Connecting Libraries and Civic Data

How you and your library can expand (or start) taking part in your local civic data ecosystem

ACTIVITIES

communications

GOVERNM

DATA PROVIDERS

DATA USERS

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DATA FUNDERS

DATA Conveners

Charlotte Observer

Charlotte Agenda

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Data Portal

Introducing Civic Switchboard

The Civic Switchboard project, with support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, works to develop the capacity of academic and public libraries in their civic data ecosystems.

What is civic data? *Open data* generally describes data that are free to access, use, and reuse by anybody for any purpose and which can be modified and shared by others. *Civic data* can include open data as well data produced by governmental organizations, but also non-profits, civic institutions (like libraries!), and other coviduals; such data can powerfully represent alternative perspectives and stories. We use the phrase *civic data ecosystems* to describe the people/organizations connected with data in a local region and the infrastructure that supports this work.

Civic Switchboard believes that libraries and library workers should be key actors in civic open data ecosystems and act as core data intermediaries. The project encourages partnerships between libraries and other local data intermediaries to better serve data users, further democratize data, and support equitable access to information.

That role can take many forms: developing community data literacies, making civic data more usable, strengthening relationships between data producers, providing expertise on privacy and data management, publishing and archiving civic data, hosting events . . . the specifics will be different in different regions, but at the core is the goal of helping people find, use, and apply public information.
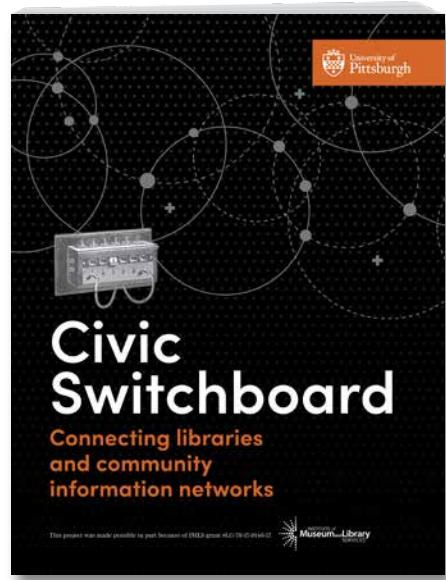
The project is designed around two strong convictions:

1. **Cultivating a healthy local civic data ecosystem** depends upon the coordinated efforts of a variety of data intermediaries. No single entity (e.g. your library) can effectively cover all of the necessary roles alone.

2. **The importance of local context** and the variety of local civic data landscapes mean that no single model can be made to fit every city or region.

In this document we introduce some of the key features of the project, share selected case studies from around the US, and suggest ways that your library can get involved. We have also created a detailed guide for libraries interested in expanding (or beginning) their role around civic data.

You can access it here:
civic-switchboard.github.io

Why the library?

Working with civic data probably already aligns with your library mission

- Your library likely places importance on community engagement, specifically **working to strengthen its communities**
- Your library probably already considers **data literacy** as increasingly important for its staff and community to cultivate.
- Because it's a good strategy for addressing tough problems (and because funding is often tight), **collaborating with strategic partners** may be a point of emphasis.
- Developing your library's role in its civic data ecosystem can address all of these goals.

Help to lead and grow your local community

- Libraries are community anchors, firmly connected to local communities and practice; **libraries and their workers should be helping to lead the development of their civic data ecosystems**.

You won't go alone: You can strengthen existing partnerships and build new ones

- You don't have to do it all yourself: cultivating a healthy local civic data ecosystem takes the **coordinated efforts of a variety of data intermediaries**; no single entity can be expected to cover all of the necessary roles alone.

- Taking an ecosystem approach is an opportunity to **build relationships with other organizations and people in your community**. Knowing about existing strengths means you can take on roles that complement and build on existing capacity.
- **Partnering includes working with other libraries, too!** If you are in an academic library, explore civic data partnerships with your public library, and vice-versa.

Share the value of library workers' expertise and ethics

- Simply publishing open data does not always result in community impact. **Data intermediaries**, much like library workers in general, help the public apply and use open data to achieve impact.
- Data intermediaries contribute value by building relationships among publishers, users, and other members of the ecosystem, improving data, statistical, and technological literacy, enhancing data quality, providing feedback mechanisms to publishers, and building tools that enable broader data use—all familiar activities in libraries.
- **Libraries and librarians should act as core civic data intermediaries!** Their expertise adds value to a wide range of issues that affect both data publishers and users.

NYC OPEN DATA 101

Want to know more about how your local government and city agencies work? Curious how you can use open data to better understand and advocate for change in your community? Join us for this introductory workshop to learn how to access, filter, and analyze information about your neighborhood from New York City's open data platform.

FREE ADMISSION

Mondays, September 9; October 21
6pm
RIDGEWOOD
20-12 Madison Street • (718) 821-4770

Mondays, September 16; October 28
6pm
LEFFERTS
103-34 Lefferts Blvd., Richmond Hill • (718) 843-5950

Thursday, September 19
5:30pm
EAST ELMHURST
95-06 Astoria Boulevard • (718) 424-2619

Thursdays, September 19;
October 24, 6pm
CORONA
38-23 104 Street • (718) 426-2844

Case
studies

St. Paul Public Library

Increasing awareness of open data through community conversations

ST. PAUL, MINNESTOTA
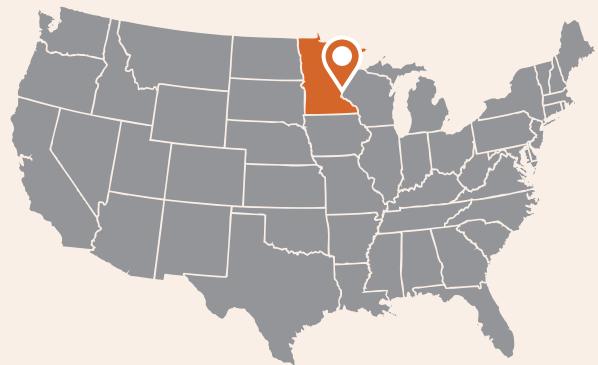
Saint Paul Public Library worked with the city of St. Paul's Office of Technology and Community to create a more data literate community and a more responsive, inclusive city government by (1) increasing awareness of the civic data available in general and in particular the City of Saint Paul's Open Information portal, (2) creating opportunities for both connected and disconnected residents to engage more deeply with data that is relevant to their community, and (3) developing a framework for gathering and responding to feedback and common questions.

To increase awareness of open data, the team created a brochure to illustrate what open data is, what is collected, how it is shared, and what are the benefits, rights, and responsibilities of both civic data owners and everyday users.

The team also designed and presented a series of events aimed at giving residents the opportunity to understand and discuss civic data opportunities and challenges. The events were held at three of their most visited libraries,

"As team roles changed throughout the project, we decided to write a project charter about halfway through to outline the opportunity, scope, roles and expectations. We recommend doing this from the start to keep momentum and communication going through the sometimes inevitable staff and organizational changes of public service."

all in diverse neighborhoods that have historically experienced an under-investment in technology. The events included panel discussions with local experts and data intermediaries with questions focused on the use of open and civic data in community settings. To further engage attendees and boost data literacy, there was an overview of the information portal, as well as hands-on activities and healthy food and drinks at every session.

Open Saint Paul Brochure

Training for library staff was also part of the project, which included an introduction to the City's open data properties as well as the technical knowledge necessary to help library patrons with its operation. Multiple staff training sessions were held before events to ensure that staff would be prepared to answer questions at events.

Reaching disconnected residents proved to be challenging but the team found the most interest from people without a data background at the events themselves. During an event at the Library and Parks & Recreation space an announcement was made over the loudspeaker and soon there was an all-ages crowd that had questions for almost every panelist and were excited to jump into activities. This led to the realization that there could be less emphasis on splashy marketing and more informal pop-up or tabling events would be better received.

This project helped the team elevate the importance of increasing awareness of civic data and emphasized the importance of being adaptive in learning about audience needs. The team proactively designed strategies to institutionalize the library's role in the local civic data ecosystem. ■

Robert L. Bogomolny Library, University of Baltimore

Joining open data and archival collections for neighborhood stories

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND
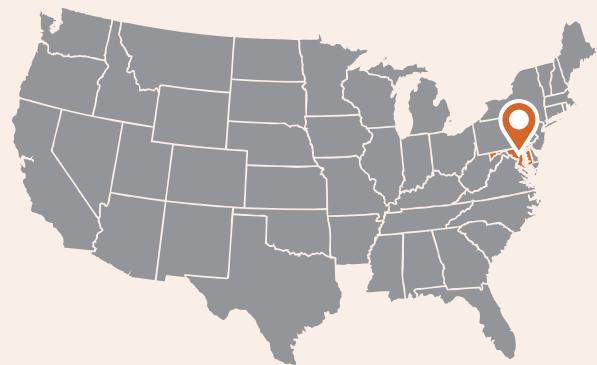
The Baltimore Regional Study Archives (BRSA) at the Robert L. Bogomolny Library, University of Baltimore contains a treasure of archival information on Baltimore's neighborhoods. Additionally, the Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance (BNIA) also at the University of Baltimore, hosts a great deal of community-based open data about and for Baltimore.

"We had to learn how to speak each other's language and learn how to communicate in ways that made sense across disciplines."

The Library partnered with BNIA to design learning modules that connected the library's archival collections to BINA's community-based open data.The purpose was to create scaffolded learning experiences and pedagogical tools that, through accessing archival materials and open data together, will empower everyone who cares about neighborhoods to effectively "tell their story".

The collaboration was organized around a three-week classroom activity in the spring Introduction to Information Literacy course at the University of Baltimore. The course focused on helping students learn to work with community information stored in Library archives and contemporary information systems developed by BNIA. Secondary goals included building awareness of these resources both among faculty and other members of Baltimore's community.

The team focused on creating a specific learning module that provided step-by-step instructions on how to access one representative collection from the Archives' Model Urban Neighborhood Demonstration (MUND) Collection and explore the community data in BINA's Vital Signs. Joining archival sources with contemporary community-based open data prompts students to examine how a community changed over time and if initiatives or trends that began in the 1960s are present in the early 21st century as reflected through Vital Signs indicators. The connection to qualitative data about

Archival image from MUND

neighborhoods was particularly welcomed by community organizations.

Since this project was the first official collaboration between the Library and BNIA, the team had to familiarize themselves with the resources available and services provided by one another. The team had to learn how to speak each other's language and learn how to communicate in ways that made sense across disciplines. The project team created linkages to enhance ongoing activities and events. These included classroom instruction and links to student learning outcomes (Library), community engagement (BNIA), online resources (Library and BNIA) and our annual event, Baltimore Data Day.

Before the initiative to connect these two resources, there was not a clear pathway that allowed potential users to make this link. Being mindful of sustainability, the project found ways to build their work onto existing programs, structures, and organizational goals. This case study also shows that when forming new partnerships, it is important to take dedicated time for each partner to learn about the other; this lays a foundation necessary for successful collaboration. ■

St. Joseph County Public Library

Building civic data community partnerships

SOUTH BEND, INDIANA

South Bend, Indiana, has one of the highest concentration of nonprofit organizations of any city in the United States. While South Bend has a strong nonprofit network that can provide robust services, these resources are often under-organized. To address this need St. Joseph County Public Library worked with the city of South Bend and the University of Notre Dame to assess the data capacity of community organizations in the region.

The Sound Bend team conducted an assessment of local nonprofits to understand what data local community groups want access to and what skills they need to utilize the information. They then produced a comprehensive report highlighting challenges these organizations face in using and accessing data, including employee skills, financial barriers, and time management. The report also covered the tools, software, and programs used by organizations to capture, store, analyze, and share data.

"A central lesson learned is the intentional practice of having regular discussions with community partners or other service providers."

The information gathered was shared back with the community through a Data User Roundtable event in order to deepen community partnerships and craft programming to be offered by the Library and the City to fill the identified data needs of the local community.

Greatest challenges in using data, according to partners

40% Staff lack the necessary technical skills (computer literacy, data management, data analysis)

38% Unable to dedicate time to data work given other demands

28% Unable to afford the tools we need to make use of data

22% Not sure where to find or how to collect the data we need

20% Not sure how data can further our mission

11% Unable to gain access to the data we need

8% There is no software/data/tool that meets our data needs

The project underlined the importance of regular discussions between community partners and those—such as libraries—who wish to support their data needs. Through this effort the team came to recognize the barriers the organizations are facing were less likely related to accessing data but to time and staff capacity to use the data.

The Library was the overall champion of the project. It led communication and outreach to local nonprofits, was an active participant in the interview process, and facilitated the survey data collection. Next steps include facilitating recurring community conversations and building focused trainings to meet community needs. ■

Take action

1. Look for Partners

Our first recommendation is that you look for partners among other data intermediaries in your ecosystem. Why? Because data intermediaries are natural allies to libraries, perform similar and complementary roles, and usually have a broad understanding of your local community data and user needs.
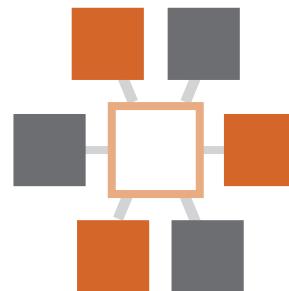
2. Build Connections

You can start to bring people together to talk about data with an eye toward developing shared best practices. One way to bring people together is to invite a speaker from a nearby community knee-deep in data intermediaries. Or, hold an open data conversation to connect with potential allies. You might consider holding a training session on federal data tools, or an informal hack night using whatever community data is available to you.

3. Map Your Civic Data Ecosystem

Inventorying or "mapping" your ecosystem can help you and your collaborators get a high level view of what is happening locally. An ecosystem mapping process can uncover players or relationships that aren't documented, and start ecosystem discussions from a shared place of understanding.

3. Understand your Community's Needs

What data are people in your community looking for? How might they want to use data? How discoverable is civic data in your region? What literacies and software competencies are people looking to build? Asking these questions will help your library's efforts be responsive to community needs.

4. Consider your Library's Role

Libraries are different and at varying stages of work with civic data. There's not just one way for your library to be active. You might choose to focus on any of the following, for example: connecting data users, developing data literacies, advocating for ethical uses of data, data management, publishing, or archiving civic data. As you consider potential roles for your library, remember the larger civic data ecosystem. Think about what is already taking place, who is already active, and where you might work in partnership with other organizations.
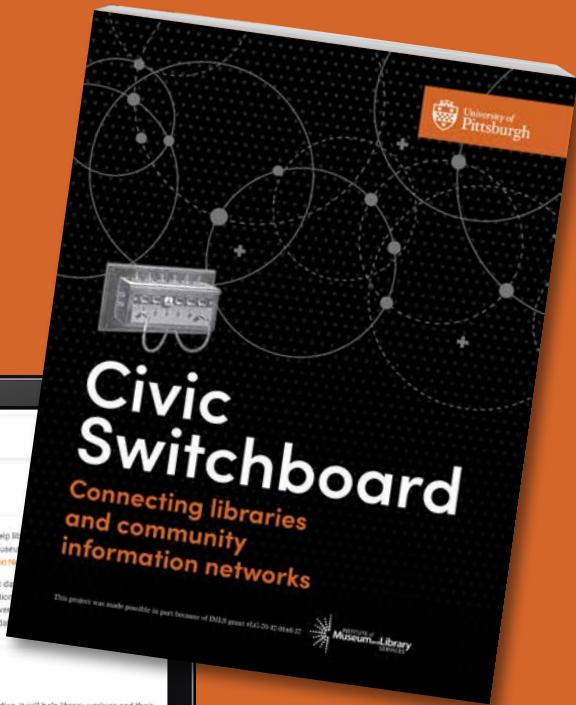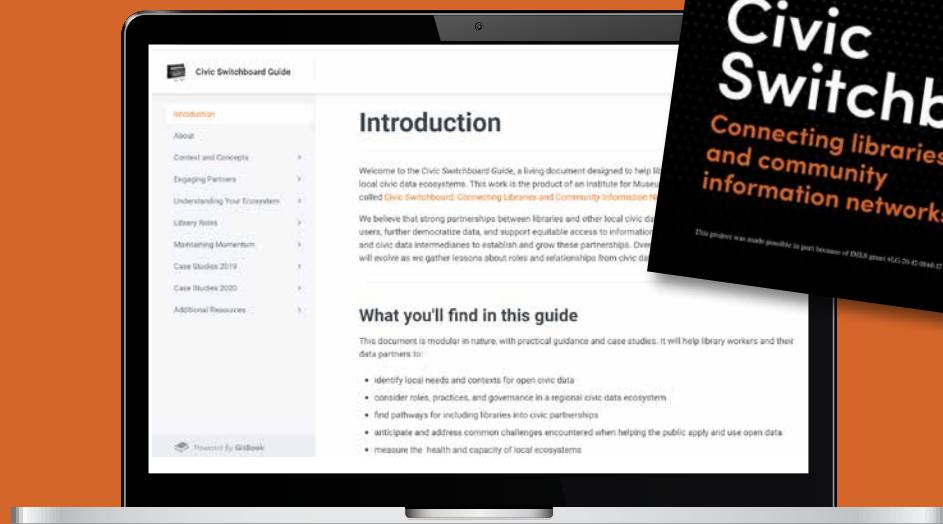
5. Start Small and Build Capacity

Starting small and building a proof of concept can help build momentum for your work and demonstrate that putting time and capacity into the work is worthwhile. Over time, your library will build partnerships and trust, working towards becoming a key participant in your local civic data ecosystem.

For more information
and resources
see the full
Civic Switchboard
Guide (PDF / print)
and website

civic-switchboard.github.io