

This essay is part of a series essays dedicated to Open Data Day, in which we highlight the added value of different open data initiatives.

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It all started with frustration. Always a good motivator for change.

I blogged about national politics in the Netherlands and found it hard to find the right documents about debates happening in the Dutch parliament. More important, once I found the right documents, it was impossible to have a permanent link to them. That's over 20 years ago now already. A lot has happened since.

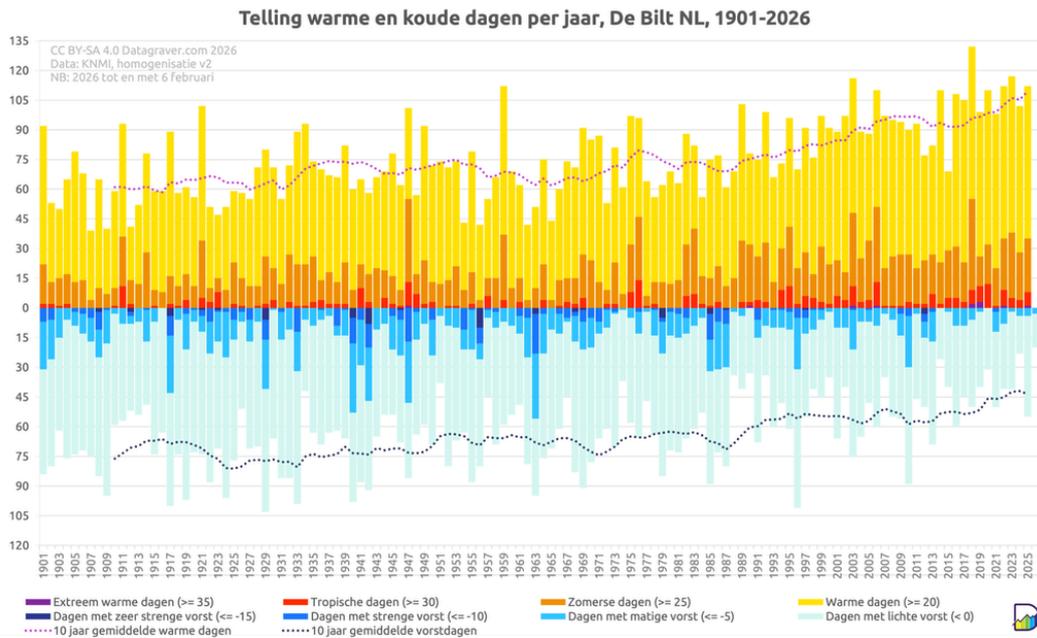
In my opinion the best way to promote a more transparent government is by showing the value and importance of the data that is already open and available.

Analyzing voting behaviour of members of parliament over time, which nowadays seems obvious, helped people choose a party in elections based not on what they promised during election campaigns but on what they actually voted on. Doing this on specific subjects like Privacy or Climate Change sometimes forced political parties to change their position.

Using and promoting open data in an indirect way also enriched the public debate. Political statements like "crime is rising, we need more police" could be validated using the actual statistics on crime (it is declining) but also on the number of police officers (had already grown).

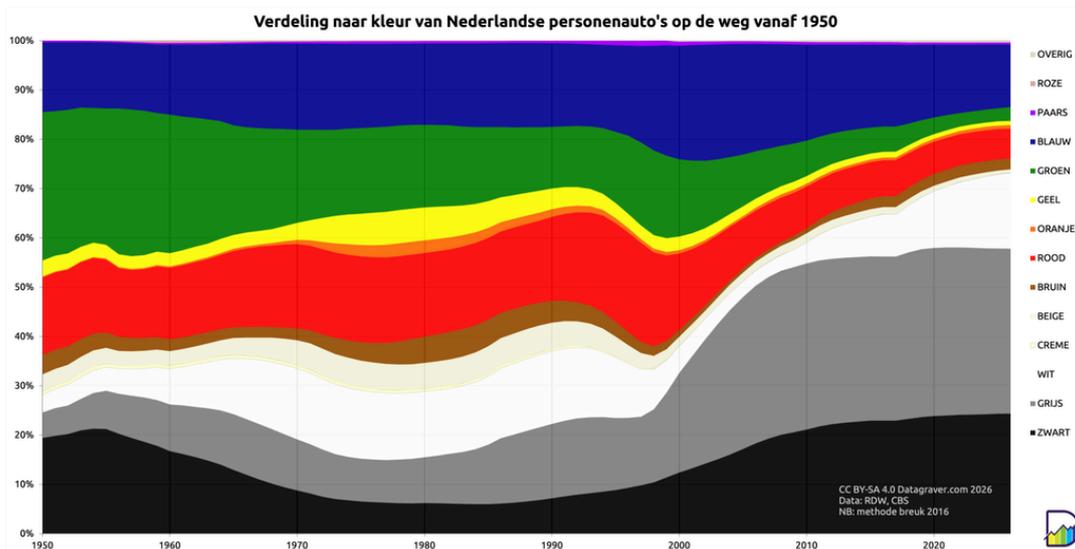
Publicly showing what was already available with appealing examples helped grow the role of data journalism and forced structural open data initiatives at the government level simultaneously. For instance the national bureau of statistics (CBS) opened up their datasets by pointing out what data was collected elsewhere as part of lower governments but was not yet available to the public. As a side effect, this kicked off some apps finding cafe's that are currently not in the shade '[sun on your face!](http://zonopjebakkes.nl)' ([zon op je bakkes](http://zonopjebakkes.nl)) [zonopjebakkes.nl] and sites on earthquakes due to gas drilling in the Netherlands (Aardbevingen groningen) were created based on opened up data.

During the first years of promoting open data my background in IT (I started my career as a software and database engineer) helped me to show that large or complex datasets could be transformed into understandable information for many people, using some basic steps. This played a big role in making visualizations on climate change. Zillions of datapoints from all around the globe or more locally in the Netherlands could be transformed into a single graph showing distinct trends.



Sometimes you have to use these skills to make a “fun” graph, like a graph on the changes in color of the cars on the road in the Netherlands over time. We see that flower power changed into black, white and grey. Millions of records from the Dutch government (RDW) on vehicles on the road were opened to the public. And finally a question I had for years could be answered.

Although this was kind of fun, it is important to have more easily digestible publications every once in a while to grab the attention of more people on what can be done with open data.



One of the challenges regarding the availability of open data was getting up-to-date data. Finding data that was already two or three years old (or even longer) didn't really help in making use of that data for apps or articles. This became most apparent during the Corona Pandemic in 2020.

A lot happened quickly after the first cases were discovered in the Netherlands. To really understand the impact, it required not only new data to become open – the amount of Intensive Care beds that were occupied for instance – but having this data available not years or even weeks later, but refreshed nearly daily.

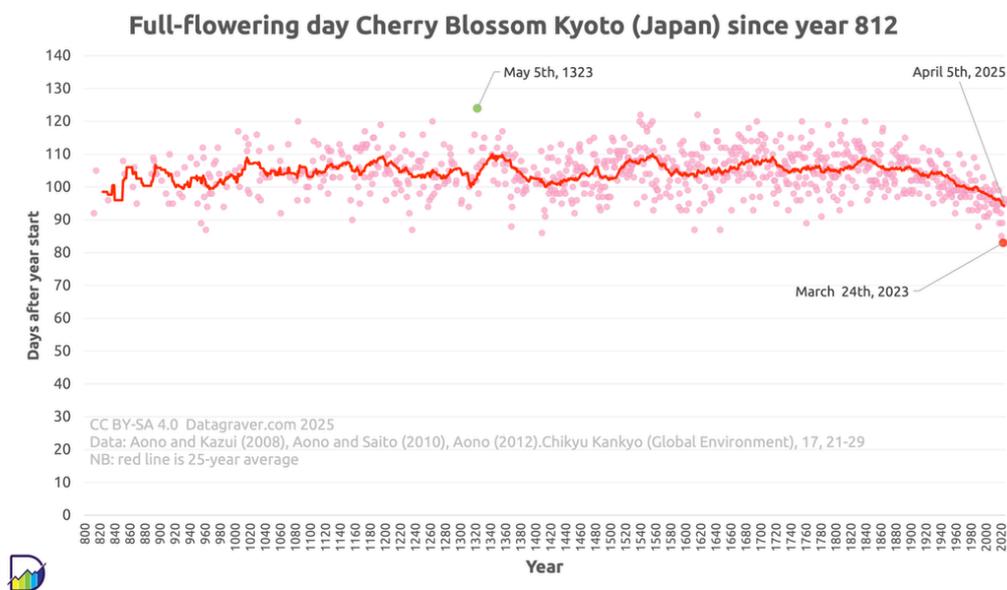
In times of crisis people need to be informed based on factual information to accept certain measures the government needs to take. So pushing the RIVM (Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment) to unlock their data and make it machine readable helped create necessary new dynamics. Previously the RIVM published bi-weekly PDF overviews, within two months after the start of the pandemic they opened up in a big way.

In turn, this helped others to translate a lot of complex data into understandable visuals or articles. Experimenting and interacting with readers happened with lightning speed. And the impact of the pandemic became understandable and verifiable for a wider audience. Opening up also helped scientists by providing the right and complete data for their research on topics like virus contagiousness and spreading patterns and by enabling new ways of combining different data sources for their analysis.

[gevallen naar leeftijd, 15e grafiek hier, heatmap. <https://datagraver.com/corona-covid-19-archieff/>]

Being very visible online (using all social media channels) also led to being invited to different departments of the government. As a real-world and vocal user I helped them understand what they needed and could do, but also made civil servants more convinced regarding the importance of opening up. Building these visuals and doing this project also helped generate the necessary trust that “their” data would not be used improperly.

By making the right use of open data I have gained a loud voice in the public discourse. And this shows: my productions have literally been seen by millions of people worldwide.



It is a great journey, starting of as blogger taking the first steps in using open data in articles to nowadays a fixed place in the online world as Datagraver (datagraver.com, @datagraver @mastodon....) with almost daily publications. Being an intermediary and a catalyst in the use of open data for transparency but also for useful and fun apps.

This nerdy hobby of mine turned out to be my contribution to society.

Still more work to do though!

Want to see more of my work? Head over to datagraver.com

