

How Government's Data Can Be Truly Useable

Forget spreadsheets. Visualization is what residents need to be able to drive action on issues.

BY: [Stephen Goldsmith](#) | April 18, 2017

In honor of the recent [Open Data Day](#), here's what might seem a counterintuitive suggestion: Let's *stop* celebrating open data.

Why? A little history: It was back in early 2010 when a groundbreaking open data ordinance was introduced in the New York City Council. It became law two years later and provided a presumption that information previously hoarded by government agencies belonged not to them but to the public. In subsequent years, organizations like the Sunlight Foundation advocated for open data, and an enormous change began to occur across the country. Open data policies are now common at every level of government. We've moved beyond the need to celebrate it as special. Rather, we should regard it as a minimum and core requirement of government.

What the movement should be pushing for instead is *useable* data, and we're seeing considerable progress on that front. A group of chief data officers from large cities recently released [a letter to the open data community](#) that makes the point in a compelling way. The CDOs argue that the real issue is accessibility of data to a wider audience so that the number and types of users continue to expand. Simply counting the number of released data sets as a performance accomplishment misses the point. It's the production of useable data, along with the essential metadata to tie it together.

Among other things, the CDOs call for governments to incorporate well-designed open data portals, with mobile-friendly access, that allow for chats and include guides, dashboards and social media communication. And they advocate making geospatial data, which they say has been "an underdeveloped and undervalued asset," integral to open data platforms.

That approach to geospatial data is the direction Chicago is moving toward. CDO Tom Schenk Jr., who led early breakthroughs with his city's WindyGrid open data portal and its recent [OpenGrid update](#), sees embedding maps in the fabric of open data is part of the broader strategy of lowering the level of data literacy needed to make use of it. OpenGrid, he pointed out, contextualizes information based the user's physical location and has a strong focus on mapping. "It's all about data literacy, whether you're enabling city employees, or the general public, or trying to get someone like your mother or your grandmother to interact with these sort of tools," Schenk said. "These are all very important things to make sure we're empowering our respective residents."

Pittsburgh's ["Burgh's Eye View"](#) 311 visualization tool is a prime example of taking rather incomprehensible datasets and using visualization to translate lists of complaints filed into insights about the city. Launched last November, the site maps not only service requests but also arrests, police actions, building code violations and the like to allow residents to visually understand what happens in their neighborhoods. Citizens who report a faulty streetlight or a pothole can not only see their requests on a map but also the frequency and locations of similar requests, and can understand the broader context of the problems they report. Providing access to the information only via a spreadsheet misses the point entirely.

As important as streetlights and potholes may be, the power of visualization to enhance understanding of broader urban issues cannot be overstated. Thanks to a dynamic, interactive ["story](#)

map." for example, citizens around the country now can see just how much the issue of wealth divides us. This platform, produced by Esri, expresses how visible the rich-poor divide is in America's largest cities, illuminating the reality that poor neighborhoods are often just blocks from rich ones. Those divides are not so clear in a spreadsheet view.

Beyond enhancing understanding of issues, data visualization drives action and spurs citizen-government collaboration. When I was deputy mayor for operations in New York City, the city's 311 call center reported that we were receiving 20 million calls a year but that nobody really knew the results of those calls. So we began to implement mapping software that placed dots on the location of citizen reports, with larger dots representing reports of higher frequency.

The city trained community boards to use the software, and one day soon after I got a call from a community board member telling me that a large number of pedestrian accidents were occurring at a single intersection where a senior-citizen home was across the street from a pharmacy. As a result of this insight, which came directly from analyzing the issue on a map, we lengthened the walk-signal timing for the intersection, and there was a marked reduction in pedestrian incidents.

But as shown by the work now being done in Pittsburgh, that kind of mapping software is outdated. The technologies available now are far superior, providing seemingly endless opportunities to weave visualization into the fabric of municipal government, from budget spending to crowdsourced reporting of abandoned property with citizen-provided smartphone pictures.

The lesson for municipal officials is clear: When people can visualize a problem, they can truly understand an issue and be empowered to act on it. When it comes down to it, aren't we all visual learners?

This article was printed from: <http://www.governing.com/blogs/bfc/col-how-government-data-can-be-truly-useable.html>