

The harsh life of a Czech data journalist when requesting access to Open data

Submitted on 19 Aug 2013 by Michal Kuban

It is really hard to work as a data journalist in the Czech Republic since you have to confront many obstacles, not only obstacles based on ordinary journalistic basis. As a data journalist you vitally need a certain element, data. Let's start from the beginning and let me tell you an exemplary story about difficulties of Czech journalists when they request from Czech state companies access to their datasets.



A team of data journalists from lhned.cz (Economia, publishing house) created an [application](#) for Prague public transport. It took them more than 3 months to finally make it available on-line for all users. However, the actual data processing and programming applications, although it took a few days, but journalists had to lead a lengthy bureaucratic battle for obtaining datasets with the Prague Public Transit Company, a.s., which, in fact, is a state company. This case points out Czech open data environment. First of all. What is this application all about?

This [application](#) allow users to see on a map how far they can travel by tram, metro or bus from the selected station in a certain period of time. You can just type in the address, and set the time of drive. There are data that reflect the state of Prague public transport before the big changes. Since the Prague Public Transport Company, a.s. (state company) claimed that that huge changes and improvements within the connections and transport links will be implemented in order to increase a level of accessibility, availability as well as reduction of time period between the transport links. There are data that reflect the state before the summer holidays last year, early this year, and current data of traffic. Particularly, the application is able to show significant changes and implementation of new time schedule in Prague public transport which happened last September. These important changes raised a number of protests not only for travellers and citizens of Prague. Passengers were afraid that they will need more time to get to work.

Which are the results that the application gives us? In fact, the transportation is not significantly worsen, especially for passengers in the main transport nodes. Although, the application was created in order to observe the main changes after September traffic innovations made by Prague Public

Transport Company, a.s., the application serve very well for instance, in selecting sites for housing and business, depending on the availability of public transport. The more applications like this one, the more happiest citizens. But the the biggest problem is with an access to a data.

The author of this application, journalist [Jan Cibulka](#), has needed a lot of patience to get all the data. Firstly, he asked the Ministry of Transport for all datasets whose data is legally obliged to collect from operators of regular services in order to feed them into the The Czech National Information System of Timetables (an information system containing information on transport connections). Nevertheless, Ministry has entrusted this work without any tender to private company called [CHAPS](#) which runs this system for free. However, thanks to this exclusive contract with the Ministry, these datasets do not get anyone else. But [CHAPS](#) builds its own application called [IDOS.CZ](#) using the data from The Czech National Information System of Timetables and provides it to another Czech publisher MAFRA for money. Unlucky for those business companies and individuals who would like to build timetables of its products or simply to see what the state creates for their money. If anyone asks about the data, CHAPS argue that it is a private company and does not give your information to anyone. Ministry of Transport does not own the database itself since CHAPS is the only administrator.

Due to the fact that Prague Public Transport Company, a.s. did not want to provide to journalists of Ihd.cz Jan Cibulka had to requested all datasets from Prague Public Transport Company, a.s. through [Freedom of Information Act](#) (FOI) According to the Czech legal system requesting information via FOI takes 15 days. Journalists from Ihd.cz have so far only five packages of data. From the period of 2012, before the September, changes to the peak of the traffic from workday and weekend as well as two packages from early 2013 to a peak weekend. Finally, data from the beginning of the holiday season, reflecting the limited holiday traffic. However, for each additional set of data they would have to obtain new datasets under Freedom of Information Act since Prague Public Transport Company, a.s. refuses to provide access to daily updated data packages without framework agreement (in return of press conference as a partners of application) with journalists.

To sum up, it takes almost three months to finish application which serve pretty well for public good. It helps people to check transport connection in Prague and could serve very well for people who are in need of information about good access of transport and good living standards in all areas in Prague. The application was inspired by German project called [Mapnificent.net](#).

There is obviously big demand for such an application and more use of open data in favour of data journalism. But the biggest problems is with the access to the datasets and obstacles when obtaining current up-to-date datasets from Czech state institutions. For instance, [Road and Motorway Directorate of the Czech Republic](#) billed more than 210 000 CZK (8,082 EUR) for publishing dataset from Czech Motorways and roads. There are institutions which sells for reasonable price data information (they charge you since they need to pay staff time in selecting data from a database), for instance: [Czech Statistical Office](#). On the contrary, some other Czech institutions charge for exorbitant sums, the huge sums serves as a tool of obstruction. For instance, [Energy Regulatory Office](#) charged for 275 000 CZK (10,583 EUR) for list of legal contracts. Not every business company or individual can afford to pay such a huge sums for data which come from our taxes. The example of fight for accessing a datasets with Prague Public Transport Company, a.s. is not the only one, there are many obstruction given by state owned companies and thus so hard to get access to their database.

The way out from this situation is through [Open Government Partnership](#) which Czech government signed last year. However, not much has been done so far. The other way is through initiatives, for instance [Otakar Motejl Fund](#) which supports and lead several projects in order promote open data and its re-use.