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UNIFIED DATA

Free 'Open' Data From Your Government

Robert Plant, Associate Professor, School of Business Administration, University of Miami
2/13/2013
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If the future corporate currency is data then it follows that the wealth of nations correspondingly will also be derived from the data generated by the people and their governments.

This is the premise behind the concept of "open data," where data generated and owned by a government is made available for use by anyone, for any purpose, at no cost.

The UK has taken a lead in this movement with the creation of the Open Data Institute (ODI), founded in 2012, located in London, and presided over by Sir Tim Berners-Lee. ODI was granted £10 million in seed startup funding over five years by the UK Government's Technology Strategy Board, with the aim to "catalyse the evolution of an open data culture to create economic, environmental, and social value." The Institute has also attracted $750,000 in funding from eBay founder Pierre Omidyar and his wife through their Omidyar Network.

Frameworks to continue sharing
The ODI has several aims. One is to work towards the establishment of licensing frameworks for open data; these include guidelines for posting and use. For example: "that people who use the data must credit whoever is publishing it (this is called attribution)" and "that people who mix the data with other data have to also release the results as open data (this is called share-alike)."

ODI also acts as an incubator and currently has four active startups:

- **Open Corporates'** aim is to become "The Open Database of the Corporate World," complete with a URL of every company in the world, and to act as a repository of all government data connected to those companies.

- **Placr** is an organization that aims to "create a single UK source of transport information by unification of timetable, live departure and disruption information for bus, rail, metro and ferry services."

- **Mastodon C** (whose Francine Bennett currently writes for Big Data Republic; see Big Data Can Save Millions – in Surprisingly Simple Ways) is a firm that provides a "self-managing Hadoop cloud platform" environment for big data sets, favoring a sustainable, zero-carbon datacenter approach towards the processing.

- **Locatable** uses big data to help users decide where to live in London.

Prime for entrepreneurship
The ODI is an example of a new gateway for big data entrepreneurship, one where the entrepreneur does not have to create his own dataset but, rather, be creative with someone else's. The British Government's site, DATA.GOV.UK, has 9,026 databases that can be used. These include a wide variety of data sets. Some of the more popular ones are: Road Safety; Social Trends; GB Road Traffic Counts; and Population Estimates by Broad Age Band.

Similar open data initiatives have been created in France, where through Etalab, the government has made 350,000 government-generated datasets available to the public. In the US, DATA.GOV, under the Open Government Initiative, provides access to datasets generated and held by the federal government. Popular US datasets include: Worldwide M1+ Earthquakes in the Past 7 Days; US Overseas Loans and Grants; TSCA Inventory; and the Personnel Trends by Gender and Race.

Entrepreneurs wishing to embrace big open data sources should consider the following three issues in developing their plans:

- First, it is worthwhile to remember that this is *open* data. The positives are that for many of the data sources the data will continue to grow, and be updated free of charge. The negative is that you don't have exclusive rights to that data. Competitors can and will take the data and leverage it for their own products that may overlap your space.

Government open data initiatives encourage individuals to take and continue sharing datasets.

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- Second, as the data alone cannot be the provider of competitive advantage, innovation must come from other strategies. These will include the integration of multiple datasets, processes that develop the value within the data, and value-added services that can be driven around the data.

- Third, over-reliance upon one dataset will be a potential liability, as its closure will have the potential to prevent the endeavor being current. Diversification or duplication in data sources should be considered as part of the strategy, especially for unique, high-value datasets.

As data transitions from being a commodity or by-product of a society to being recognized as a truly valuable asset, entrepreneurs will increasingly face competition from established corporations and even governments that will wish to provide data-driven services. Thus the window of opportunity to act may be short. So, entrepreneurs should reflect on the notion of *carpe diem*, embrace the big open data innovation journey, and move forward quickly to gain that important first-mover advantage.

Related posts:

- Why Open-Source Is Making Waves in the UK Public Sector
- How Big Data Analytics Lead to a National Competitive Advantage
- Big Data Can Save Millions – in Surprisingly Simple Ways

— Robert Plant, *Associate Professor, School of Business Administration, University of Miami*

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technetronic, User Rank: Blogger
2/19/2013 | 11:30:45 AM

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Re: The priority must be to protect citizens
Really good point James -- ultimately all good data comes from the same reality so reconstituting a sense of reality from multiple datasets can reveal anonymized data.

This networkworld article references Microsoft research showing how difficult it is to just stay anonymous on the regular web.

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Saul Sherry, User Rank: Blogger
2/15/2013 | 1:00:24 PM

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Re: Open Data
Seems these guys would be the best place to start: http://media.visitflorida.org/

Hopefully you are right, and these government initiatives can spread, so local economies can benefit from the data used.

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brad5131, User Rank: Bit Player
2/15/2013 | 12:53:17 PM

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Re: Open Data
@Saul That is a good question, I'm sure some agency down here has a large amount of tourist data but I would have to do some research to find out who. I just think about all of the great weather apps that came out with open source weather data, it's reasonable to believe the same could be done in other areas.

You're right it would be interesting to intersect weather patterns with tourism in Miami to see what would come up. Very thought provoking article.

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Saul Sherry, User Rank: Blogger
2/15/2013 | 12:02:17 PM

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Re: Open Data
@Brad what a great idea! Is there a central tourist board who would be the main collection point for that data? I imagine in that climate there would be a lot of cross pollination with weather based data sets as well.

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brad5131, User Rank: Bit Player
2/15/2013 | 11:47:35 AM

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Open Data
Great article, glad to see the UK taking that initiative to provide open source of data. Living in such a transient city like Miami I can only wonder what the possibilities would be to have a look at all our tourism data. Definitely a great time for entrepreneur's to act and create some really cool applications around these data sets. Hopefully this becomes the norm for other governments to follow and not an exception.

Brad

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Saul Sherry, User Rank: Blogger
2/15/2013 | 9:17:45 AM

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Re: The priority must be to protect citizens
@James good point. Open data providers like this probably rest on their laurels a little bit, thinking they have done due dilligence by scraping that identifying data out.

All it would take is one case where a data provider was ruled to have been 'jointly' responsible in outing private data and I am sure this would end.

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Media Pioneer Award Winner

James Robinson, User Rank: Blogger
2/15/2013 | 6:31:54 AM

The priority must be to protect citizens

I am strongly in favour of as much open government data as possible, however @sharco I have some reservations. It's absolutely key that the proper precautions are taken to prevent anonymity. One thing that must be remembered is that 2 datasets can well be more than the sum of their parts and this is espcially relevant to when it comes to anonymity. A dataset that has e.g. registered oweners of houses is not enough to rtrack people, but a dataset of anonymized user movements is (but you don't know who the poeple are). In combination ... you have something potentially quite dangerous. I'll write about this in future posts.

Sometimes I think governemnts do not realise this, for example the Hubway challenge http://hubwaydatachallenge.org/trip-history-data/ released data that Harvard researchers were able to recombine to track people. Governments must be wise to the potentially harmful uses of this data as well as the benefits.

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Saul Sherry, User Rank: Blogger
2/15/2013 | 5:00:03 AM

Re: And vice versa?
@Sharco, I would imagine it will be a case of businesses picking their options when it comes to sharing. Smaller businesses might like to throw their data in a pot with similar organisations - but those already established as larger will have more to protect....

Both sizes will see benefit from harnessing this government offered data though...

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Saul Sherry, User Rank: Blogger
2/15/2013 | 4:55:39 AM

Re: And vice versa?
@netcrawl, I'm sure in some ways the same can be said for government. If this is all the data they happily offer up, imagine what they are keeping hidden from eyes. I am starting to sound like a conspiracy theorist - and I don't mean to. But there must be sensitive data which COULD be anonymized and uploaded.

I like the fact that the 'suggest a data set' button looms large on data.gov.uk - a transparent and reactive service. Brilliant!

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Saul Sherry, User Rank: Blogger
2/15/2013 | 4:52:44 AM

Re: And vice versa?
It makes me quite excited... the possibilities are huge. Once companies have their internal data sorted, lined up and analyzable, the options are huge. Looking at data.gov.uk fills you with the possibilities... what kind of use could an organization get from a data set like "Household waste recycled and composted"? - start ups focused on reuasable materials? Packaging teams with an eco bent?

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