REVIEW: OPEN KNOWLEDGE FESTIVAL, HELSINKI

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The Event

In academic circles it is rare to find yourself in a discussion where the topic of the talk jumps very fast between open datasets, increased sustainability and transparency of services. This is the norm in the annual Open Knowledge Festival, which builds on such unanticipated and sporadic encounters with experts and enthusiast of different fields. Although the event as such did not have, to my knowledge, a lot of Open Access content, related themes were discussed all the time.
OKF or Open Knowledge Festival is an event organized by volunteer open knowledge enthusiasts under the auspices of Open Knowledge Foundation. This year the duration of the festival was extended to one week and held in Helsinki (17th to 22nd of September). The event combined for the first time two previously separate annual events: OGDCamp (Open Government Data Camp) and OKCon (Open Knowledge Conference). Over 800 participants from all around the world arrived to the sold-out event. Only about half of the quests were from Finland. The event was organized in over ten parallel tracks and hosted many other co-located events.

The theme of the year was Open Knowledge in Action. The key focus areas were related in searching for 1) the values behind open data publications, 2) economic value gained by opening up of different datasets, and 3) value provided by the increased transparency. This theme reoccurred in several of the discussions and the participants had very varied viewpoints on the issue.

The main institution behind the event is the Open Knowledge Foundation. Founded in 2004 in Cambridge, UK, Open Knowledge Foundation brings together hackers and political activists to promote open knowledge and open content in society. In addition, the organization included a large set of different communities interested in promoting openness in society. Venue of the conference was Aalto University's Arabia Campus, which offered a nice setting. It was also able to serve the demanding visitors quite well even though their number in the end probably surprised the organizers. Only the food distribution arrangements did not always run so smoothly, as all the visitors wanted to have lunch at the same time.

One of the most famous of the speakers was the Internet celebrity and statistician Hans Rosling, whose main scientific work is on statistics. Most of the festival goers surely knew Rosling better from his TED-talks. The content of Rosling's presentation was a good fit to the theme of the conference and the audience welcomed the speech in an almost religious atmosphere.

When there are over ten parallel tracks in the program, the main task is to find the relevant presentations and discussions. Most participants used twitter and social media to track what was going on. On the other hand, the unanticipated and even surprising discussions provided to be the most valuable ones in hindsight. Naturally, the presentations were streamed on the web pages.

Open Data Research

The festival also provided several avenues to discuss Open Data from a research perspective. This is good, as there is a lot of work to be done in relation to the impacts of open data. Unfortunately, the tracks were organized at the same time, with the result that participants were able to participate to only in one of the research sessions. Thus I mainly focus here on reviewing the open data service business track.

The main findings of the research presentations about open data business were about the potential of opening up data in different domains (traffic, biomedicine, newspaper industry), and what would be the incentives of the actors to open up their data sets.

Is a search for one business model a feasible task? As we know previously from business model research, business models are often thought to be a governance tool, which describes a company's networks, offering, resources, and revenue model. A business model is located somewhere between a description of business strategy and descriptions of business operations. Thus the goal of trying to find "the open data business model" is not likely to be a very good starting point. A more informed approach is to try to identify a variety of different business models and then proceed to map out the different actors in value networks.

Overall, the research on Open Data is dispersed to many different research traditions, with their own methodologies and research outlets. Therefore it is

very important to build links between different scientist who work on similar topics, but, for example, publish their work in different journals. Open Access can have a key role here, since it makes research more readily available for different scientific and, more importantly, non-scientific audiences.

Theory and practice

Academics tend to agree that theoretical discussion might at times take place on a totally different level than would be relevant to solve the issues at hand in the industry. Therefore OKF and similar festivals serve a very important purpose: they bring these communities together. They also give valuable input about the state of industry. However, research should vice versa be able to inform the discussions about Open Data, but in this regards there still remains a lot of work to be done. Interesting audiences for research findings that gather in similar events include for example journalists, public sector officials and decision-makers, service development companies, and of course hackers/individual developers.

From a service development research perspective, the event was quite fruitful. Getting in touch with the actors, who are developing the new applications is very interesting and provides research with a whole set of new research challenges.

Summary

Overall, I think that the event was really good. The program had a lot of interesting elements, although there was too much to follow it all. A lot of very interesting people who develop and promote open data services were around. Enough to actually create a feeling that "everybody" was in Helsinki. The venue was surprisingly good and arrangements seemed to work well.

At least I am already looking forward for the next years' event, presentations and contacts. The organizers really need to do their best to match the organization of the event in Helsinki.

Links:

Open Knowledge Festival http://okfestival.org/
Open Knowledge Foundation http://okfn.org/

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