



Openness, Usability, and Effectiveness: Bringing data to bear on local issues

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Launched in May 2009, data.gov seeks to "increase public access to high value, machine readable data sets". This initiative, as well as the activities of federal data producers and federally funded grant projects, has increased the availability of accessible data across the United States. However, restrictions due to confidentiality and national security can restrict access to data for small or local areas. What has been the net effect of these initiatives in terms of bringing data to bear on local issues? Are there more comparable local level data sets available? Are they easier to use? Are efforts being made to improve their effectiveness in terms of using them to inform local policies and programs?

The effectiveness of open data for informing local decisions making lies in its usability. Usability is enhanced through the use of standard formats for dissemination of both data and metadata. It facilitates the creation of shared tools for addressing specific issue areas, filtering and customization of public data for local consumption, and the integration of locally collected data. A number of consortia are sharing the development of open source tools as well as creating definitions of comparable indicators, providing better means of layering information from multiple sources, and sharing approaches to bringing this new wealth of data to bear on local issues.

This paper reviews the impact of the open data initiative in the United States in terms of its effectiveness in better informing local area planning and development. The focus will be on the usability of newly available data through standards, shared tools, and cooperative activities.

Keywords: open data; standards; local area data.