

Best open source in government: policies, new tools, and case studies

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As I reflect on another year of open source in government stories, I took a look back at the articles we published on Opensource.com this year to see if there were any noticeable commonalities. I found that most articles on the government channel fell into one of three categories: government policies, new tools available, and case studies.

This is consistent with the trend I highlighted last year ([We have policies. Now what?](#)). As Mark Bohannon is fond of [saying](#), "Governments are wrestling with the 'how tos' of open source choices; not 'whether' to use it." Government policies are become more refined and sophisticated in regards to open technologies, and increasingly, governments are choosing to "default to open." However, governments still need help implementing those policies, and citizens are stepping up by creating new, open source tools and open formats to help governments get the job done.

Rather than do a traditional *Top 10 list* this year, I wanted to highlight a few standouts from each of these categories from 2014 that I think are worth reading if you missed them the first time. Or might even be worth a second read if it's been a while.

Governments: open source policy and practice

[Why isn't all government software open source?](#) by Ben Balter

The federal government is the single largest purchaser of code in the world. So why is this code—taxpayer-funded and integral to the day-to-day working of our democracy—so often hidden from public view? As someone who's been on the inside, Balter does a great job explaining the US federal government's "culture of no" and how the lack of "suits" behind open source really does make a

difference in the procurement process.

[US Digital Services Playbook: Default to open](#) by Mark Bohannon

Bohannon describes the US's Digital Service Playbook and other initiatives of the US federal government this year. There's also a good discussion here about the inherent risks of governments trying to insource 'freebie' software.

[UK government makes "big step forward" with open document standards](#) by Paul Brownell

The UK government announced it would henceforth require compliance with Open Document Format (ODF) in software purchases in all public administrations. Brownell praises the policy, but notes with caution that good policy does not always equal good practice.

New open source tools for governments and citizens

[Open source code helps governments share information with citizens](#) by Tamara Manik-Perlman

RecordTrac, a web-based portal for making and managing public records requests (like FOIA), provides detailed data to both governments and the public to increase transparency and accountability in the records request process. Brilliant.

[Technology driven governance just got a little smarter](#) by Rajesh Ranjan

The [FUEL Project](#) provides linguistic resources needed for localization, including computer translation style and convention guides, translation assessment methodologies and matrix, complex text-layout rendering references system (UTRRS), including help documents for globalization, internationalization, localization, and translation (GILT) world.

[Public crime data becomes more open and transparent city](#) by Brittany Suszan

SpotCrime's goal is to create a public-facing crime mapping and email alert website which collects public crime data from police agencies around the world and makes it available to anyone in machine readable format without restrictions on ability to use, consume, or share. While this does read a bit like a marketing piece, it's clear that there's a definite need for a common open standard for law enforcement agencies to share and report crime data.

Case studies

[City of Vienna turns increasingly to open source](#) by Gijs Hillenius

The administration in the Austrian capital, Vienna, outlined how and why it was expanding its use of open source solutions, including on its workstations, because of new requirements, open data, budget constraints and the major shift towards smartphones and tablets.

[The State of open source at the VA \(Veterans Affairs\)](#) by Luis Ibanez

In this interview, Stephen Warren, acting VA CIO discussed continuity of the VA's open source

initiative at the US's second largest federal government agency. The most interesting piece here is how their open source VistA project didn't really thrive until developing a community around it. This is a key takeaway for governments—it's not enough to release your software as open source. It takes a community to maintain and innovate.

Very honorable mention

[2014 Year of Open Source Miracles](#) by Gunnar Hellekson

The old "open source is insecure" FUD is made new again thanks to the fracas surrounding Heartbleed and Shellshock. Hellekson explains why that (tired) argument is wrong, and he does so beautifully.

TL;DR

It was a great year for open source in government. If you didn't have time to read the articles, check out this video playlist: [8 videos to get you excited about open government](#)