Ground-up open data intermediaries - Who? Where? How?

Open Knowledge Festival 2014 - Session Report
Thursday, July 17 • 12:00 - 13:00 - Berlin, Germany

Objectives of the session:
This session had 3 broad objectives to understand where intermediaries were situated within the open data eco-system. It asked:

- **Who?** Mapping out the different categories of open data intermediaries in various countries, sectors and issues areas around the world.
• **What and why?** Exploring the incentives for, capacities of, and the roles played by, intermediaries who work with open data and in other data-driven projects.

• **How?** Seeking to understand the dependencies and power relations between data suppliers, intermediaries and end-users or citizens. In focussing on the how, the session also aimed to understand and map out the challenges that infomediaries and intermediaries face with data access, reuse, dissemination and encouraging adoption of their outputs by other groups works in the sector.

**Session overview:**

This was a participatory and interactive session, with categories, roles and other questions relating to intermediaries developed with the session participants, and feeding into a shared mapping exercise.

After opening remarks by the moderator, an operative definition of an intermediary was put forward as a basis for discussion. This was elaborated on through three presentations from ODDC case study partners: The University of Cape Town (UCT), South Africa, University of Ilorin (Nigeria) and Transparent Chennai (India). Each presentation explored the type of intermediaries found their respective research, and presented then initiated the process of categorising data providers, intermediaries and user into different groups my mapping those they mentioned in their research onto shared flip-charts.

Session participants were then invited to think about, and map on the same flip-charts, intermediaries from the different contexts they work in, and to also map out data providers and users related to these.

This was followed by the moderator summing up the different categories of suppliers and intermediaries that emerged out of the exercise and selecting a number of categories of intermediary to discuss in the next section of the session, focussing on incentives for engagement, the respective roles of intermediaries, and the challenges they face. The key intermediaries that were picked were:

• Government;
• Community based Organisations(CBOs);
• Media;
and
• Entrepreneurs/Private business.
Workshop participants were then invited to group around one of the categories and to hold a 15 minute discussion on this kind of intermediary. These discussions were then reported back to the plenary and summed up by the moderator.

The operative definition of an intermediary

The session began with an operative definition of an ‘intermediary’. While the accepted understanding of an intermediary is on that bridges the supply and demand side of open data, in reality it is more nuanced and hardly that rigid as sometimes the categories overlap a fair bit. The same agencies could be providers, intermediaries as well as users of data. Even in bridging the supply and user/demand side of data, intermediaries play a significant role in the following ways:

1. Intermediaries play a crucial role in the use and reuse of data - converting data into information that becomes a catalyst for action. In doing so, they go beyond the mere technical role, and are often situated outside the technical arena. The broad category of intermediaries may include groups such as traditional chief’s offices which are often the closest to communities needs and demands, community based organisations, and faith based organisations, that often play an information provision role.

2. Intermediaries play a crucial role as data generators - usually from communities at the last mile where the government has not/or is not willing to reach. Intermediaries situated closest to the communities help in generating useful data that could inform government policy and decision-making. Intermediaries also validate the government data against the reality on the ground and help corroborate the accurateness of government data.

3. Intermediaries help shape and demand for data from government agencies.. They can sometimes partner with governments in helping them open up data in forms that are useful for key users.

4. Governments can sometimes play an intermediary role: with one agency of the government acting as an intermediary for another in opening up data.

Data Providers, Intermediaries & Users

The post-it note mapping exercise we carried out resulted in the following typology of data providers, intermediaries and users. This is not an exhaustive list, listing only those groups surfaced in a short group exercise, but it does provide a basis for further work.

Providers:

1. Government:
   a. Ministry of Finance( International Economic Coordination Tribunal)

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b. Budget office  
c. Statistics Office  
d. Technology fellows  
e. Department of Education (Primary school Data)  
f. Local Government  
g. Government open data portals  

2. Research Institutes  
   a. Research information providers (e.g. Eldis)  
   b. Academia  

3. Donors  
4. Media  
5. Data Philanthropists  
   a. Cell phone companies  
   b. Corporations  

6. Citizens  
   a. Communities  
   b. Crowd-sourced data  
   c. Citizen-centered data projects (Smart Citizen)  

7. NGOs, charities, social organisations  
8. Independent agencies  
   a. OFSTED (provider of school inspection/performance data)  

**Intermediaries**  

1. NGOs  
   a. Open Nepal portal (Transforming data in an open format)  
   b. Budgit Nigeria (Web based visuals)  
   c. Center for Social Justice (Budget visualisation in print format)  
   d. Budget working group of Zamfara and Kebbi state (Nigeria)  
   e. Aid Data (Visualising IATI data)  
   f. DataKind  
   g. Youth groups  

2. Innovation Agency  
3. Archives  
   a. Processing  
   b. Enhancing  
   c. Structuring  

4. Commercial  
   a. Technology Fellows  
   b. Technology Institutions (Code 4 Africa)  
   c. IDS  
   d. Private firms  

5. Media
6. Community based organisations (CBOs)
   a. Youth groups
   b. Community Radio organisations
   c. Online communities of interest
7. Think Tanks
8. Universities
9. Research Institutes
10. Local Government
11. Traditional chiefs offices
12. Faith based organisations

Group Work around categories of Intermediaries
We broke into groups to select particular intermediaries, and explore the roles they play, their incentives, and the challenges they might face.

Government as an intermediary
What are the roles played by Government as an intermediary?

1. Governments provide structures, policies and resources that facilitate the sharing of data.
2. Their role as a supplier is to provide data to the media and other user groups
3. Government plays the role of a ‘Middleman’ both at the national level as well as to the communities below.
4. They also play an intermediary role facilitating data exchange and sharing at an inter-departmental level, between different ministries and agencies.

What are their incentives?

1. Reduce burden
2. Sometimes it is due to sheer international pressures, multilateral and donor requirements or even peer-pressure (when other countries open up data, it exerts a strong pressure to conform to the norms of international or regional openness)
3. Governments open up data with the aim of leading to enhanced efficiency and participation from stakeholders for a better feedback on their policies and programs
4. The motivation at times is to add to their e-gov. initiatives
5. There is a motivation for a better public image behind opening up data.

Community Based Organisations
What are the roles played by CBOs as intermediaries?
1. CBOs, having situated themselves within communities are often the first interface of citizens with their Governments. CBOs play a crucial role in monitoring service delivery within communities by reading, analysing and unpacking data that is most relevant to the delivery of public services and entitlements.

2. CBOs use data to indicate a measurement of change, as a comparative analysis (both positive and negative) of scenarios over a period of time. This analysis is often used or could be used in their advocacy efforts.

3. Skill and fame for data-driven engagement as a departure from usual methods (non-data driven) is a motivation for CBOs to engage with open data.

4. CBOs engage with open data to foster and encourage innovations or innovate approaches to their work.

5. Many social enterprises that provide services to the bottom of the pyramid populations use open data to create better access to services. For example: Next Drop uses open data to feed its application to inform populations in slums on the next availability of water in their area.

6. One of the most important role of a CBO using data is to monitor and provide feedback to the Government agencies/service providers on citizen feedback in order to close feedback loops and foster greater accountability.

7. CBOs play the role of a journalist when it is able to see the bigger picture using data and then break it down to its many parts to make the data intelligible to the community to inform and foster better decision making and demand for accountability.

**Media as an intermediary**

What are the roles of media as an intermediary and its motivations

1. Channel of data is more relevant. to make information accessible to a broad audience to perform their fundamental role.

2. Engaging with open data and data driven journalism could be a potential new business model for media organisations

3. Journalistic ethics and public interest as opposed to prevailing commercial interests might be one of the motivations for media organisations to cover open data.

4. Having said that community radios are more vulnerable.

**Commercial organisations as intermediaries**

1. Who are the intermediaries and what are their incentives?
   - Technology entrepreneurs and app. developers who are looking for new business models.
   - Firms consulting with governments and/or NGOs to help them to use their own data,
- Media
- Commercial data portals:
  - E.g. selling data to universities and research institutes
  - The messier the data, the bigger is the business opportunity.
  - They also use data to offer business intelligence services.
- Political Consulting organisations: use data for targeting voters during campaigns.
- Social mission organisations: using data in advocacy for human rights and sustainability, but also selling the data in order to have sustainability strategy - and because firms (e.g. oil companies) may value data more when it is bought, as opposed to when it is free.

Where next?
The organisers of the Intermediaries workshop will be drawing upon these notes in developing plans for a more detailed paper and research exploration of Intermediaries.