Open Data: From "Platform" to "Program"
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A few months ago, Dutch designer Mark van der Net launched OSCity.nl, a highly interesting example of what can be done with open data.¹ At first, it looks like a mapping tool. The interface shows a – beautifully designed – map of The Netherlands, colour coded according to whatever open data set the user selects, varying from geographical height to the location of empty office buildings. As such it is an example of a broader current in which artists, citizens, NGO’s and business actors have built online tools to visualise all kinds of data, varying from open government data to collaboratively produced data sets focused on issues like environmental pollution.²

What makes OSCity interesting is that it allows users to intuitively map various datasets in combination with each other in so called ‘map stories’. For instance, a map of empty office space can be combined with maps of urban growth and decline, the average renting price per square meter of office space, as well as a map that displays the prices of houses for sale. The intersection of those maps shows you where empty office spaces are offered at or below half the price of regular houses and apartments. The result is thus not just an aesthetically pleasing state of affairs, but an action map. Policy makers, developers and citizens can use the insights produced by the map to find empty offices that are worthwhile to turn into houses.

There are two important lessons we can learn from this project. First, it shows the importance of programs like OSCity to make open data platforms operationable for various actors. Over the last

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1. OSCity.nl: http://oscity.nl/ (accessed 04.10.2013)

2. Examples can be found a.o. in Offenhuber, Dietmar and Katja Schechtner eds. “Urban Data as Public Space”(2012), Vienna: SpringerWienNewYork
few years governments and other organisations have started to open up their datasets, often accompanied with high expectations of citizen empowerment and greater transparency of governments. However, case studies have shown that opening up data and building an open platform is only a first step. Dawes and Helbig have shown that various stakeholders have various needs in terms of standards and protocols, whereas both citizens and government officials need the relevant skills to be able to understand and operate upon the data.³ ‘Vast amounts of useful information is contained in government data systems’, they write, ‘but the systems themselves are seldom designed for use beyond the collecting agency’s own needs.’ In other words: what is needed to deliver on the expectations of Open Data, is not only a platform – a publicly available database - but also what I have called ‘programs’ – online tools with intuitive interfaces that make this data intelligible and actionable in concert with the needs of the public.⁴

There is a second issue that OSCity raises. As Jo Bates has pointed out, the main question is: who exactly is empowered through programs like this? Will ‘programs’ that make data operationable work for citizens?⁵ Or will their procedures, standards and access be organised to benefit corporate interests? These do not have to be necessarily contradicting, but if the goal is to empower citizens, it is important to engage them as stakeholders in the design of these programs.

This is a very important issue as many local governments have started to discuss the implementation of so called Smart City technologies with major technology companies, as it is these companies that have a lot of know-how and experience with the collection of real-time data. But which data will be collected in what ways? And to whom will it be made available? With what standards and under what conditions?

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In the discussions on smart cities, the city is usually framed as a set of infrastructure to be managed as efficiently as possible. ‘The city as a service’, this approach is sometimes called, a vision in which urbanites are mainly addressed as consumers. Yet a city is more than just infrastructure, and urbanites are not only consumers but also citizens. What if these citizens would like to make use of the datasets collected by smart city technologies? For instance, data assembled about traffic could be used commercially to operate roads more efficiently or help paying individual drivers avoid congestion. But what if citizens would like to combine datasets of traffic in an OSCity type of program with data about school locations, to make a point about dangerous routes to school for their children? Will citizens be allowed access to these datasets? Will the data be formatted in such a way that they can use it as such? Or will these data remain in the domain of the companies and institutions that collect them?

If we will decide on the latter, we will end up with Smart Cities – efficiently managed technopoles. Only if we opt for the former will we can begin to empower Smart Citizens that are able to contribute to the ever ongoing process of city-making.

Martijn de Waal

Martijn de Waal is the author of The City as Interface. How New Media are changing the City, published by NAi010 publishers in the autumn of 2013. He is also a co-founder of The Mobile City, a research group on the role of digital media in urban culture. He works as an assistant professor in the department of media studies at the University of Amsterdam.