Conference: Open data world info. game-changer

By Don Fraser, St. Catharines Standard
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A 2001: A Space Odyssey/ masquerade theme kicked off the two-day GO Open Data 2015 Conference at Brock University which ends Saturday

Open data will pave the way to more informed decisions, and a better society.

Variations on that theme dominated the third-annual GO Open Data Conference held at Brock University Friday.

Among its keynote speakers was Christian Villum, a Denmark-based international community manager for the non-profit Open Knowledge.

"How do we get people involved in open data?," Villum said to the group of about 200. "We're seeing all this new data becoming open and that's amazing — but what can we really do with it?"

The gathering included speakers, panels, knowledge sessions and learning labs.

St. Catharines' community-driven conference is designed by, and for Ontario's open data community and stakeholders.

Waterloo was the site of the first gathering in 2013, and Toronto the second.

At the St. Catharines event, Villum spoke about "advocacy, training and building technology to promote the idea of open knowledge."

The fact this movement has become a global network of collaboration is critical, he said.

"We're tapping into a whole ideology of building universal access to information … this global network, basically a network of communities, stretches across more than 60 countries."

Villum showed the conference-goers powerful uses of sharing publicly-released and downloadable data by government bodies and other groups.

One example was an "atlas of pollution" displaying the planet in national carbon dioxide emissions.

Another united world researchers who opened-sourced data about the H1N1 swine flu virus and its genome, resulting in the rap production of a vaccine.

"Open data is about people … who want to have an input in how society is run," Villum continued. "They can use (the informatio to create a change for people.

"And people can learn about these things without being technical … we need to empower them."

Villum said participants at the event — which ends Saturday — were on the cusp of an historic information revolution.

"We are the frontrunners of this idea, these principles, and have the responsibility and privilege of helping shape the future."

In an interview, co-host Connie McCutcheon said the conference is also about "taking awareness to action."

"We're hoping people won't just know about open data, they will learn to use it," said McCutcheon, a senior business analyst for Niagara Region.

That accumulating public information online "should affect every citizen," she added.

"This is about the ability of any person to get a hold of data, and become more engaged with governments and non-profits."

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Open Data Conference in St. Catharines

The community-based conference organizing committee included: Open Knowledge Canada, CoWork Niagara, Niagara Connects, Geospatial Niagara, Innovate Niagara, the Niagara Region, the City of St. Catharines, the City of Niagara Falls, the City of Welland, Niagara Regional Police Service, Niagara Catholic District School Board, District School Board of Niagara, Niagara College, Brock University, Make Web Not War, Province of Ontario, and the Open Data Institute Toronto (ODI Toronto)

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For more information, visit 2015.go-opendata.ca