Europe Opens Access to Public Data

The European Commission is to make public data available, irrespective of whether it is for commercial or non-commercial use, and it is calling national governments to follow this example. The term 'public data' covers all the information that public bodies in the European Union produce, collect or pay for. This could include geographical data, statistics, meteorological data, data from publicly funded research projects, and digitised books from libraries.

'Open' public data can be readily and easily consulted and re-used by anyone with access to a computer. In the European Commission's view 'readily accessible' means much more than the mere absence of a restriction of access to the public. Access and re-use of data can be made difficult by public authorities - often unintentionally - because of a number of barriers like a lack of information that certain data actually exists and is available; a lack of clarity of which public authority holds the data; a lack of clarity about the terms of re-use; data which is made available only in formats that are difficult or expensive to use; complicated licensing procedures or prohibitive fees; exclusive re-use agreements with one commercial actor or re-use restricted to a government-owned company. Barriers such as these mean that public data cannot be called truly open data.

Data can be integrated into new products and services, which we use on a daily basis, such as car navigation systems, weather forecasts or other useful "apps" on smart phones. Opportunities for re-use have multiplied in recent years as technological developments have spurred advances in data production as well as data analysis, processing and exploitation.

Public sector bodies which have drastically cut their charges for re-use have seen the number of re-users increase by between 1,000% and 10,000%. For instance, in the case of Danish Enterprise and Construction Authority (DECA) the number of re-users went up by 10,000% leading to a re-use market growth of 1,000% over eight years. The additional tax revenue for the government is estimated to be four times the reduction in income from fees.

The lowering of charges brings in new types of users, particularly SMEs. For example SIRCOM (the Communication Service of the French Ministry for the Economy, Finance and Industry) has been collecting data on fuel prices in France regularly. It introduced a pricing and licensing model for re-use of this data in 2009 (re-use was unregulated before). NAVX, a venture capital company active in the field of location-based services, acquired a licence for commercial re-use right from the very start.

NAVX enriches public data in three ways as it filters out double entries and fuel stations that have gone bankrupt, it adds data for the fuel stations that are exempt from public reporting obligations, and it improves the precision of the geo-localisation. The enriched data is then used for the company's own GPS and smart phone applications and sold to NAVX's sub-licensees. NAVX focuses on both the B2C business of selling its applications directly to end-users and on the B2B2C business of providing its enriched location-based content to GPS manufacturers, geo-information companies and mobile operators. Building on its strong home market in France, NAVX has been able to expand further to cover at least eight different European countries.

The market size and growth of the geographic information sector shows the potential of public data as an engine for job creation. The German market for geo-information in 2007 was estimated at EUR1.4 billion, a 50 % increase since 20001. In the Netherlands, the geo-sector accounted for 15,000 full-time employees in 2008. Other areas such as meteorological data, legal information and business information also form the basis of steadily growing markets.

A recent study estimates the total market for public sector information in 2008 at EUR28 billion across the EU. The same study indicates that the overall economic gains from further opening up public sector information by allowing easy access are in the order of EUR40 billion a year for the EU27. However, the total direct and indirect economic gains from easier PSI re-use across the whole EU27 economy would

be in the order of EUR140 billion annually.

The EU policy considers information prepared as part of a public sector organisations' public task has been gathered at the taxpayers' expense and for their ultimate benefit. As such, it is a public good and the taxpayer has a right to access and re-use that information.

However, it is also reasonable sometimes to expect the re-user, not the taxpayer, to cover the costs of making the information available for re-use. In some special cases some of the costs of gathering that information may therefore be recovered.

The revised Directive is likely to come into effect in 2013. Member States will then have eighteen months to implement it into their national legislation. There is, however, nothing to prevent any public body adopting before this date the types of improvements to access and use which the Directive introduces. Those Member States that have already adopted more open policies on this issue are already benefitting from the growth of new services in this area.

A number of countries, regions and municipalities have already created portal websites on accessible data. These include http://opendata.paris.fr.; www.dati.piemonte.it; www.data.gov.uk, www.data.gouv.fr; www.data.overheid.nl.

In 2012, the Commission will set up an Internet portal for its own data. It proposes that other EU institutions, bodies and agencies make their information accessible through this portal, making it the single access point to EU information.

In 2013, the Commission will establish a pan-European portal, bringing together data from different Member States as well as from the European institutions.

The Commission funds research and will use different instruments to test and promote the development of innovative solutions, and to ensure the widest possible uptake of open data.