

Editorial

Governments around the world are actively looking for opportunities to better engage with the community, increase transparency and use of public sector and other information, using Web 2.0 concepts.

For example, the “Show us a better way” competition featuring Web 2.0 was launched by the UK’s Cabinet Office in 2008 [1] to encourage the creative use and “mash up” of information.

In 2009, the Prime Minister of the UK, Mr Gordon Brown, invited the creator of the web, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, to join a panel “. . . to help the Government drive the opening up of access to Government data in the web [2] . . .”.

In mid 2009, the Australian Government established a task force on Government 2.0 to help it meet the challenge to “. . . build a new culture of openness . . .”. It also provided funds to “support the development of Web 2.0 tools and applications that either enable engagement between the Government and the community or support the innovative use of Government information [3] . . .”.

Recently, Sitepoint [4] reported that “. . . in a revolutionary move, Obama’s administration is set to utilise next generation web technologies to bring an unprecedented level of transparency to government . . .” The US Government also released the “data.gov” site in May 2009 allowing the access and download of Government data with the aim of encouraging innovative use of the information.

There has been significant debate over the definition of Web 2.0. Some people described Web 1.0 as the phenomenon of connecting computers and Web 2.0 as that of connecting people. So what exactly is Web 2.0? And how can it be used to help statistical offices better communicate with their users, make statistics more accessible and easier to understand, and better achieve their mission of informed decision making?

The papers in this Special Issue provide some of the answers to these questions. They also demystify the terms commonly associated with Web 2.0.

In her paper on “Blogs, Wikis and Official Statistics: New Perspectives on the Use of Web 2.0 by Statistical Offices”, Jessica Gardner explains that the term Web

2.0 describes a new wave in internet technologies that allows users to add, change, or influence the web content. Whilst noting that Real Simple Syndication and podcasts are fairly commonly used in statistical offices, Jessica Gardner argues that the opportunities available from Web 2.0 have yet to be fully realised. Whilst she does not support “crowd sourcing” of official statistics, she suggests that social networks may be an effective vehicle for developing education programs to improve statistical literacy in schools and universities.

How does one turn data into information, and information into knowledge? The paper “Innovative Approach of Turning Statistics into Knowledge” by Lars Thygesen and Bo Sundgren summarises the outcome of a workshop co-hosted by Statistics Sweden and the OECD on the same topic, and outlines the critical steps required to create knowledge from statistics.

Professor Hans Rosling, the founder of GapMinder foundation, once compared statisticians with composers, and argued that a layperson would require a statistical story teller and an instrument to tell the story in order to appreciate the statistics, as much as a person who does not know how to read music would need a musician and a musical instrument to help him/her to appreciate it. What is the statistical equivalent of a musical instrument? Data visualisation is one such instrument, and in their paper “Visualisation of Official Statistics” Olav ten Bosch and Edwin de Jonge give an overview of the data visualisations that are commonly found on the internet, as well as a good account of those used or created by Statistics Netherlands for statistical applications.

As one of the two original creators of the very popular dynamic population pyramid, Alan Smith and his colleague Steven Rogers, in their paper “Web 2.0 and Official Statistics – the Need for a Multi-disciplinary Approach”, note that perceptiveness science has a lot to offer in improving the communication of statistics using Web 2.0. They argue that it is appropriate for official statisticians to work in collaboration with perception scientists on using Web 2.0 to improve the communication of statistical messages and stories to the community.

Common feedback received by national statistical offices about their websites is that the content is hard to find. In her paper “Tagging – Can User-generated Content Improve our Services?”, Katja Šnuderl, observes that Web 2.0 applications “. . . allow users to share content on the web, comment, discuss and rate it, and organize that content . . .”. She asks whether statistical offices should also allow users to create their own meta data for searching, to complement the meta data created by the offices, in order to improve access to information.

As a regular contributor to the “Blog About Statistics”, and the creator of the widget “Statistics of the Week” on Statistics Switzerland’s website, Armin Grossenbacher, in his paper “The Globalisation of Statistical Content”, traces the evolution of web technologies as they were applied in official statistics, and foresees that the next stage of the evolution will feature branded services, in which widgets, mashups, Application Programming Interfaces, and the semantic will become standard offerings. Branded services, together with well coordinated international harmonisation of metadata, will be vital to help globalise the statistical content.

In the paper “Informing the Nation: Open Access to Statistical Information in Australia”, Siu-Ming Tam describes the journey of the Australian Bureau of

Statistics (ABS) over the past 25 years, from a policy of user pays to taxpayer pays, and from a copyright policy of “all rights reserved” to that of “some rights reserved” for the access and use of ABS information. He argues that adopting a Creative Commons license for ABS statistics will facilitate an environment for creativity, innovation and foster the development of high value-added information products through users combining information from different sources, and ultimately lead Australia to be a better place for its citizens.

These papers are informative and interesting, and I recommend them to you.

Siu-Ming Tam
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References

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- [2] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/8096273.stm>.
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- [4] <http://www.sitepoint.com/blogs/2009/03/19/obama-groundbreaking-use-semantic-web/>.