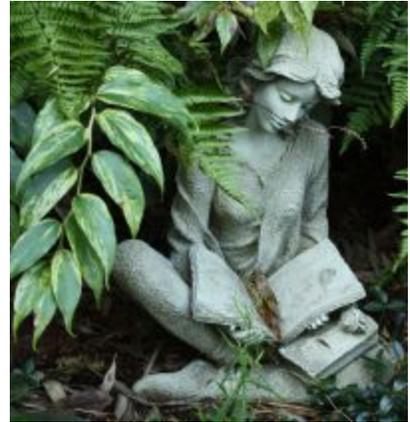


Questions About Google and Local Government Data

by
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Margo Georgiadis, Google's president for the Americas, may have been awkward in her recent discussion of [how Google might interact with city supplied data in the future](#) but the outline of what she suggests makes perfect sense. Google Search is no longer just about returning high-ranking links but, especially with the coming of [Hummingbird](#), makes better use of stored data about personal online behavior to return more personalized and localized results.



Given the increasing importance of localization and access via mobile platforms it makes sense for Google to extend its reach for data to index into the potential treasure trove of local governments. Cities have data available on how they conduct their business, some of it already geocoded. Cities are putting these data online not only in the form of webpages but as downloadable files, as data files that can be manipulated and used as the basis for calculations and visualization, and as input to other services where they can be further integrated and manipulated by third parties.

Currently if I type a phrase like "Restaurants in Alexandria Virginia" into the Google search bar I get back an attractively formatted page containing several links to restaurant guides and rating services, a horizontally scrolling banner with pictures, reviews, and price ratings, and a Google map pre-pinned with restaurant locations and around Alexandria. What if Google could also pull in data from the local government and have the following links also display on the page when questions are asked by local restaurants:

- Restaurant health and safety violations for the last 12 months
- Restaurants tax revenue for Alexandria

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- Access to restaurants via public transportation
- Number of liquor licenses currently under review
- Neighborhood drunk & disorderly charges
- Restaurant employment numbers
- Restaurant menus and prices

The logical step would then be to make all these data available for individual restaurants with a click-through for ordering, reservations, or links to other services that already provide such services. Clearly, the advertising opportunities make such personalized integration of local restaurant-specific data of potential interest to Google.

There may be some hurdles to overcome.

Cities will need to make such data available for indexing, access, manipulation, and display. Google already [links to public transportation data](#) and some governments are already publishing data on their own or through services provided by vendors such as [Socrata](#). Others have quite a way to go. Might the late adopters see a Google offering as a potentially "low-cost" way to join the "open data" bandwagon by following Google's lead?

Google is certainly not the only online service providing access to data about local restaurants and related services. How will existing vendors react to such potential competition especially if they don't themselves have the wherewithal to provide such services as enhanced by local government supplied data?

How will local residents feel about data about, say, their own tax or fee payments being accessible for indexing by Google, even if anonymized or aggregated? Questions may still arise from the public about the propriety of a commercial advertising service -- Google -- making money from the use of "free" public data.

All of this is conjecture but as more cities adopt their "open data" policies and begin making data files accessible for manipulation and re-use, questions may arise about the relative balancing of costs and benefits, especially when commercial and for profit services become involved in making public data available.

Related reading:

- [AGA's Citizen Centric Reporting and Government Transparency](#)
- [How To Make Datathon Efforts Sustainable](#)
- [Understanding How Open Data Reaches the Public](#)
- [Should Local Governments Rely on Facebook for Public Communications?](#)
- [Six Ways Local Governments Can Use Social Media to Promote Energy Conservation](#)