

Allotment (publics): *an open data and data driven journalism perspective*

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Through an examination of the future of allotments in the UK, small plots of land rented from the council to grow fruits and vegetables, this case study highlights larger issues concerning the use and value of open data as well as how data driven journalism can play a role in telling these important stories. This is a research collaboration with one of my postgraduate students (Yana Manyukhina) and has so far focussed on the following three issues:

1. Media coverage of allotments in the UK

We focus on mainstream print media coverage of allotments and growing your own in the UK national press, 2001-2011, with a specific interest in the coverage of the popularity of allotments, their perceived benefits, and the dominant lens through which they are reported in the media: 'Digging for Victory' and (threats to) 'The Good Life', referring respectively to the wartime effort of growing your own food and secondly a popular sitcom from the 1970s in which a middle class couple decided to adopt a more simple, sustainable life style.

In the spring of 2011, the Department for Communities and Local Government issued a public consultation on 1294 Statutory Duties pertaining to local authorities to possibly reduce their number. These duties included Section 23 of the 1908 Allotments Act, which ensures local authorities provide allotments, causing some newspapers to suggest that 'The Good Life' was now under threat. The Act remained unchanged however and in the summer of 2011 the government announced that of the 6,103 responses received nearly half contained a comment on the Allotment Act, highlighting significant public interest in the issue.

This part of the allotment project aims to contextualise this public response by examining how discourses around allotments and more recently 'growing your own' have been represented in the national British press over the last decade. These discourses specifically focus on the increased popularity of allotments, identified benefits of growing your own and more recently the crisis over waiting list numbers, as highlighted by the Transition Town movement as well as The National Society of Allotments and Leisure Gardens. Secondly, through the analysis of over 300 Allotment Tenancy Agreements and related data, obtained via the Freedom of Information Act, this work highlights potentially far-reaching changes some councils are implementing.

These different strands of analysis bring in to visibility the under-documented changes some individual councils are making to local allotment policy, how these fit with dominant media discourses and highlights the tensions between national and local government policy related to the future of allotments in the UK.

2. FOI data on allotments – *allotmentdata*

The Freedom of Information Act was used to carry out a comprehensive national survey of allotment provision with the specific aim to make this data openly available. We obtained data about rents, water charges, discounts, changes to tenancy agreements and other factors from 216 councils across England. We aim to work with councils and make recommendations about how this data could be published more easily in the future and are currently in discussion with Trafford Council, in the Greater Manchester area. Trafford Council are one of the most forward thinking councils in the UK when it comes to open data and they are interested in this particular case study as it usefully highlights the value of open data through an everyday example that the general public can easily relate to. As allotments are such a highly valued resource we feel that accurate and open data has the potential to deliver far-reaching societal benefits. This allotment data was published through *The Guardian Data Store* accompanied by a write up by me¹ and has received wide media coverage², specifically in the tabloid media. More information can be found on the project website: www.allotmentdata.org

3. Digging for Victory again

Digging has gained a new cultural and political currency in the UK in the last decade or so. As David Crouch and Gavin Parker noted in 2003, activists in the late 1990s utilised ideas and motifs derived from the 17th century Diggers and the wartime governmental campaign 'Dig for Victory' within their political campaigns. More recently Rebecca Bramall has shown how the mythology of the wartime home front linked to the 'Dig for Victory' campaign has been mobilised in anti-consumerist and austerity oriented discourses that promote sustainable living.

This part of the project seeks to build on these arguments by considering the current cultural and political significance of digging through further examples, such as the Winstanley Festival and the Ashton Allotment Action Group in greater Manchester. This will entail looking at how the ideas of the Diggers and the notion of 'Digging for Victory' have been entwined with notions of locally oriented consumerism, sustainability, grassroots community action, and anti-commercialism. As Crouch and Parker suggested, in these contexts physical acts of digging, performed as an embodiment of community, are as crucial as discourses and images. The research will therefore approach its topic through a mixture of discourse and iconographical analysis combined with field research that attempts to engage with the embodied nature of digging as an expression of opposition to official and commercial structures. This discussion will also be inflected by the

¹ The English Allotment Lottery:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/nov/10/allotments-rents-waiting-list>

² Coverage includes: 'You want an allotment? Come back in 2026... Gardeners forced to wait years to get land' (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2061958/You-want-allotment-Come-2026-Gardeners-forced-wait-years-land.html>); 'The New Landed Gentry' (Daily Express, 17/11, pp. 32-33) as well as articles in *The Sun*, *Horticulture Week*, *Garden News*, RHS website 'Postcode Lottery for Allotments' (<http://www.rhs.org.uk/Gardening/News/Postcode-lottery-for-allotments>) and Which? 'England's most expensive allotment?' (Jan/Feb 2012 issue of Which? Gardening magazine) <http://www.which.co.uk/news/2012/01/englands-most-expensive-allotment-274841/> I was also interviewed on BBC radio Kent and BBC radio Surrey.

consideration of the cultural legacy of earlier relationships between land, landscape and identity within the UK that go beyond the Diggers and 'Dig for Victory'.

To sum up, my personal interest lies with everyday data, related to 'mundane issues' that people relate to easily, principally because they feature in their everyday lives. This allows for a rethinking of political participation and civic engagement beyond the rather stale ways in which this is measured traditionally. I'm interested in 'really useful' data, which has the ordinary end user firmly in mind. So for some time now, I have been looking at the issue of allotments in the UK as an open data case study that could embed open data ideas more firmly in the mainstream and take it outside the world of technology. Having an allotment and growing your own food have become incredibly popular in recent years. Due to a real shortage in allotments, lack of creation of new plots, and ever-growing waiting lists, this research is interested in building on and extending previous work in this area, addressing the following questions:

- RQ1: How can allotment data be made really useful?
- RQ2: How can open data go mainstream, securing wide use adoption?

In collaboration with the Geography Department (and other potential partners at the University of Sheffield³ and beyond) novel data collection (FOI) and visualization methods will be applied, to secure empirically based evidence for the current 'waiting list crisis' by simply producing more accurate allotment data that can inform better policy in future. These same techniques can map alternative growing spaces and actively engage the potential of growing more food within our own cities, creating increased overall environmental awareness as well as having additional benefits, for example in our relationship to food. Moreover this will build on current interest from key stakeholders such as the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners (NSALG) as well as the Allotment Regeneration Initiative. By expanding the current project website and transforming it into a national allotment data hub, allotment data from across the UK will for the first time since the establishment of the Allotments Act (1908) be easily available, capable of not only informing policy, but crucially, *citizens*, addressing RQ1 and RQ2. The interest from the mainstream media in the UK, most notably the tabloid media in the allotment data project, highlights possible ways in which open data can be made more mainstream. Most notably by reframing the emphasis of the work away from 'open data' issues, but in this case highlighting issues of food production instead as well as related topics. This work contributes to the growing debate about how open data issues can be adopted more widely, and most importantly, how they can be made more sustainable. The presentation will go into further detail about these issues, highlighting different models for making this possible, as well as discussing a number of exciting responses to the project by others, such as the Open Street Map community in the Midlands.

³ I will start as a Research Fellow in the Social Sciences, at the University of Sheffield from the 1st of September 2012. I will be based in the Information School, but will work across the Department of Journalism, Geography and Sociological Studies with a remit to extend my research on crisis communication on social media as well as issues around open data and data driven journalism.