

Flemish Open Data Day

Submitted on 18 Jun 2013 by Yves Peirsman

Last week I took part in the [Open Data Day](#) organized by the Flemish government in Brussels. Open Data is experiencing a boost these days: governments all over the world are pledging to open up their information, and they expect good things to happen in return. The European Union dreams out loud about increased government efficiency, more transparency, and 140 billion euros in economic activity. Good things are certainly happening: inspiring initiatives are sprouting up, and with more than 200 people in attendance, the Flemish Open Data Day showed that in Flanders too, interest is high. At the same time, it brought to light some possible conflicts and practical problems.

But first things first. The day started with a keynote by Phil Archer. Phil discussed the state of Open Data in Europe, the needs of the several parties involved, and the work of the [W3C](#) in creating standards for Open Data. In the first workshop of the day, Erik Mannens talked about the link between Open Data, Linked Data and Big Data. Erik identified some key markets for Open Data, like banking, healthcare and marketing, and presented a list of existing initiatives. In the second workshop, Yves Vanderbeken and Paul Hermans introduced some technical aspects of opening up and publishing data, with a particular focus on the publishing platform used by the Flemish Government. The most inspiring speaker of the morning was Bart Van Leeuwen: speaking both as a firefighter and an entrepreneur, Bart showed convincingly how open data from various sources can be used to make his life as a firefighter safer.

After lunch, Chris Taggart introduced [OpenCorporates](#), a website that aims to expose as much information about corporates as possible. The panel that followed gave some food for thought: financial issues and privacy questions illustrated that opening up government data was not as straightforward as it might seem, and despite the reigning optimism, Jo Caudron argued that Open Data would not likely bring about more democracy. The third workshop I attended mainly served as a demo of [Citadel on the Move](#), a platform that allows people to develop an app for their city in five easy steps. Finally, the day ended with a presentation of some new Flemish projects to open up data, and with the awards ceremony of AppsForFlanders.

Without a doubt, the Open Data Day was an inspiring event. I learnt about some impressive initiatives, like [the Datatank](#), an Open Data management system, and websites like [OpenSpending](#) that organize fascinating troves of information. I took home some interesting pointers for my job at [Wolters Kluwer Belgium](#), like the [Flemish Database of Corporations](#) and the [Flemish legislation](#) that will soon be made publicly available. My notes will keep me entertained for some time to come.

Still, the event also raised some questions. I was disappointed to see that an overwhelming majority of the participants worked for the government. Sure, the government holds a virtually endless amount of information that its citizens could benefit from. It's great to see initiatives to make that information publicly available. But the story shouldn't stop there. People and companies should take up the gauntlet and use that information in their products, research, software, writings, and so on. If this doesn't happen, Open Data may not change much, as Jo Caudron feared: power will remain in the hands of the few companies willing and able to analyze that information. Today it's too early to know which way we're headed, but I hope the next Open Data events see some more interest from outside the government.

As Phil Archer already indicated, one of the biggest challenges is helping people and organizations make use of the data that will become public. Few people will find their way through the forest of

available file formats and APIs. Google and Facebook will know what to do, but the same may not be true for cultural organizations, and healthcare institutions, say. The "rich" will get richer, but the "poor" will remain just as poor. That's where app developers, software engineers and data scientists come in. Without their assistance, Open Data might just as well be closed.