GAAS - government-as-a-service

Everything you ever wanted to know about your block in a few American cities, well almost everything, is now in the open on the internet at Everyblock, a pretty neat mash-up, aggregating a lot of public data.

The need for such a service in developing Asia's rapidly growing, chaotic megalopoli is great, promising substantial economic benefits. It opens up new opportunities for delivering government in Asia and perhaps even making money.

For now Everyblock only available for a few American cities, like New York, Chicago and San Francisco, but it must definitely a sign of things to come, everywhere. Very soon someone will mash this with Google Maps. Real time data is surely next.

Everyblock is a powerful tool that might even give local democracy a lift. By bringing so much data together it shines a powerful light on what's really happening in a neighbourhood before it becomes news, if it ever does.

Residents can get a much better idea about what's good, what's not, where things are going. Everyblock will really come into its own when it can add weekly or even daily updates of house sale prices and mortgage approvals.

Knowing every block is one thing, being a master of nations quite another. Nationmaster does exactly that, pulling together data feeds on statistics from national and international agencies.

All well and good, but what about now, what's happening right now in the organism of the city?

MIT's SENSEable City Laboratory is working on WikiCity, a project to monitor, anonymously, the flows of people around a city via their mobilephones and GPS on buses and taxis. The results of a live test in Rome last September were fascinating, the city appears as a living, breathing, pulsating organism.

MIT's scientists think if people know in real-time the status of streets and transport they can move around more efficiently, perhaps avoiding overcrowding.

Think of it like this: data packets whiz around the internet taking the fastest route possible depending on traffic conditions (well most of the time) because the internet is 'intelligent', packets know which route to take.

Now substitute people for the packets of data, and a city for the internet. People however do not know exactly what is happening along their route, they move in an information void, almost like walking in the dark. If they had the information that data packets had they could
better plan their passage and interaction with the city.

Even more promising, as this data library of movement grows planners will have a great resource to replace models, inevitably inaccurate, when developing new transport systems. In developing Asia where megacities expanding outwards and upwards at an incredible pace often with only minimal planning, public information services like Everyblock, Nationmaster and WikiCity would be very useful, not only for citizens struggling to find their way, to understand a neighbourhood, but also for planners trying to get transport systems right.

Problem is the data is rarely readily available. Internet government remains by-and-large an aspiration. Information is usually hoarded out of habit by bureaucrats leery of serving the public. Tight budgets are another barrier, information technology is rarely adequate.

The solution for cash-strapped, forward-thinking government departments and ministries is to employ a free 'system-as-a-service' (think of it as a cluster of software-as-a-service).

The opportunity for making some money lies in providing an online system easily customizable for creating forms and process steps to move a bureaucracy's procedures and services onto the web. All that routine task-oriented service stuff that government does, building permits, crime reports, whatever.

To get the service for free the government would have to give the service provider the exclusive right to make that data, or rather its insights, available to the public online, like Everyblock, accompanied by adverts.

The real money however will lie in the exclusive right to licence the data for commercial use, with the revenue split between the service provider and the government (the promise of revenue should encourage bureaucrats into being helpful, willing partners).

By no means an easy sell, but with the success of software-as-a-service operations like Salesforce and Google Docs and the power and speed of open systems and information the economic and social gains look promising for cities and governments in Asia that get on board the trend.

Those stepping aboard the trend may gain political capital and revenue, those that don't will probably lose out because eventually the power of the internet will find a way to deliver the information anyway.

everyblock | nationmaster | wikicity

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