

EU's Recognition of Open Data's Economic Value is Good Start



Davide Morisi, with the European Commission's Communication Directorate applauds the Commission's decision to make its data available freely and easily, but warns that spreading the open data agenda across the member states will not be easy.

Making public data accessible to every citizen is not solely about encouraging a better informed and more transparent society. It can also lead to economic gains, as a result of re-use or recombination of these data in creative ways. This is the perspective that has driven the European

Commission to launch an **Open Data Strategy**, following the examples of other governments' initiatives in the field – such as the US (data.gov), the UK (data.gov.uk) and very recently also the French Government (data.gouv.fr). This includes a commendable commitment from the Commission to make its own data available, but in the current atmosphere, its plans for open data across the member states may meet resistance.

“The real message I want to send to public authorities today is: don't wait for this package [the Open Data Strategy] to become law. You can give your data away now, and generates revenue and jobs, and even save money from the better information and decisions that will flow”, Commission Vice-President Neelie Kroes said during a press conference on 12 December.

The European Commission's estimates about open data's economic impact mainly draw on a recent **study** on the market value of Public Sector Information (PSI) by Graham Vickery (Information Economics). According to him, “the direct PSI-related market would be around EUR 32 billion in 2010”. He also estimates that each year, within the European area, “overall economic gains from opening up PSI and providing easy access for free or marginal cost of distribution could be up to EUR 40 billion”.

Examples of data that can be collected include not only public statistics, but also geographical, meteorological, and cultural data from libraries, archives and museums. Creative ways to recombine these data in order to provide citizens and companies with new services are already in place. Some examples are openspending.org, where citizens can learn about how their taxes are spent, wheelmap.org, which combines public data to help disabled people to find accessible places, or energy.publicdata.eu, which visualises each European country's commitment to reduce energy consumption.

Based on this evidence, the Commission will open its vaults of information to the public through a new data portal in 2012. By gathering additional information from other EU institutions and agencies, the portal should become the single access point to EU information.

The second strand of this package – which revises the **2003 Directive** on re-use of public sector information and now needs approval from the European Parliament and the Council – concerns the effort to establish a common European approach towards open data. “We are proposing to harmonise the way member states will make their public data re-usable. This should make it possible for business to gain the benefits of the single market”, said Ms. Kroes.

This second part of the package probably proves the most challenging one. While Ms. Kroes takes a long-term view, imaging citizens “automatically allowed to re-use” public data, creating a level playing field for open data across the EU does not seem an easy task at the current stage. In the newer member states freedom of information laws are still very new and the degree to which national administrations have embraced their use is often debated. Even several of the EU's “old members” rank in the bottom half of Access Info's **Right to Information Index**, and there is also a

possibility of resistance by public authorities that would have to release for free data for which they now charge. The good news, however, is that the Commission itself is setting an example by starting to open its own data archive. And sometimes good examples work better than imposed regulations.

December 14th, 2011 | [Guest Blog](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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