Community Engagement and Open Data in Matera by Matteo Brunati

Submitted on 04 Oct 2013 by ePSIplatform Team

In my last blog post I described Wikitalia as an association inspired by Code For America and MySociety. We are working to develop Wikitalia in several ways. Currently, we're focused on building capacity in local public administrations to adopt open data and open government practices.

It's not so simple, but we are trying to find a sustainable business model to survive. It's one of our goals for this year, and it isn't the only one. We are working to simplify the association and to focus more on projects and less on process. We Italians love bureaucracy, don't we?

I've heard that "less is more" and I believe it's a truth that we often forget. As you can see from our projects, several of them are connected directly to the idea of a "wiki-town" or something similar. The idea belongs to Alberto Cottica, who wrote a book titled "Wikicrazia." Based on this idea, we are developing a model to manage how Wikitalia itself works in every single city, in a more scalable way. We use direct experiences as sources for the model. After our work with the municipality of Florence in 2012, we are now focused on Matera.

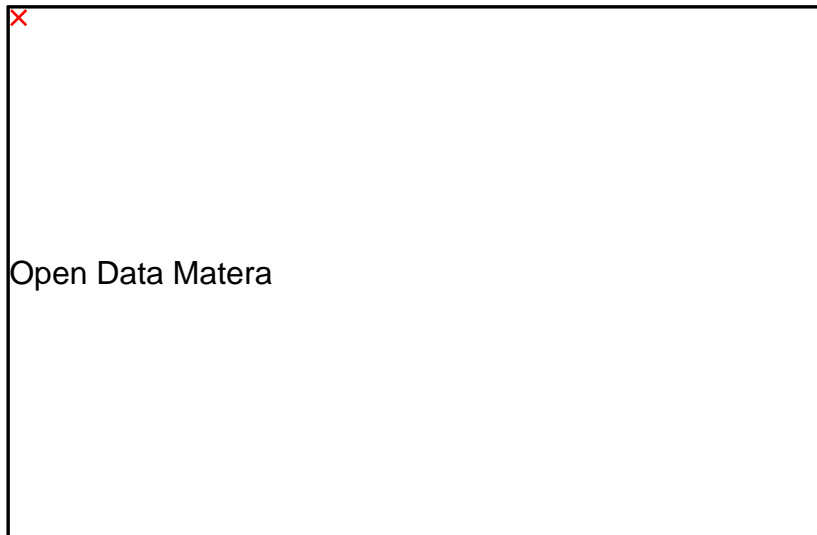**Open Matera: Supporting Open Data projects at the municipal level**

One of the projects I'm working on now is **Open Matera**: if you don't know Matera, it is a beautiful town in the south of Italy. If you have ever seen "The Passion of the Christ", directed by Mel Gibson, it was filmed on location in Matera (here is an article with more information about the town).

Matera wanted to do some projects related to Open Data and Open Government, as I have written on Wikitalia's blog some days ago. For instance, there is an informal association, called "Matera2019", that is helping the city to submit its candidacy for European Capital of Culture 2019. After a first discussion published on SOD (*Spaghetti Open Data mailing list*), we organized two events in February 2013. One of them was a public event, where several experts talked about Open Government ideas and related projects. It took place on a Sunday evening, a very cold one, but the room was full to bursting with people interested on the subject.

The next day, we had an official meeting with the Mayor of the town and some town councilors, who expressed a shared desire to make Matera Open Data a reality. After some months, we had reached a formal agreement between the Matera municipal government and Wikitalia. The agreement has two main goals:

- Wikitalia pays for a **two-day course on Open Data and Open Government management** to build capacity in the community and the local public administration.The objective is to enhance local organizations' abilities to perform Open Government activities independently. In that way, they will be better able to understand the concepts and context of Open Data and Open Government management. Compared with official Open Data Institute courses, like "Open Data in practice", our course is smaller and more informal. We want to make people passionate about their own role in a Open Gov context, and about how they can change their perspective on politics and on public policies. This is especially important now that in Italy we perceive the State as an institution far removed from daily life.
- Wikitalia makes **a direct effort to help the municipality develop and maintain an Open**

Data portal, designed with an [Open Data engagement approach](#). During August and September 2013, an informal attempt to set up a local instance of CKAN as a test became an open bottom-up shared process experiment. In other words, [Francesco Piero Paolicelli](#), a local developer who is helping the Matera2019 association, had published successfully the [official Matera Open Data website](#). It's a community-driven effort, supported by the municipality.

What I find particularly interesting is the **open process we are following now**: a lot of details, questions and doubts are published through the Spaghetti Open Data mailing list, allowing a more shared knowledge of even the small elements of a CKAN portal setup. It isn't the best way to do software projects, I know, but we will see if this sort of shared agile approach repays us in the future.

Improving the "net experience"

When Wikitalia and I helped the Firenze municipality with their [Open Data portal](#), I saw that we needed to focus on what we can call the "net experience". That is, we need to focus on the internet as an enabler of more conversations between people, and so we need to make data one of the topics of these conversations. The people working in Public Administration must become more comfortable with online communities, mailing lists, and so on. They almost live in a linear world, and the hypertext with its links and connections is a new kind of world for them. If they don't use internet often, we need to focus on changing that and giving them direct online experience so that they can work successfully in the Open Government context.

Matera has the potential to make communities more visible and more connected; in October and November there will be several events related to idea of augmented communities: [unMonastery](#) events such as "[Living on the Edge, (LOT3)](#), which is organized by Edge Riders community", and some other events organized by Matera2019.