

The Impact of Open

Blog by Michelle Pauli

The stage for the panel discussion on the impact of 'open' may have looked like a set from a highbrow late night TV arts programme – all leather easy chairs around occasional tables – but this discussion was anything but laidback. The panel featured five experts in the field who are all passionate about their take on open, whether data, source code, educational resources or accessibility. Their individual five minute presentations set the bar high for the audience, who responded with wide-ranging questions and comments that took the debate from newspaper business models to whether closed access to academic research is 'blocking the progress of humanity'.

Rufus Pollack of the Open Knowledge Foundation pitched the tone for the session with a fast-paced and impassioned argument for open data. First off, he clarified the terminology. For him, something is 'open' if we are 'free to take it, use it, reuse it and redistribute with no restrictions'. This also means that you have to be able to actually get your hands on the data – it's no good it being hidden away on a mouldy CD in a drawer somewhere.

'The creation, storage, analysis and transmission of information are the fundamental activities of the academy and are becoming the dominant economic activity in much of the world," said Rufus, and we are seeing an 'openness revolution'. Information is special, he explained, it's non-rivalrous, it is very cheaply copied at zero cost and when it's open it can be scaled, broken up into reusable pieces and weaved back together again. By easily sharing material we get optimum use of it – 'the best thing to do with your data will be thought of by someone else,' claimed Rufus.

Ross Gardler followed with a speedy rundown of the benefits of open source, as befits the manager of OSS Watch and Vice President of Community Development at The Apache Software Foundation. Open source is a faster, higher quality development process that results in more innovation, said Ross. Proof? The internet. 'Is that innovative enough for you?' he asked with a smile. It's built on opens source software. This kind of software is more innovative because it means that we do not have to keep reinventing the wheel – agile processes are open development, allowing us to iterate and build upon previous innovations. Open source also allows mutually beneficial partnerships and enables us to spread the risk and the burden of sustainability.

A different tack was taken by Helen Beetham, a consultant who was involved in the JISC OER pilot programme. She intrigued the audience by setting out four different 'open' scenarios of the future, lightly touching on the benefits and drawbacks of each. 'Open market' described a policy at a university which is making the most of the benefits of open content – enhanced reputation,

syndication of quality assured open content, boosted teaching ratings and 'star' teachers. 'Open choice' featured a student who has made up for lack of science A levels and used transitional materials to get a diploma and is now engaged in self-directed learning, accessing knowledge from anywhere while at the 'uni of anytown'. While she could not have got where she is without OER, she worries that she is maybe missing out on learning same thing with same people, sees other students struggling, and notices that support does not come from the teachers who wrote the material. The third scenario, 'open access' showed how open content can help an Ethiopian student access material from all over the world, but none in her own language and highlights the need for more partnerships between universities in the west and developing countries. Finally, 'open sharing' showed the limits to openness in an institutional open repository where all the researchers share material, find profiles, follow, comment, and learn together but worry about research reputation issues.

'Equality and diversity is not a specialist subject, it affects everyone,' said Sal Cooke of TechDis, 'and openness and accessibility should go together.' She urged developers to think about the range of things they can do to make apps and other innovations more accessible, pointing out that, worst case scenario, it can take 170 clicks to read one page of ebook. We have to be careful of raising the barriers, she said: 'we don't need higher ladders, we need lower walls'.

Hugh Look rounded off the panel by arguing that the 'if it ain't broke don't fix it argument' simply doesn't apply in this case because the current models are not fit for purpose and we are 'running out of the kinds of resources that will allow us to spend large sums of money on things that are locked away.'