

Opening new partnerships through shared and landed Histories

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Abstract

Data is data; it can be big, little, personal, public, open, closed, but context - that is the social context of data - is everything. Equity issues frequently arise around access (i.e., the digital divide) but all data exists in a sociological context, and the shape, texture, and positioning - the very utility of data - depends on more than access writ large, but also who can select what is available and how access is configured. For land based practices, like agriculture for example, the geoweb is a new and potentially powerful tool for accessing information, for articulating priorities and concerns, for mobilizing support, and for creating community both virtual and face-to-face. This paper explores how deliberate linkages between the methodologies for researching/mobilizing around the concerns of small holder agriculturalists and geoweb based technologies can more effectively address (that is improve) wicked problems (Rittel and Weber 1973; Corbett 2014) by ensuring data is both produced and consumed with an eye to its sociological and geo-political context.

Background and Relevance

The Landed Histories projects (one currently underway in the Northern Rivers of NSW Australia, and another in the proposal and planning stage in the Okanagan Valley of BC Canada) are community engaged research projects that combine historical and textual data on a web-based platform in order to facilitate the voices of farming families and present their past challenges and contemporary concerns. Landedhistories.org presently includes archival and oral history materials pertaining to 11 farms, each with its own unique contribution to understanding the diverse ecologies and farming adaptations of the Northern Rivers. Using farms themselves as a lens through which to explore and represent the intersection of local ecologies and global process, the landed histories methodology facilitates dialogue by and about contemporary farming communities via materials developed via community based research.

These materials are currently presented on a WordPress platform (www.landedhistories.org). This program was chosen because of its accessibility and relative ease of use. The key functionalities of the site are the capacity to present and index resources of various types (text and media) through both map points, dropdowns, and tag clouds. These elements of the structure render the data accessible and meaningful in context – specifically the context of the landscape of the Northern Rivers, and the social history of the settler presence on that land. Whether this platform is suitable for future developments is an open question. In part, this is a question that revolves around the sort of data we wish to open up. That question is, in turn, a matter for discussion and negotiation between the collaborators in the next phase of the project – the phase we are calling – “opening data, facilitating debate”. The [Geothink](#) project has been crafted to assess just how significant and in particular how public data (i.e., government datasets) are effectively made public – open – and what benefit that might have in terms of government to citizen interaction. In this project, additional data and datasets are depended on the participatory framing of the core problems and questions people wish addressed; the ability of the research collective (including the community) to negotiate access to such data sets in an absolute sense (i.e., open up data held by government and quasi-governmental organizations) follows, and only then is the problem to mount the data in an accessible and usable form. As Corbett (2014) points out, the first problem relates to what data is directed towards addressing the “wicked problem”, while the second is a tool of greater or lesser quality. While the quality of our intervention is limited to some extent by the quality of the geoinfomatic tools at our disposal, the core problem precedes that intervention. And indeed, geoinfomatic tools are just that – just tools.

Methods and Data

We propose here to work collaboratively across two regions – The Northern Rivers (Australia) and the Okanagan Valley (Canada) – to develop and evaluate open data initiatives specifically generated out of the priorities of farmers working within their local food-systems working in collaboration with key public/government institutions. Academic research partners will participate as such – that is as community engaged researchers working to both facilitate and evaluate the potential of open data.

Just what data is to be opened is contingent on the partners involved. While at this time of writing this paper it is not possible to be definitive, we anticipate the following collaborations. In the Northern Rivers the key partners are the [Sustainability, Partnerships and Community Engagement](#) team and researchers in the [School of Arts and Social Sciences](#) at SCU, [Regional Development Australia Northern Rivers](#) and an advisory board to be formed by interested farmers and farm oriented organizations. In the

Okanagan Valley, the partners will include the [Young Agrarians Society](#), Okanagan Valley members of the [BC Food Systems Network](#), the [Okanagan Basin Water Board](#), and researchers from the Centre for Social, Spatial, and Economic Justice. Fundamentally we need to start with the problem, and one defined in a participatory manner, and in place; we then build out to data holding partners, to data sharing protocols, and then mounting that data. In that order exactly.

The first stage of our project will be to form parallel processes bring these regional groups of partners together to explore what sorts of data sets are available, and how these might be brought into the public realm - opened up - in a context meaningful to and engaged with the local/regional farming community. The landed history methodology is described briefly in Evans et al. (2014) and more extensively in Wessell et al. (*under review*). Employing techniques arising from history, oral history and anthropology within a broader interdisciplinary framework, we work with particular parcels of land defined simply by land selection procedures and cadastral surveys. As a result, our histories are bounded and constrained by the lines created in the colonization and fragmentation of Australia into the fee simple parcels of land. Reorienting the historical narrative around land and the people who live on it over generations provides a valuable lens to re-examine how food is central to politics and people's lives. Within the chains that connect family and community to place, links to empire and markets, government directives, knowledge and circumstance have changed that over time. Traditions and legacies have been subject to and shaped policies and debate over food supply and consumer demand. From a broader historical perspective it is possible to open up the present to farmers and imagine that the story could have been different. The current food system and the fate of food producers more specifically, is not the result of good planning, government support, consumer demand or cooperative markets, but rather all those things. As Latour (2012) suggests fragmenting our studies into environment or political economy, food supply chains or cultural symbolism, identity and representation, globalisation or local history, will likewise provide few answers for the future.

Results

Our goal here is to integrate the earlier work in the Northern Rivers, and new work in the Okanagan Valley with one or more data sets pertinent to the issues and priorities identified by farmers in the original landed histories project, and in the discussions supported by this agenda. The Landed Histories methodology need not engage larger data or even, overtly, larger issues; the work completed in Australia has value as a public history initiative that provides a platform for farm histories. That said however, there is a great deal of potential, and in particular there is potential for open public data sets to provide impetus for people's participation as both consumers and producers of data. Once identified, and accessed, we will

integrate these datasets with those work arising directly from the community via the web. In addition to the landedhistories.org site, the [SCU Regional Food Systems Geolive](http://scu-regional-food-systems-geolive) site is another potential platform - we will determine how to go forward on the technology part of our agenda once other elements are in place. The underlying intention is to support a viable and health farming sector through collaboration with farmers themselves. Support of farmers and their allies in local food systems, a contribution to food security and eco-system health, and the support of long-term robust adaptation to regional ecologies are linked in general terms. We anticipate that water issues, succession and property rights, economic viability and market relations, regulatory frameworks for food production and processing, environmental change, and the rural-urban interface will all be areas of concern. We will begin from there, from that open process, to seek additional data-holding partners, data to open, and the means to present, share, and augment the data effectively.

Conclusions

As scholars, we can probably agree that data is good and good data is even better. As scholars in the 21st century, we would also probably generally agree that open data is best. But for many of us it is increasingly clear that the fundamental challenges for mobilizing data, for facilitating change through open data and for honing the platforms that support open data, actually *precede* data in the first instance. In this paper, we have outlined a project underway that proceeds just so, and implicitly posits that participatory processes might best be the foundation which, in some contexts at least, must shape open data initiatives. This means, by necessity, that partnerships and partnership building in such contexts must be ongoing, iterative, open, and interactive, like participatory research problems themselves.

References

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