for knowledge sharing that improves smart and open governance practices for citizens across Canada and the world.

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