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23rd World Congress of Political Science
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Challenges of Contemporary Governance
Les défis de la gouvernance contemporaine

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Open Big Spatial Data: From Procedural to Discursive Accountability?

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The rise of big data—data by and about people, things and their interactions—as a sociotechnical phenomenon is forcing scholars to interrogate its biases, which are now hotly debated in the literature. A well-known bias concerns the new classes of people emerging in the realm of big data. The smallest and most privileged new class is the one possessing big data analysis expertise. In this paper, we present first insights from the analysis of data on water point functionality covering an entire nation in the South. The data collection in this international development intervention was funded by financing and donor institutions (financier) on behalf of a ministry (client) and was executed by a consortium of private companies (consultant). Often development interventions frame wicked problems (e.g. easy access to safe water) as structured, with consultants being accountable for the appropriate execution of adequate procedures (procedural accountability) in a technical game. Drawing upon ongoing research, we argue that the openness of such big data may create spaces for the new privileged class of big data analysts to reframe the problem as moderately structured with goal consensus as well as to create opportunities for discursive accountability for all main actors—the financier, client and consultant—in the development intervention.

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