OpenGov Voices: Does open data improve governance? Of course!

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I have a confession, something I don't usually say in public: I enjoy looking at datasets on the weekend. I love playing with data and I love seeing what developers can create with data.

I am a data geek. It's safe to admit now, since I've already married and started a family.

But my love for data is only one reason I have devoted my career to the open data movement. A bigger reason is that I believe open data can actually improve democracy.

That's a pretty big statement and I know there are some doubters out there. But I've seen enough examples to know it's true. The really exciting part is that we are still in the very early days of open data.

Even today, most of the cities opening their datasets are large and have money to invest in technology and try things. There are some smaller, leading cities, such as Palo Alto, Calif., but so far they are the outliers.

It's not that cities don't want to open up data. Rather, they either simply feel it's out of reach for one reason or another, or they cannot yet measure the impact of an open data program.

Open data must be made simple

At Junar our main focus has been on making open data so simple that a lot of small and midsize cities – cities that aren't usually on the leading edge and don't think they have budgets to embrace open data – can have it. Junar is a cloud-based data platform that enables businesses, governments and other organizations to free their data in order to drive new opportunities, collaboration and transparency. The platform works by collecting, enhancing, publishing, sharing and analyzing data.

Think about the democratization of content on the web. What made that possible was the emergence of low-threshold, easy-to-use content platforms. If I ask you to go to the web and publish content of 140 characters or less, it's obvious which tool you would use and that tool is so simple. If I ask you to create a blog, you know how to create an account and start doing that. It's easy.

But if I ask you to go publish information that fulfills the definition of open data – usable format, easily sharable, proper structure, enriched metadata, APIs, etc. – what is the application that comes to mind? Probably none, because until very recently there was no easy way to publish open data.

But it is already getting easier and there will come a day when it gets easier still. When it does, we'll really start to see the transformation of democracies.

How data transformed a city in Argentina

I've seen this first-hand while participating in an open data project in Bahía Blanca, a port city and a center for petrochemicals in my native Argentina, where not all things are transparent, so to speak.

A few years ago, some smart, brave people leveraged open data to shed light on official corruption. A new mayor came in, determined to change things and he hired a great CIO.

They started an open data portal that I can tell you has completely changed the status quo and helps the government engage citizens on a different level. They published all kinds of data – even some salary information – and they created an API that allows apps to send out a lot of data about the environment. They brought all this data to life and it is now bringing a lot of applications to life.

Now, you see a lot of young people in Bahía Blanca (a city of about 300,000) sensing that they can change government and this is generating an effect across Argentina.

Other seeds of progress

Even as open data is transforming government, other seeds are beginning to take root. In the United States, we're starting to see hard evidence that open data is having profound economic effects.

Joel Gurin's recently released an Open Data 500 study at New York University which shows that a "data economy" is, in fact, taking shape and that data spurs economic development wherever it is set free.

It's amazing to think that it is all starting with the transformation of democratic governments. In this case, government is leading the pack. Many other organizations – NGOs, academia, corporations, media companies – are soon to follow, once they discover easy ways to open up valuable data they have compiled.

And that will be very good news for data geeks like me.

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