

The Big Smog

Opening the city
Bastien Douglas (left)
and Mart van de Ven



THE
BURNING
ISSUE

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Open data, open society

A growing movement of data enthusiasts are hoping to use government information in apps and products in a way that could change our daily lives. Anna Cummins meets the volunteers behind Open Data Hong Kong

What might our city be like in 2020? While we can assume some things won't have changed much in six years (we're looking at you, overcrowding and high rent), the future certainly heralds a huge shift in the way Hongkongers interact with information and data. Admittedly, this particular vision of the future may not be as instantly gripping as, say, hoverboards or teleportation. But having unhindered access to government data – officially known as Public Sector Information – is a fundamental part of a free society. It's something that has implications as far-ranging as what we read in the headlines, which new apps we download and even how we assess our government's efficacy. In other words: it's important.

So, what exactly is 'open data'? And why is it so good? "Open data is simply data that has been placed in the commons," explains

Mart van de Ven, programmer and co-founder of the Open Data Hong Kong group. "It's information that is publicly available – and you're permitted to use it for whatever means you want." Co-founded by Van de Ven and technologist Bastien Douglas last year, the Open Data Hong Kong group meets every three weeks and passionately advocates the assimilation of open data into our society. The diverse members include academics, journalists, graphic designers and programmers.

Examples of such 'open' data currently provided by the government include information about beach water quality, lists of wanted criminals, information about restaurant licences, census data and property vacancy rates.

Having a large audience for data can swiftly increase its utility – something Van de Ven compares with sharing notes in class. He

says that 'everyone benefits'. For example, this year, for the first time, the Hong Kong budget was released in a more accessible Excel format, rather than just as a document. By 3pm the day the



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budget was released, members of Open Data Hong Kong had 'scraped' the data and produced their own version of the report, complete with visualisations and graphs.

There was also a case in Canada where the public analysed open

databases of charity donations and uncovered schemes by companies who were avoiding taxation, thus saving the government a reported CA\$3.2billion. "It wasn't possible for the revenue department to do the analysis – but the public could," points out Douglas.

It's undeniable that when the government makes its data easily accessible, it is instantly held more accountable to the public.

"It's interesting to talk about [the year] 2020 because, by then, we should have direct elections for the Chief Executive," says Van de Ven. "[With better access to government data], we could have metrics to see how the government is performing. You'd end up with an infinite amount of material that you can hold [the government] accountable to. You may even end up with a Chief Executive who is elected based on performance," he smiles. "I am always optimistic!"

Van de Ven admits that the 'scandal starved' media, which tends to jump on every possible story, is a 'growing pain' that can follow increased access to government information. But he points out that it's hard to argue that increased transparency is a particularly bad thing.

While open data is certainly not – yet – something to shout about in Hong Kong, the government has certainly made attempts at embracing the concept. 2011 saw the launch of the Data.one website, which holds free-to-use information about a range of topics, including public transport, census data, weather and air pollution. Last year, LegCo also began releasing its voting records in open data.

"I think [Data.one] is a good first step... but there's a lot of potential for it to be much more," says Bastien. "I'd like to see the data becoming available without any limitations – and I'd like it to be very easy to access." This opinion is echoed by Darcy Christ, a systems designer at Hong Kong University, and founder of Hacks/Hackers, a group that brings together journalists, web designers and developers. "[Data.one] is a good initiative but it doesn't go far enough in my opinion," he says. "There's a lot more data on government sites that could be released."

Perhaps surprisingly for some people from other countries, there's no Freedom of Information legislation in Hong Kong, only an advisory code. The government is therefore not legally obliged to hand over any public interest data. Despite the fact that the Law Reform Commission is reviewing the situation at the moment, with a report in the offing, many people feel there's plenty more which could be done to ensure transparency across all government departments.

This is exactly where Open Data Hong Kong comes in. The group comes up with new websites and apps during 'hackathons', events that see programmers and designers come together to work intensively on new apps and products – often over 24 or even 48 hours straight. The word 'hack', in this sense, simply means to create something new, rather than anything to do with breaching security.

Examples of some of the group's outcomes from hackathons include apps that show you where your nearest public toilets and recycling facilities are, a 'LegCo scraper' which allows computer analysis of the records of LegCo meetings, and an interface called Gazetteer HK, which allows the public to quickly digest and compare current geographical and census data. The information in these kind of products is technically already freely available – but is made much easier for the public to understand and use via this 'wrangling' – converting into a useful format – by the group.

"Apps are just the first stage," emphasises Van de Ven. "They're exciting at first but that's not where the real utility lies. Weather checkers and toilet finders are nice but they aren't the end goal! They don't change the discourse, they don't change how we view the media and our relationship with government."

Open Data's next step is to conduct the first ever 'longitudinal hack' (a hackathon lasting for an extended period of time) in Hong Kong, alongside the government. "We'll invite lots of NGOs, organisations and academics, information officers from the government and explain how [open data] works," says Van de Ven. Over the three months of this hack, from May to July, the group hopes to showcase to the powers-that-be exactly what its members are capable of. "The quality of the

applications will be higher and more sustainable," he says.

One of these platforms will be a centralised database of all the research done by each of the local NGOs that support domestic helpers. It's hoped that this will help people defending the rights of helpers to use the NGOs' work more effectively and argumentatively. Christ and Van de Ven are also preparing to be working on an FOI request portal at Opengov.hk. It will manage FOI requests, help people to direct them to the correct government departments and then store the response for the public to see. This should make it easier to see how many requests are rejected and what the given reasons are.

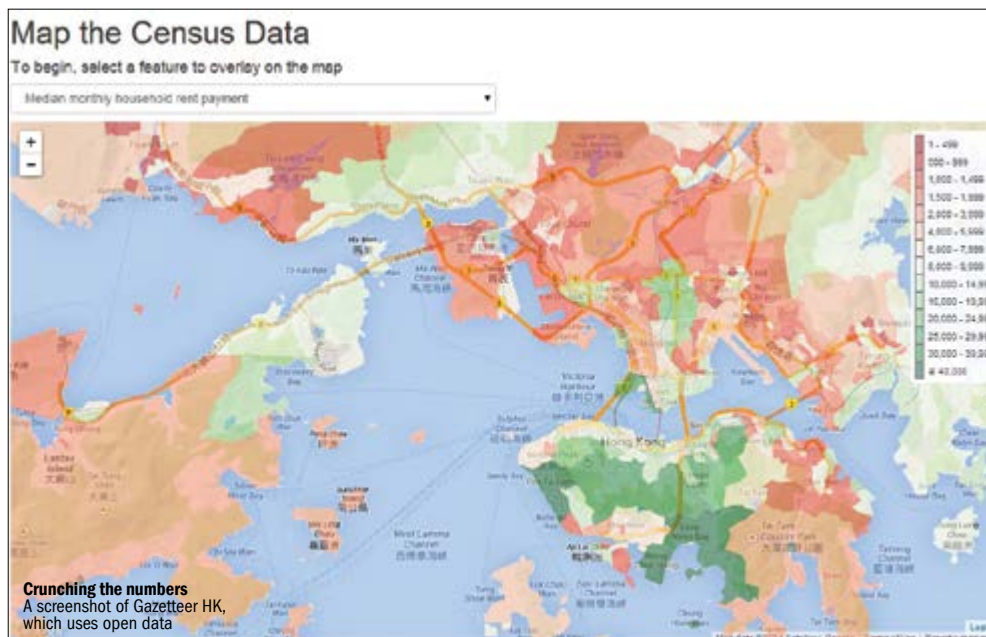
Christ is adamant that the future of journalism lies increasingly with data. He cites statistician Nate Silver, who successfully predicted the outcome of all 50 seats in the 2012 US Presidential election on his blog *Fivethirtyeight*. Silver has since been hired by ESPN.

Having said all of this, though, there's one obvious issue that may go against the future of having open governmental data in our city. And that's Beijing. Hong Kong's ever-increasing ties to the Chinese capital could slow – or even reverse – this drive for free information. But, when asked about this, Christ is thoughtful. "A lot of folks see this bad influence from Beijing," he says. "But I don't see that. In fact, I am optimistic about seeing more open data in China and I think it will make the country more efficient. I think all that is delaying open data in Hong Kong is bureaucracy!"

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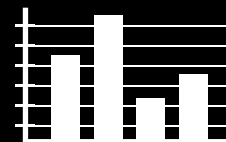


Opening up



1

Year since the Open Data Hong Kong group formed



3

Years since the government launched its Open Data portal – Data.One



CA\$6million

The money recently allocated to launch an Open Data Institute in Ontario, Canada



At least 95

countries have enacted Freedom of Information legislation



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The number of laws in Hong Kong that specifically ensure Freedom of Information



2014

The first year that the Hong Kong annual budget was released in an Excel format