Product Open Data, launches providing consumers product information in a single view

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Product Open Data (POD) is a new open data project from Philippe Plagnol, an engineer and former business intelligence consultant based in Paris, France. The project builds on Plagnol's knowledge of retail product information and how large companies track their products through the supply chain. With POD, Plagnol wants to provide GTIN codes which are printed beneath the barcode of products purchased by consumers to the public. These codes are currently managed by an organization called GS1 which works with manufacturers of products worldwide and maintains these codes as a closed database.

POD aims to create the first open source GTIN database so that when consumers look for product information they can see the full scope of product and supply chain data tied to that product. "I thought it made sense to provide this data because consumers are interested in several issues, human rights, the environment, safety and searching for individual products rarely turns up all of this information," says Plagnol in an interview with *CivSource*.

For the last four months, Plagnol has been working on the first version of the repository which includes approximately 260,000 products. He found this information through bulk information queries around what is currently available online, and is now interested in finding partners to continue contributing data and building out applications. He is also working on an RSS standard that would allow users to subscribe to new product additions and look at the full product information in XML. "In a lot of ways, I feel like my previous work in business intelligence and engineering has brought me to this point, because people outside of retail manufacturing might not understand the data like this that is available," he says.

The GS1 organization is funded by manufacturers of products worldwide, and is the only organization allowed to issue barcodes. The codes are kept in this central reference to ensure uniqueness and maintain tracking information on a given product. Each part of a given supply chain is given a GLN code, or Global Location Number which tracks a products movements. The GTIN code, or Global Trade Item Number is also supplied and creates a unique code for a specific product.

The GS1 Organization only provides limited access to GLN information, and no open access to GTIN codes. No one knows how many codes there are because GS1 closes off the database. This leaves consumers with access only to public information about the end stage product. "There is other information that might be as important to a consumer to know like where it was produced, take Foxconn for example," Plagnol says, noting that by keeping pieces of the production puzzle hidden, consumers have less power to buy according to their values.

For his part, Plagnol would like to collaborate with manufacturers or the GS1 to open this data. He explains that he is not working against them, but few businesses that make products or the GS1 have fully realized the value of this dataset to consumers. The advent of big data tools have also made this project possible, when it might not have been before given the billions of products in production worldwide.

Although the project has only been live to the public for a few weeks, Plagnol has already had outreach from all over the world. Companies and individuals are reaching out, often just wanting to learn more about these codes and what they mean. On the website, visitors can download the whole dataset, along with a presentation Plagnol put together to explain the work. He has also broken the site down into specific work areas, like smartphone applications, the data repository, or product photos so users can readily understand each component of the work.

"This might change the GS1, but I don't think that's a bad thing, collaboration and more information is not bad for this part of the industry. I think if everyone has more information we can innovate in new ways or learn things that help us make better decisions," he says. "I feel like I am not just a Parisian, I am a citizen of the world, and I am interacting with the world through this work."

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