

## Open Data Institute - what could go wrong with that?

I have a uneasy feeling about Silicon Roundabout. It seems like the Californian gold rush, where huge profits could be made:

selling picks, shovels and blue jeans

A recent BBC Radio programme seems to indicate parallels:

Peter Day weighs up the evidence, talking to some of London's most promising social networking companies, and the venture capitalists and business groups supporting them

And even Rory Cellan-Jones is a little underwhelmed. However, the place continues to get a lot of government love including the decision to site the shiny new Open Data Institute there.

Great announcement but what does it amount to?

The press release is never knowingly hyperbole light:

A world-leading Open Data Institute is to be established in East London

I wonder if I am alone in thinking that "world-leading" is ex-post rather than ex-ante, but reading on we may find:

The ODI will aim to become an authoritative source of expert advice for government and help accelerate the release of Open Data in ways that will minimize private sector costs and lower barriers to reusing data

Which is interesting, because as we said in our response to the recent open data consultation:

The definition of open data is flaky, it identifies a need for open standards despite there being no government definition of an open standard nor any progress on plans to create one. The consultation is also silent on interoperability.

Since then, of course, the government is ambling along with its plans (odt). A journey started nine years ago, but they talk a good story.

The more official autumn statement helpfully tells us the the ODI will also be:

developing Web standards to support the Open Data Agenda

The capitalisation tells us they are Serious About This but given the luminaries involved one might wonder if any one has told W3C

In 1994, Tim Berners-Lee founded the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology,

with support from CERN, DARPA (as ARPA had been renamed to) and the European Commission. The W3C's vision was to standardize the protocols and technologies used to build the web such that the content would be available to as wide a population of the world as possible."

I'm not alone in wondering if the detail will match the announcements. Well worth a read in its entirety I've pulled out two fragments:

[...]government continues to fudge key reforms to bring the UK's open data infrastructure into the 21st Century, and displays some worrying (though perhaps unsurprising) signs of open data rhetoric being hijacked to advance non-open personal data sharing projects, and highly political uses of selective open data release.

The responsibility to promote availability of open data is split off to a 'Data Strategy Board (DSB) [...] It is notable that the DSB is only responsible for 'commissioning and purchasing of data for free release' and not for 'open' release.

The ODI has political form.

The scheme recalls the Institute for Web Science, an academic research centre proposed by former prime minister Gordon Brown in March 2010, which was also due to be run by Shadbolt and Berners-Lee.

A bit like the government on open source software then.

-- Gerry Gavigan, Chair, 2 December 2011

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