

The role of communication in building an open data ecosystem

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Abstract: This paper highlights the need to create spaces for communication between public bodies and the digital community, and between different public bodies, allowing the adoption and creation of business cases, demand side cases as well as forums for peer and community support, enabling a risk reduced environment for the release of open data. It aims to show that once a space for communication and trust is created, projects can be co-created. The paper focuses on the experiences of FutureEverything's Open Data Cities project, Open Data Manchester and DataGM – The Greater Manchester Datastore.

From the original enquiry question that initiated FutureEverything's Open Data Cities project in May 2009, "How would a city evolve if all data was made open? Would it evolve differently, or would it still have the same asymmetries and inequalities that we see in cities today?" The paper looks at the creation of pragmatic, non-partisan approaches, engaging with the executive and data managers of public bodies and the nurturing of a community around the release of open data in Manchester. It looks at how Open Data Cities pragmatic, non-partisan position became jeopardised after the General Election of 2010 and how the perception in some local authorities was that open data was an ideological initiative.

It looks at how the Open Data Manchester community - which was initially a community of developers and activists - has broadened into one containing both local and national public officials and how the forum has evolved into one where local public bodies seek advice so that data can be released. It draws on comparisons with the adoption of open data within cities such as Vancouver and how public transit authorities such as BART San Francisco use forums to remain relevant to their respective open data communities.

It draws on the experience of FutureEverything as a unique UK based organisation that is traditionally seen as a international festival of digital culture. How by drawing in a wide and varied group of people a space for dialogue is created allowing the profile of projects such as Open Data Cities to be raised. It is this ability to raise the profile of the open data agenda within the city and create targeted discussions with leaders in this space is of interest. We also see how the festival allows the open data debate to be given context in emerging social and technical trends. The ability to draw on both a local and wider community of open data practitioners and activists also creates an environment for the curation of events that look at specific areas of interest for open data such as transport, planning and environment.

The paper also looks at how the establishment of the Open Data Cities and the Open Data Manchester community have created an environment for the development of longer term strategic projects within Manchester.