Emergence and Open Data: the chaotic Italian Open Data movement

Submitted on 01 Jul 2014 by Matteo Brunati

Years ago I read a beautiful book, written by Steven Johnson, titled "**Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software**"

I found it very insightful, with some ideas of what are now common modern day concepts (such as crowdsourcing or collective intelligence) being explained in a clear and documented way. The main concept was the following, taken from Wikipedia:

Emergence refers to the ability of low-level components of a system or community to self-organize into a higher-level system of sophistication and awareness. Johnson notes that this self-reorganizing stems from the bottom up rather than directed by an external control factor. Johnson gives examples of feedback, self-organization and adaptive learning.

Sometimes, when thinking of how Italy is managing the overall Open Government process, I'm convinced that we are a good example of a chaotic emergence system (yes, I know, I'm optimistic). There are some good signals, but only a few.

Ultimately there are probably two main things which we would need in order to make the system work:

1. **Live without a centre, by design, and accept the risk**:

The recent controversy surrounding the governance and the election of the director of our "Agenzia per l'Italia Digitale - AGID" isn't helping us. We need a decentralized awareness to make it clear where the real power to get things done really is … most probably at the regional level.

With a small head and small governance from the top, but more power to our regional institutions, we can do a lot more. Recently the positive steps made by some good-willed people inside AGID are an important signal of this inclusion design. I'm referring to the process used to help create a recent version of Open Data guidelines, in which AGID used a wiki and a public discussion to help improve the guidelines, as a digital shared common.

1. **Manage a *feedback cycle* inside the overall process**. (It's not a new idea):

A feedback cycle involves four distinct stages. First comes the data: behaviour must be measured, captured, and stored. This is the evidence stage.

Second, the information must be relayed to the individual, not in the raw-data form in which it was captured but in a context that makes it emotionally resonant. This is the relevance stage.

But even compelling information is useless if we don't know what to make of it, so we need a third stage: consequence. The information must illuminate one or more paths ahead.

Finally, the fourth stage: action. There must be a clear moment when the individual can recalibrate behaviour, make a choice, and act. Then that action is measured, and the feedback loop can run once more, every action stimulating new behaviour that inch us closer to our goals.

This is the difficult part: among other things, there isn't a true awareness of the actors involved. They aren't considered real peers. Civil society, citizens, ONG etc. need real acknowledgement from inside the government, at all levels. To think about a real feedback cycle, we need respect between all the stakeholders.

Essentially, Italy needs help! We need to be more connected internally, as well as externally with the other countries. We need more storytelling about our best practices and experiences related to PSI reuse. Some areas in the south are working hard to fill this gap, specifically in Matera and Lecce.

Lecce is working a lot, thanks to Wikitalia but also thanks to people like Francesco Paolicelli, who acts as a '*local civic hero*' (well, he's called a *hero* by people inside the municipality, really :)).
 Thanks also to some local politicians, like Alessandro Delli Noci for example, who understands the real power of a shared government process, and thankfully works hard to enable it.

The best thing is that Open Data Engagement stars are really become more widespread - from the official Open Data guidelines written by AGID, to the best practice examples of Lecce and Matera.

In Italy, we need to be a little more disruptive - to make us more visible and to make our thoughts more understandable. **We need to make people worried about the level of reuse of our PSI**, speaking using simple ideas and simple shared values. We need to go on TV shows, and we need to invest in our digital culture as one of our most important national assets. We need to speak to the people not only using our minds, but also with our hearts. We need to focus more on power, and not only on data.

In order to be more visible we have to discuss topics that people really care about. We established that Health data is one of these possible topics, and so we already invested some time in this area by hosting a recent event in Bologna.

For a lot of inputs and ideas, we need more awareness on the digital world, and on how it is changing our society. Thankfully there are some good signals that we are starting to do right things to improve this awareness across society. **We are focusing more on education and schools**. Initiatives such as 'Monithons' are now taught in several schools across Italy, thanks to the "A Scuola di Open Coesione" project.

But all of these signals are loosely linked: how we can manage them as little pieces of an emergent ecosystem and not a diaspora of our small Open Data community? We are in 2014, not in 2010, and Italy needs to make big steps forward.