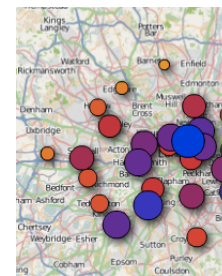
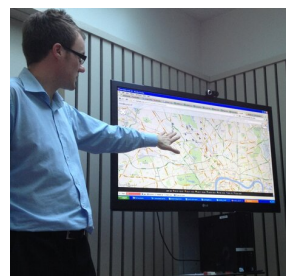
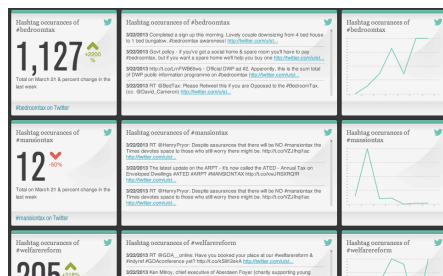


Intelligent Impact

Social Media and Open Data Workshop 20th March 2013, London

Evaluation report



Summary

The UK government has opened up access to large quantities of public data. The voluntary sector stands to benefit from using this data, and from generating and sharing its own open data. However, at present there is limited evidence of open data use in the VCS. To explore how open data could be used in VCS, the Your Voice, Your City project commissioned a workshop for London voluntary sector organisations to gain hands-on experience of social media and open data tools. The workshop started by identifying key health, welfare and equality questions that social media and open data might be able to address, and then linking VCS participants with expert mentors who could help them create a presentation on one of these questions by the end of the day, drawing on open data and social media.

This report captures evaluation findings from the workshop, and reflects on future opportunities for open data capacity building in the VCS in London.

Key findings:

- **There is a wealth of data available that can help VCS organisations generate insights, campaigns on issues, and communicate key messages** but much open data remains scattered, hard to find, and requires considerable technical expertise and domain knowledge to use. However, not all the data the VCS may want is available, and many questions may be hard to answer with available data.
- **Ongoing capacity building is needed** to ensure that the resources exist within the voluntary sector to make the most of open data.
- **Infrastructure organisations have a key role to play** in curating open data and findings from open data, and showing what is possible with open data. We used free and open collaborative platforms to prototype a local intelligence hub, and explore how an infrastructure organization could play a role as a local open data intermediary.
- **Social media skills can act as a building block for open data skills** and there is value in linking open data capacity building to wider cultural change and skill building.

Overview

On the 20th February around 20 staff from voluntary and community sector organisations gathered to explore how open data and social media could be used to support ‘intelligent impact’ in service delivery and advocacy work. Supported by a team of mentors, and working in small groups around specific questions, they explored a range of different datasets, digital tools and techniques over the course of the day.

Our goals for the day were to:

- 1 Explore a range of open data and social media resources that can support policy and practice;
- 2 Prototype intelligence products building on these - to inform the design of a new LVSC intelligence hub;
- 3 Share learning on the opportunities and challenges of making open data and social media work for the sector;

A narrative report of the day was captured on Storify at: <http://storify.com/alexjamesfarrow/lvsc-opensdata-jam>, and the Impact Assessment App¹ was used to gather participants experience. At the end of the day we held a debrief for the mentors team, and any participants who wished to take part, and after the day we circulated an open Google Document of evaluation notes inviting participants to feedback on: things I learnt; things that worked well; things that didn’t work so well; and where next – future actions that participants might take, and actions we should take to follow up from the day. This report draws on these sources to offer an evaluation of the day, and to explore future needs for open data and social media capacity building in the voluntary sector.

Overview of the day

The day ran from 10am – 4pm. We started with 30 minutes of short presentations on ‘the art of the possible’ covering an introduction to open data, data visualization, data journalism and social media. From 10.45 – 11.30 groups formed to discuss particular questions they wanted to look at over the course of the workshop, discussing possible sources of data and approaches to those questions with mentors. From 11.30 onwards groups were working hands-on with data with their mentors, and at 3.15pm each group presented its findings to other participants.

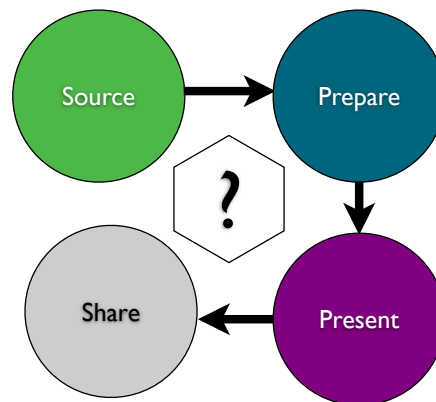


Figure 1: Stages of working with open data and social media

¹ The Impact Assessment App (<https://impactassessmentapp.com/>) is a tool developed by PodNosh to capture stories of impact from users of a service, or participants in an event. We used it to record short video clips of participants outlining what they expected from the day, and what they had been learning through the day. We recorded 10 clips on the day.

The projects

By the end of the day participants shared four different prototypes, created using social media and open data.

- **Mapping good neighbors schemes.** Using data scraped from a local authority website, open data on mortality, and batchgeo to plot the data on a map, this prototype explored the relationship between the location of services, and the health outcomes in those areas.
- **Referrals to psychological therapies.** Using NHS data, and datasets found on Google Fusion Tables with Primary Care Trust boundaries, this prototype looked at the relationship between diagnosis of low level anxiety and depression disorders, and referrals to psychological therapies, and prescriptions for anti-depressants. The results were graphed and mapped using Fusion Tables. LVSC have written up a further exploration of this data: <http://www.lvsc.org/yourvoiceworkcity/intelligent-impact-the-learning-and-next-steps/>
- **Education and employment gap.** This project explored the gap between disabled and non-disabled people and their rates of employment, and then the gap between education levels of disabled people and subsequent employment. The results were plotted as a basic Infographic using Tableau, and video clips were created to place a human narrative alongside the data. The data, counter to the groups expectation, seemed to show a narrowing of the gap in unemployment rates between disabled and non-disabled young people in recent years, though potentially due to the rising overall levels of unemployment.
- **Bedroom tax trend tracker.** Using social media data from Twitter, this project created a prototype dashboard to explore conversations around #bedroomtax and #welfarereform – currently high profile policy debates. The resulting dashboard shows which terms are most used in current debates, and stimulated discussion over how social media monitoring could be used as part of campaigning, or to inform the narrative around policy work. A further write-up of trend tracking is here: <http://www.lvsc.org/yourvoiceworkcity/tracking-trends-through-online-traces-welfare-reform/>

All of the prototypes were very early stage. We had initially anticipated it might be possible to come up with clear answer to some of the questions that groups had identified at the start of the day. However, our prototypes raised as many questions as they answered, and none were at a stage where they could be directly used. However, since the workshop a number of the prototypes have been developed further as noted above.

Key learning points

- **There is a wealth of data available – but finding the right data is tricky.** For example, we located one mental health service dataset from the NHS, but another we could only find on Google Fusion Tables (in fact, we stumbled across it looking for PCT boundary data). Matching up data by years, periods covered and so-on to compare like-for-like took like and careful attention, and a number of steps we took in generating prototypes we then found later had been mistaken as they did not take into account issues of data normalization, or the different periods covered by datasets.

In some cases we may have been better off going to expert services which have already analysed data, rather than trying to explore ‘raw’ open datasets for ourselves. Knowing when to go to existing sources of analysis, and when open data is useful in an important skill. We discovered participants were often not aware of existing sources of analysis, and so introducing these may have been a useful first step before going in depth into open data analysis.

The proliferation of open data sets may, right now, in the absence of good tools for sifting through the available data, lead to a more confusing landscape for VCS searching for data than existed a few years ago, when key data sources were available online, but few open datasets were available.

- **Working with data requires domain knowledge.** Government datasets are often filled with codes – from Local Authority Ward Codes, to Primary Care Trust identifiers. Not only does the ability to recognize these kinds of codes at a glance help a data user join up different datasets, but using them often requires an understanding of how the NHS, Local Authorities or other institutions are structured. Our mentors, who have spent lots of time working with these datasets often had tacit knowledge of this form that helped them interpret the data, but workshop participants, who may only work on a specific area of health, education or welfare, were often not familiar with the codes or structures needed to ‘unlock’ the contents of the datasets.

One participant explained that there are “*fantastic amounts of data out there, but learned that it helps to have some subject knowledge, know the jargon, know how data might be organised, what indicators might be proxies for others etc. etc.*”

For any domain there may be **key concepts** that it is useful to prepare briefings or training resources on to help re-users of open datasets.

- **Balancing a directed or open agenda.** We planned the agenda with very few fixed elements beyond the introductory presentations. Whilst we invited suggestions for questions to explore in advance through a User Voice website (<http://yvyc.uservoice.com>) and used this input to frame question areas, we did not pre-prepare questions or datasets to work with. This meant that we hit a number of dead-ends during data exploration, as we discovered that data wasn’t available to answer the

questions we had set ourselves in the morning, or when getting datasets prepared for use would have been too time consuming. There was a risk of this being disempowering for participants: showing more of the challenges of working with open data than the opportunities. However, it was also realistic – showing the trial and error nature of much work with open data.

One participant noted that *“the problems were too big: we needed to focus in on one question, or one dataset - rather than having the rather broad questions we were working with”*, whilst another pointed out that *“Framing and specifying the questions... wasn’t going to be straightforward, it could have ... taken up the whole day (and beyond). Perhaps a regular forum needs to discuss and develop questions?”*

For future events, spending more time on framing the questions to be asked in advance may support a smoother process of open data exploration.

- **Exploring and mentoring.** The fact that our mentors had not always seen the datasets they were working with before made their task of sharing skills with workshop participants challenging. Mentors had to both facilitate their groups, and show-and-tell different open data and social media tools whilst they explored ways to respond to the questions and available data. Unlike the Social Media Surgery model (<http://socialmediasurgery.com>), working with data may require a mentor to have quiet time to explore and understand the data before they can show others how to work with it – for example, to assess which tools are best suited for working with the available data.

It also meant the mentor could not attend to other practical issues in the group – like making sure everyone had a computer they could work on to try out their own exploration of relevant data and social media – so there was a greater degree of clustering around a single mentors screen than we had anticipated – rather than people working in small sub-groups. One participant noted that there is a *“danger of things losing momentum during self directed activity”* and suggested it would be useful to have *“things for people to focus on when they are not directly involved in the group activity just because it doesn’t logistically work (e.g. exploring other tools etc.)”*

Having a separate facilitator to support each group and focus on group dynamics may help address this.

- **Open data and social media.** We addressed both open data and social media in the workshop – as we wanted to explore how both ‘stats and stories’ are part of research and intelligence work in the voluntary sector. At times the relationship of the two wasn’t clear to participants, and we did not get as far as planned with generating open data prototypes that could then be shared through social media. However, one group successfully demonstrated how combining data and video narratives could be used to illuminate a policy issue.

More work on connecting stats and stories would be valuable.

- **Practicalities.** The WiFi Internet access in the venue was intermittent and slow, meaning many groups switched to 3G hotspots as backup, restricting the number of people who had fast Internet access during the workshop. Some participants felt they got stuck in groups that didn't meet their interests, and more overall facilitation may have been needed to encourage people to move between groups if they felt this would be best for their learning.

A number of participants noted they would have liked printed take-away materials, including How To guides on the tools explored. The digital record of the day has been used by at least one participant to find a tool that was explored on the day, and a number of follow up How To recipes have been put together for participants.

The format for the workshop was experimental – avoiding both formal training, in which the skills to be explored are pre-selected by the trainer, and 'hack day' formats in which existing high levels of technical skill are required. At times this felt chaotic and uncomfortable when there were gaps, or when technologies appeared not to be working for us, but feedback from participants shows that most took away a number of learning points and new skills relevant to their work. For example:

"I learnt that I need to do some excel training before thinking about using open data sets - the event was very interesting and stimulating but I need to work more on research skills"

"I learnt about Sparkwise, Social mention and some of the many things you can do with Google."

"I learnt how to use the vast amount of data available to improve the quality and targeting of our campaigns and policy work."

"Wow impressive range of data and tools; and their accessibility - for the first time I have a sense that this is something I might actually be able to do (as a social media novice especially)"

Since the Intelligent impact workshop a participants have gone on to make use of open data in their own work, including one visualization of changes in private housing rentals that formed the basis of a campaign by homelessness charity Crisis: <http://www.crisis.org.uk/pages/impact-of-lha-cuts-london.html>

Where next?

Through the Intelligent Impact workshop we've learnt a lot about building voluntary sector capacity to work with open data. Below we outline a number of possible ways to build on this learning, and further capacity building in the sector.

An open intelligence hub

Infrastructure organisations like London Voluntary Services Council (LVSC) play an important role in carrying out research, providing insight, and communicating information and analysis to their members. For the Intelligent Impact workshop we explored how a range of open platforms could be put together to create an 'Intelligence Hub' for LVSC:

- **User Voice** – allows the organisation to collect questions that matter to local VCS organisations and to prioritise issues for analysis. Visitors can submit questions, or rate existing questions as important to answer. The policy and research team can use the questions submitted to guide their work, and can respond to those asking questions to discuss what might be required of an answer. Input received through User Voice can also be used to direct planning for events, workshops and face-to-face work with local VCS organisations.
- **The Data Hub** – allows the organisation to curate a collection of useful datasets, both datasets already available on the web, and new datasets which are uploaded and hosted on the data hub. By using the data hub groups feature, the policy and research team can maintain an editorial oversight over collections of data that London voluntary sector organisations might find useful. This data curation role might extend to ensuring certain core reference datasets and resources such as PCT boundary data, or London Borough statistics, are kept up-to-date and available in standard formats.
- **Mendeley** – is a research manager application for keeping track of publications and papers. By maintaining a public group on Mendeley, the research and policy team can curate relevant publications and research for London VCS organisations.
- **Data visualization.** Using the tools explored during the Intelligent Impact workshop, the policy and research team can create interactive data visualizations to communicate key issues. Creating interactive visualisations, or How To blog posts on using existing tools to explore data can also help VCS organisations make more intelligent use of data in their work.
- **Blogging** – to share news on new visualisations, research and data. Using 'tags' on the LVSC blog to highlight content on particular topics the organization can build up a knowledge base of relevant content to share with the local VCS.

All these tools can feed into existing communication activities, such as e-mail newsletters. By working on building an intelligence hub using open and free online platforms LVSC can collaborate with local VCS organisations and other partners to improve the availability, contextualization and relevance of data and information for the sector.

The next steps of taking forward an open intelligence hub may involve:

- **Identifying what it can contribute to strategic objectives**
- **Identifying resources needed to make it work**
- **Identifying additional skills development needs**
- **Identifying the first topics to focus on in an extended pilot & agreeing common tags**
- **Refining the LVSC Your Voice, Your City website to allow thematic hubs**

Thematic data drop-ins

“I want to explore how I can use this in my own work but would like practical guidance as I’m not seeing the wood for the trees to be honest.”

Many VCS organisations will need ongoing access to technical expertise to help them explore and make use of data. Unlike the broad-based Intelligent Impact workshop, smaller short drop-in events focused on a particular theme could be organized. Holding these regularly, building on the social media surgery model, would offer an opportunity for VCS attendees to build up their awareness and skills in working with open data over time, and would build ongoing relationships between practitioners with domain expertise and open data experts.

These events could take a number of forms:

- **Data drop-in.** Each event is publicized with a particular theme, such as employment data, or mental health data, and starts with a presentation of one or more sources of data. This is followed by discussion, and then hands-on work with a variety of open data sources, supported by open data mentors.
- **Open data surgery.** Both participants, and volunteer ‘open data mentors’ sign up in advance. Participants indicate the issues they want to explore when signing up, and the facilitator forwards details to the mentors in advance so that they can explore available data. An informal space is created for participants and mentors to mix and explore open data.

Open data surgeries may be built into a social media surgery model, offering participants a chance to explore social media tools first, before moving onto look at open data.

The events would need dedicated time from an organizer to arrange speakers and/or mentors, and to facilitate the workshops.

Online or offline action learning sets

“I would like to join an online group that met maybe once a month/ once a quarter to share tips and encourage me to look into open data in the VCS as part of my work rather than an add-on (for which I would struggle to find the time to do)”

Unlike the drop-in capacity building model outlined above, a number of participants suggested they would be interested in taking part in a regular group, possibly in the form of an action learning set, meeting to share their experiences of working with open data.

Conclusions

We started with very high expectations of what it might be possible to accomplish by bringing together open data and social media experts, VCS staff, and open datasets for one day. We ended very much aware of the big gap between availability of data, and the accessibility of that data for use to answer the kinds of questions VCS organisations have. Yet a few weeks later we can look back and see that a number of organisations have been inspired by their exposure to open data tools and techniques to start engaging with it more, and to build up their skills and capacity. We have also shown the potential for a local intelligence hub to be built on top of free open platforms.

If the VCS is to gain the full benefits of open data then considerable investment of funding, time, energy and creativity in awareness raising and capacity building will be required.