

Using Open Data to take care of our health: #code4health

Submitted on 05 May 2015 by Matteo Brunati

In Italy, we have to fix the way we report Open Data and the PSI reuse. Take this post as a personal reminder to improve the Italian context where I live.

We have to start doing better things, and not only write a lot of articles full of details on what doesn't work. I'm tired: we have to spread information across society touching Italians' heart. We have to make people care about the hidden potential of Open Data. We need to start from something we really care about. That's why **good stories** are needed.

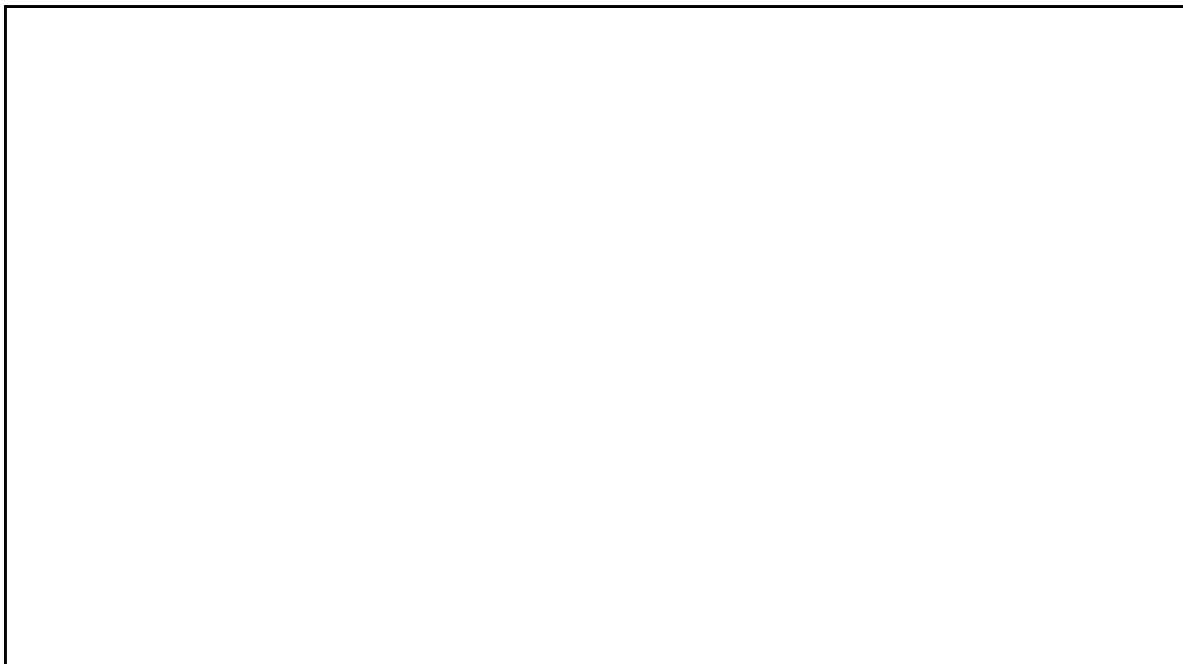
Four years have passed since the launch of the Spaghetti Open Data community, and not so much has happened in Italian society, apart from a few very good stories, like the project [Confiscati Bene](#) or the [Monithon initiative](#). I know: as an informal community, we are growing, both inside the Italian public administration and outside; but the changes and the effects in the real world aren't enough.

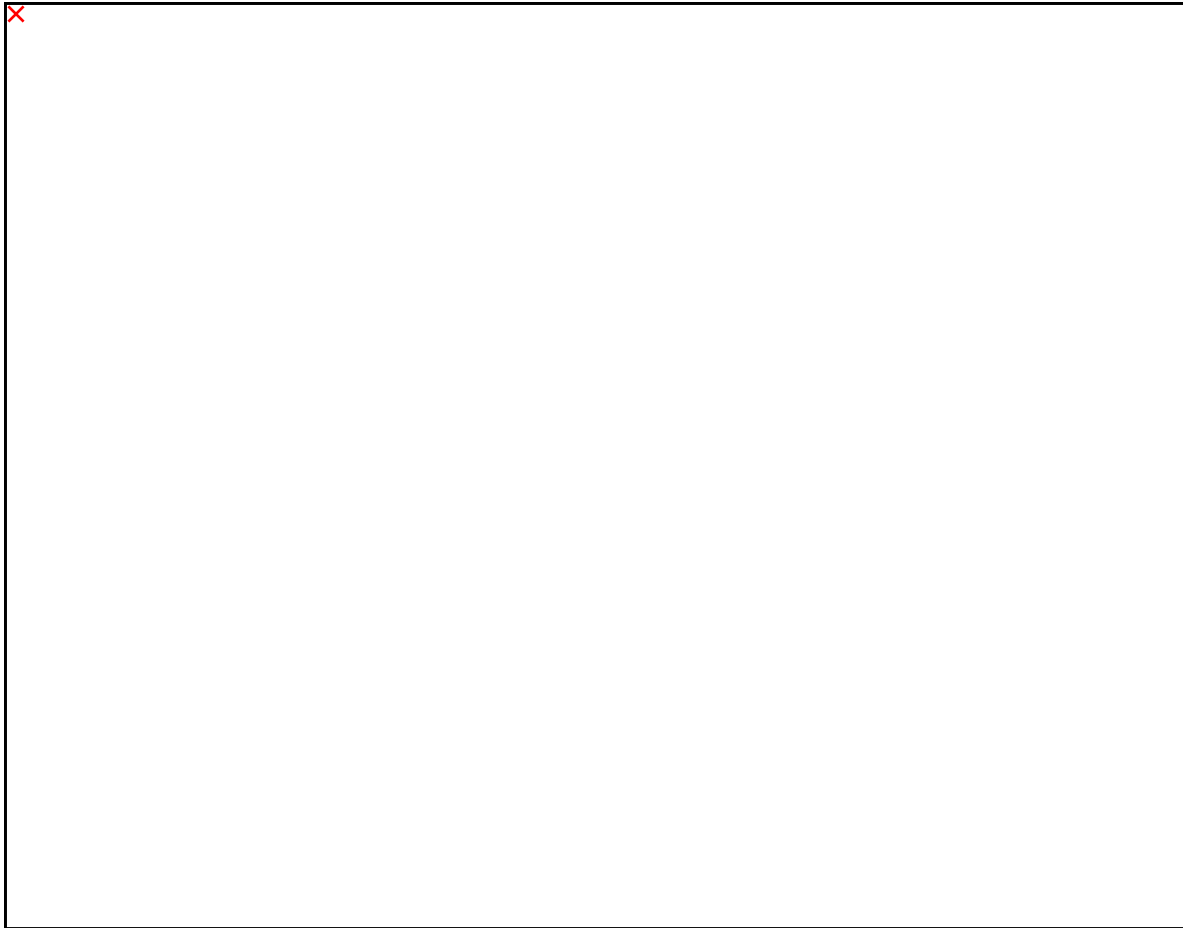
The way we are speaking about the reuse of PSI needs to be fixed: it's too technologically driven, maybe. **We need sexier data**, to work on and tell big and emotional stories, to make people more aware of the importance of this kind of thing. We need **Open Data sets at a national scale**, regarding the public health, the air pollution and all the data about the safety of public buildings, starting from our schools: these are all good starting points.

It's a matter of what we can do to make our lives better, working on a common ground. I got my Eureka moment [watching some insightful workshops](#) that took place a week ago during the International Journalism Festival 2015. A workshop was about data journalism, during which two different investigations were published, by Wired Italia, written by some famous Italian data journalists, [Elisabetta Tola and Guido Romeo](#), and Rosy Battaglia, and an activist from an ONG called [Cittadini Reattivi](#).

Building real commons on public health, starting from the data

There are two main data journalism investigations which are incomplete because of the lack of data. They are related to public health and the public safety: one is about the first large scale [data driven investigation into seismic safety of Italian public schools](#). It's called **#SafeSchools**.





And the other one is about the [Italian asbestos decontamination plan](#), and the actual mapping of all the contaminated locations and buildings. I mean, a complete map of buildings and contaminated places which has to be fully cleared.

This one is called "**The asbestos cost**".



The short answer is this: both these investigations reveal that the government hasn't got the data. Not only published as Open Data: it isn't a matter of technology or formats here. Hiding behind the wall of our infernal bureaucracy, our chaotic governance between different levels of government, hasn't

been able to collect this data. And without a real [FOIA in Italy](#), it's not so simple to access this 'sexy' data.

These two data investigations are starting to collect the data bottom-up, and release it as Open Data. So it's possible to collaborate and complete it all together. We need to handle this from a different perspective. If our own life, our own health isn't important, I really don't know what is.

We have to work as a community, to put a real end to this evil circle. Technology is only a path, an enabler of some kind of collective hack, and not an end in itself. The Net is an enabler of a potential collective intelligence, or a collective stupidity and miopia, don't know at this point. I'm an optimist: let's work on it.

This is how we can win this challenge. We can launch a Code4Italy initiative focused to close the data circle, thanks to [Wikitalia](#) and others Italian NGO organisations. If the data is difficult to find at the national level, starting from a city is simpler and faster, using a CodeForAmerica model.

We can try to find a way to hack the data at the municipality level, and we'll see if this approach can scale at the regional level, as a second step. We can do something similar to the activities done during [the Open Data in action initiative](#) at the end of 2013, for example. This bottom-up approach [can be a start](#). Meanwhile we need more support from the media, the politicians and all the world of activism to make some kind of mediatic pressure to our governments. If this data there isn't, let's us hack the process and its governance. That data needs to be shared, and known by all of us. It's a **commons**, it's ours. We need it. There is already [an online petition on change.org on this](#) topic, and some articles published regularly on Wired Italy.

We can see if what we're saying from so many years as activists and technologists is true or not and if this can be a real big story. It's not so important to mention who does something during this process, but only the end, our goal: to have the data, and reuse it to share the real information about these topics. A collective and real awareness in the Italian society, to improve our own life, connecting the dots between the government side, and the civil society one.

What do you think? Feedback, similar experiences and suggested tools are welcome! #code4health