

Communia workshop
26 March 2009
Tom Watson

Welcome and introduction

Thank you, Ian (*Angell, London School of Economics*) for that warm introduction.

It certainly is a pleasure to be here today to talk about a subject close to my heart. And I've got a bet going that I can do it without mentioning 'web 2.0' or 'government 2.0' – so let's see how I do.

Knowledge and information

Knowledge, as they say, is power. Access to information is the cornerstone of our economic and social advancement; indeed, it can be the very power behind it. It is the fuel for innovation, for entrepreneurial invention, that we need to keep Britain's place as a world-leading knowledge economy. And we are obviously smack in the middle of an economic environment that renders this more important than ever.

Of course, I say, 'access to'. As you all know, whether the information itself is available is largely irrelevant if there is no way to obtain it. The great democratisation comes not in allowing people to *have* the data, but from letting them have it *at their fingertips*. It is about removing the barriers, removing the hoops people had to jump through.

Now, I don't know if any of you have ever tried to wrench the red tape out of a bureaucrat's hands, but I can tell you it ain't easy...

And it's less easy in an age where the information is being generated faster than anything we've seen in human history. It took seventy years to create The Oxford English Dictionary, with 414,825 definitions – Wikipedia generated over 2 million full articles in less than a tenth of that time.

And like computer science had to be invented in the 1950s to respond to a new technology, so web science is the discipline of the modern age. And I'd like to extend my congratulations – and note my admiration – for Nigel Shadbolt and Tim

Berners-Lee for having the foresight to pioneer this new area of academia; investigating how the web's properties – like social networking, file-sharing and user-generated content – have emerged, how we harness them, what new phenomena might materialise, and what they mean for society. It's incredibly important work.

Information, and what people do with it, is what's driving all of this. It's the Rosetta stone; it's the ultimate transformational tool; it's what everything hinges on, even in the most mundane circumstances. Like when the tube stops inexplicably – and if any of you live on the Northern line, you'll have more experience with this than most: the second the conductor comes on to tell you *why* it's happened, you can see the entire carriage relax. They just needed that information.

Or consider lobbying, which I've got the dubious honour of sorting out. Now, why would anyone give these people money? It's because they want to get to the information. It's there, they just can't access it. They're paying for interpretation of data, for knowledge, for information.

When people have access to health advice – whether it's a government campaign or WebMD – they live longer. They get fewer diseases. They get problems treated before they become fatal. They just need the information.

Not that I'm equating rush-hour commuting with pre-cancer screening – but you get my point. Our lives revolve around getting information.

So basically, we're asking public servants for a massive cultural change, we're doing it at a time when the sheer volume of change is overwhelming, and we're asking for change in relation to one of the most fundamentally important aspects of our society.

In that context, the fact that we have made some progress feels like we've conquered Mt Kilimanjaro; so if you'll indulge me, I'd like to give you a brief update today.

What government's been doing

As a quick recap: this time last year, I set up the Power of Information Taskforce to drive forward an agenda of openness. The Taskforce recently published its first report, and we now have 25 hard-hitting recommendations.

These didn't come from nowhere. Over the past year, the Taskforce has been talking to the community. They have been hosting discussions on their blog, attending conferences like this one and they even opened up their report for comment for two weeks.

We'll be looking for rapid delivery, and this isn't going to happen without your input. So you can rest assured we'll keep talking with you, collaborating with you, listening to your advice.

And since we're on the subject, I'd like to take a moment here to thank you for playing a part in this – from being a voice in the community to working with and advising government. From the activism of the Open Knowledge Foundation – I know Rufus Pollock is here, and Jonathan Grey helped organise this event today – to the example the data-centric London Gazette sets – I think Richard Goodwin is here as well. You've all been tremendous leaders.

There's more for us to do, but we've made great strides, and I'm very pleased at what we've achieved so far. And I do say 'we'; the progress we've made so far is truly a testament to what can be achieved when government and the community work together.

The first step has already been taken with the publication, a little over two weeks ago, of *Working Together: Public Services on your Side*. In the report, the Prime Minister endorsed the Power of Information and talked about the four principles of openness:

Open feedback

Open conversation

Open information; and

Open innovation

I am not going to lecture you on the virtues of openness – I met Nolan Bushnell last week, and telling you about openness would feel a bit like telling him how to play Space Invaders – but the important message here is that government is committed, at the highest level, to shifting from our current pattern of static consultation to one where we engage in rolling collaboration with the public. This won't just be online – we can't reach everyone that way – but it will be enabled by online tools and communities.

And I do think there will be a good response. I really have to marvel at the level of interest in what were once esoteric subjects. OPSI has a survey running as part of their work to understand attitudes to terminology like Crown copyright and "commons". 1,400 people respond so far. If you've not filled it in yet you've got until tomorrow – just follow the link from the OPSI website.

We know what we have to do on this issue: Ultimately, what we need is to have a decent, easy-to-use licensing scheme for government data that encourages the generation of public value through innovation.

The presumption should be in favour of free use of the data unless there is a particular reason to charge for it. And the license can have conditions which withdraw consent to use the data if the use is inappropriate or abusive in some way.

We've learnt that perceptions matter just as much as the precise terms of a licence. I know OPSI are testing out different options for presenting Crown copyright at the moment. We have to get the details right, really make it clear that government information is the people's information, and it's there for people to use.

Carol will be saying more this afternoon about what she and OPSI are doing to push all this forward – working to deliver this agenda now, not waiting for government response.

Innovation

Of those principles the Prime Minister listed, the example closest to my heart – the one that best illustrates the benefits of successfully opening up government – is in open innovation.

This is about enabling the next generation of web entrepreneurs, strategists and developers – we need them in government, and we need them for Britain.

That creativity was showcased in our 'Show us a Better Way' competition.

We ran a blog asking the public to share their ideas. We got hundreds of responses – not as many as OPSI, but good – including one suggesting aggregating schools data and mapping the catchment area of every school in England.

From that idea, we'll soon launch an online tool to capture the catchment area of schools across the country without any IP restrictions. Once captured, the information will be available for people like Ave Wrigley of Schoolsmap.org.uk to include with their products – supporting parents through the important decisions they make about their children's lives.

As an aside, I think it's important to highlight here just how much feedback we got from countries around the world, expressing awe and quite a lot of envy along the lines of, 'I wish my government would do the same'! While I know there are challenges, I think it's worth noting that the kind of commitment we've got here is something to be proud of. Britain really is leading efforts across the world; OPSI's work with the World Wide Web Consortium on best practices for Open Government Data is just one powerful example.

At the other end of the effort, Rewired State recently gathered around 100 talented coders in a room for a day with data, pizza and beer to see what would happen. In a single day they were able to create new interfaces for the Job Centre, Companies House and put leisure facilities on a map.

Imagine what they could do if we made the information easily available and reusable!

To try and bring these two approaches together, and to create a space for this thriving community to innovate with government, Directgov has created an ‘innovate’ section of its site.

While still in early days, they are working to create a ‘BBC backstage’ environment for government. They have already demonstrated they can move quickly. Like the creation of a school closures site, in under 24 hours, during the recent snow storms. Or providing a hosting and discussion space for bicycle accident data, which has already resulted in several publicly-developed mapping mashups.

This is new stuff for Directgov. They know they need to be more agile, and I encourage you to support them as they rise to the challenge we’ve set them.

We are also proposing a set of Design Patterns for Open Government Data, with one or more in each of the following areas:

- How to put government data on the web;
- How to publish once and syndicate anywhere;
- How to tweak an existing government website to open data;
- How to move a government website into an API;
- How to open and publish government data created or maintained in proprietary formats; and
- How to express IP rights in an interoperable way

It has taken work, and a real commitment to change the way we do things, but we have broken down the cabal. This might seem easy to the outsider, but as you likely know from your own experiences, the biggest challenge we face is changing a deeply-embedded culture. You would often have more success trying to physically move the building than move the habits of the people who work within it.

It reminds me of something Machiavelli wrote: There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. Now I know, most politicians don’t

go around quoting Machiavelli – at least not in public – but he’s relevant because he’s often referred to as ‘the knowledge manager of the Renaissance’. His collation and study of the official records of ancient Rome is a precursor to what we’re talking about today: taking government-generated data and using it in new and innovative ways. And the fact that we’re still talking about the works he created with that data is a testament to the power it can have.

Of course, in addition to the cultural ones, there are the logistical issues to deal with as well – getting the right tools for the job, getting the communications right, getting the right people involved.

And of course, there are the legal, jurisdictional and technological issues to overcome as well – I know there are going to be quite a few discussions about these today, about the challenges *and* the solutions, and I’m looking forward to hearing what you have to say.

In fact, I’m happy to do that now – I don’t want to take too much of your time, and I know we’re all keen for the discussion to start. My only request is that you all bear witness that I managed to make it through without any reference to 2.0...

Thank you.