

The Open Data, Open Society report

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This report is the first output of a research project about openness of public data in EU local administrations. The full report was finished in October 2010, is released under a Creative Commons cc-by license and can be freely downloaded from the web site of the DIME project ² or from Sant'Anna school. The report is also integrally republished on <http://stop.zona-m.net>³, split in separate pages with comments open to anonymous readers, in order to facilitate as much as possible feedback and discussion on each single part (but please do check the notes to readers first!). This report only contains the introduction about this.

Goals and structure of this report

The report discusses the current and potential role, in a truly open society, of raw Public Sector Information (PSI) that is really open, that is fully accessible and reusable by everybody. The general characteristics of PSI and the conclusions are based on previous studies and on the analysis of current examples both from the European Union and the rest of the world.

Generation, management and usage of data constituting what is normally called PSI is a very large topic. This report only focuses on some parts of it. First of all, we only look here at really “public” PSI, that is information (from maps to aggregate health data) that is not tied to any single individual and whose publication, therefore, raises no privacy issues.

It is also important to distinguish between actual raw data (basic elements of information like numbers, names, dates, single geographical features like the shape of a lake, addresses...), their results (more or less complex documents, policies, laws...) and the procedures and chains of command followed to generate and use such results, that is to vote or, inside Public Administrations, to take or implement decisions.

So far, discussion and research on Open Data at national level has had relatively more coverage, even if much of the PSI that has the most direct impact on the life of most citizens is the one that is generated, managed and used by local, not central, administrations and end users (citizens, businesses or other organizations). Creation of wealth and jobs can be easier, faster and cheaper to stimulate, especially in times of economic crisis, at the local level. Finally, open access to public data is much more necessary for small businesses than for big corporations, since the latter can afford to pay for access to data anyway (and high prices of data may also protect them from competition from

2 <http://www.dime-eu.org/editions>

3 <http://stop.zona-m.net/2010/01/the-open-data-open-society-report-2/>

smaller companies).

For all these reasons, the main focus of this report will be on the raw data that constitute “public” PSI as defined above. This is the reason why in this report the terms “raw data” and “PSI” are practically interchangeable. We will also focus on the local dimension of Open PSI, that is raw data directly produced by, or directly relevant for, local communities (City and Regions), and on their direct impact on local government and local economy.

Chapters 2 and 3 summarize the importance of data in the modern society and some recent developments on the Open Data front in Europe. Chapter 4 explains why raw PSI should be open, while Chapter 5 shows the potential of such data with a few real world examples from several (mostly EU) countries. Chapter 6 looks at some dangers that should not be ignored when promoting Open Data and Chapter 7 proposes some general practices to follow for getting the most out of them.

Why and how FOSS scripting languages are important at school and at home

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FOSS scripting languages like Unix shells, Perl and Python are extremely productive, flexible and powerful programming tools for everybody. They are much easier to learn and deploy on any operating system than programs in compiled languages like C or C++, and yet they can automate or greatly speed up many tedious computer activities in any area of daily computing.

The topic of this paper is at the intersection of two tracks of the FOSS Lviv 2011 Conference: FOSS in Education and FOSS at home.

The central point of the paper is that scripting languages like Perl or the shell are not relevant only for system administrators and other software professionals and much easier than they look. These languages have no license costs and can be very efficient and useful tools even at school and at home, in at least two ways: on one level, they can save lots of time when studying or in normal home computing tasks, even on older/limited computers.

On another level, they are a very efficient, easy to set up and extremely portable way to teach programming, from primary school to adult, professional training classes. Besides, unlike other languages used to teach programming, these are tools directly usable and valuable when looking for a job (not just in the software industry, but in any business sector).

This paper discusses in depth all these theses and the fact that scripting languages are much easier to learn than normally thought. The paper also provides practical, immediately useful, real world examples of how non programmers (especially, but not exclusively teachers, students and small