

Info Tech Column

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Gee! Oh! Am I Geo Ready?

by Stephen Abram

Geo is hot, hot, hot! It started long ago but went big when the US military stopped scrambling the geo-location signals off the satellites and services like General Motors' OnStar were born. Before that time I was privileged to see GPS in action on my brother-in-law's fleet of ships in the Great Lakes, where he knew, at all times, where every ship was within six inches! Anyway, all of the cool kids are playing with Foursquare and becoming mayors or are collecting badges in Gowalla. They're divulging their locations for every Starbucks venti latte or bagel place on Twitter and Facebook. Lordy! Is this just another waste of time? Or, does it have potential to change the face of the web yet again? Is it helpful information for special librarians in specialized settings or is this just about contextual savings coupons for retail consumers in Groupon? Well, my take on it is that it's a little of both. Again, playing with these tools and features in a casual way helps us to evaluate and understand their potential, and maybe even spark our own imaginations. So this month's column is a return to my favorite theme – play.

New Lingo

It's good to get the lingo straight so that we can at least sound smart. First, let's understand some of the basic definitions and Wikipedia does fine on these for definitions and articles too:

Geolocation: "Geolocation is the identification of the real-world geographic location of an Internet-connected computer, mobile device, website visitor or other."

GPS: "Global Positioning System: a navigational system involving satellites and computers that can determine the latitude and longitude of a receiver on Earth by computing the time difference for signals from different satellites to reach the receiver."

GIS: "A geographic information system (GIS), or geographical information system, is any system that captures, stores, analyzes, manages, and presents data that are linked to location."

Geo-IP: Geographic IP address location services can help you to identify virtual mobile or web visitor's geographical location information (i.e. country, region, city, latitude, longitude, ZIP code, time zone, connection speed, ISP and domain

name, IDD country code, area code, weather station code and name, and mobile carrier) using an IP address lookup database and technology.

Geotagging: Geotagging, also called geocoding, “is the process of adding geographical identification metadata to various media such as photographs, video, websites, or RSS feeds and is a form of geospatial metadata.”

Geocaching: “Geocaching is an outdoor activity in which the participants use a Global Positioning System (GPS) receiver or other navigational techniques to hide and seek containers (called "geocaches" or "caches") anywhere in the world.”

So there, now you have the basic words for a conversation. Let’s move on.

What is Geo and how does it affect librarianship?

I’ve been playing with several geo-social apps for about a year. My personal experience is that they’re fun (OK, so work doesn’t strictly have to be fun, but they are, so that’s a bonus). I think there is an enormous potential here for libraries. We’ve become very used to search engines like Google and Bing sensing our country and serving up a geo-located interface. This is different – it exploits a much finer granularity.

I loaded Foursquare and Gowalla on my iPhone (although they work on other smart phones and iTouch as well) and PC. I tried to get Loopt but it wouldn’t load on a Canadian phone but I’d enjoy hearing from anyone who has tried that or any other geo-application. I have also permitted Twitter and Facebook to know my locations and provide geo-located experiences (and ads). I use these in certain specific situations. I always use the geo-services when I am at one of the 100 plus conferences I attend annually. I use them in airports too. I’ve made it my goal to change my location on my iPhone every time I moved about the conference or the world – libraries, convention centers, hotels, the sites, etc. It took a while to develop the habit but it was easy to place my mark in seconds. I probably can’t make this a habit every day for me personally but I felt that the now one year long experiment was worth the effort. So what did I find?

1. I earned a bunch of badges and virtual prizes and rewards. I must have been well trained as a kid by free cereal box prizes and Cracker Jack since I found these rewards surprisingly helpful for helping me to know that I was learning the app. (We must be able to add this concept to library training, intranet and orientation programs?)
2. I did feel more connected to the larger conference as a whole. I find this with feeling with conference Twitter hashtags too. I can’t be everywhere at once but I do enjoy knowing what’s going on. I even learn social insights

such as librarians will tell you when they're at Starbucks but less so when they're in the lobby bar!

3. When friends checked in at the Starbucks near me or the noteworthy bagel and doughnut places, I could sometimes even meet up. I even found the cool local doughnut places this way that I wouldn't have found otherwise. I also found the whole bunch of geo-social stuff worked for me at finding random friends nearby whom I didn't know were there.
4. I like Foursquare better than Gowalla but I'll continue to try both. I found Foursquare easier to use and its sites inventory better than Gowalla's.
5. I am pretty sure I'll always use them at events and while I travel. At this point my home neighborhood activities might stay quieter online but you never know. It's already global since I used it in Australia and New Zealand in November.
6. I often found that I wished I could quickly or more easily message someone through Foursquare or Gowalla like I can with Facebook and Twitter. I suspect that will come to be.
7. I see a whole lot of library potential in geo-social apps. I wonder if we can integrate features into library sites along the lines that Facebook, Digg and Twitter and others are integrated into Foursquare and Gowalla. Are there ideas about improving social glue here?
8. Lastly, I continued to blog, tweet, and Facebook throughout conferences. Random meet-ups worked socially too. I connected with friends at various airports since we found each other through those means and had nice conversations before and after the conference. It made airports nicer places and avoided a missed opportunity to hug a friend.

So, I will reserve judgment on the long term implications of so much of the web going geo-social. I will state that I strongly believe that this is a major part of the future of search, websites, ads, and more. Part of being social is being together. It's not all of it since we have so many virtual social lives now too. It's nice to see some of the face-to-face 'presence' being an opportunity in the virtual space too.

I am thinking about what this might mean for libraries. Things like Gale's AccessMyLibrary iPhone and Droid apps have the potential to have social interactions built in (book clubs, recommendations, hmmm...), and just ask yourself, do I know who is the mayor of your library?

There have been some great tests with big trials of these geo-social apps at Computers in Libraries and Internet Librarian with prizes and all. People were very competitive! Feel free to friend me and see if we can connect in this way. It's fun to play with new features and apps and have a discussion. This would make a great unconference or hot topic session in Philadelphia.

The importance of Place

Place is important in libraries. For centuries we were almost entirely about place! Branches told us that geography was vital to good customer service. Many libraries have had trouble transcending their image as a place in the virtual world. Understanding the opportunities inherent in geolocation features serves to open our minds to the continuing hybridization of library strategies as both physical and virtual.

Where is it important?

It fits very nicely with changes in the research and technology environment – where we excel too. If you work on gaining some playful personal experience with 'geo' you will be that one step ahead instead of one-step behind. Playing the game rather than playing catch-up. Some of the things that geo is affecting more quickly than other areas include:

- Advertising targeting - You can target ads based on geo-tagging in most SEO and SMO sites.
- Market research – You can collect data and information quietly about user behaviors by capturing geo-data.
- Geo-authentication – You can remove barriers to access to information, sites and databases using geo-authentication versus nasty passwords, bar-codes, etc.
- Surveying and data collection – You will have a deeper understanding of the latest data capture techniques for segmenting user data such as where your intranet or site hits are coming from and for what.
- Maps (mines, forestry, etc.) – map librarianship has always been a key part of our field and this geo-stuff is creating opportunities for librarian employment in both the public and private sectors.
- Domains as diverse as urban planning, crisis control, elections, surveys and polling are into geo-data.
- It's a piece of metadata and we're all about that!
- And many more.

So, how do I practice and get to know this better?

It's easy and free. Here are some that I am playing with and recommend that you try a few too.

Foursquare

<http://foursquare.com/>

Gowalla

<http://gowalla.com/>

Twitter

<http://twitter.com/>

Twitter Location, Location, Location

<http://blog.twitter.com/2009/08/location-location-location.html>

AccessMyLibrary

<http://www.gale.cengage.com/apps/>

or iTunes / App Store

Facebook

<http://www.facebook.com/>

Facebook Places

<http://mashable.com/2010/08/18/facebook-launches-its-location-features-live/>

BrightKite (local texting)

<http://brightkite.com/>

MyTown (Facebook game)

<http://www.aboutus.org/MyTown.com>

Loopt

<http://www.loopt.com/>

If you're a cataloguer or metadata specialist, then, once again, librarianship is ahead of the game with standards and metadata rules. Even the venerable MARC standard has fields for geospatial location (342) and frameworks for digital geospatial metadata crosswalks.

Field 342 - Geospatial Reference Data (since Feb. 1999!)

<http://www.loc.gov/marc/bibliographic/bd342.html>

Crosswalk: FGDC Content Standards for Digital Geospatial Metadata to USMARC.

<http://www.alexandria.ucsb.edu/public-documents/metadata/fgdc2marc.html>

Crosswalk: USMARC to FGDC Content Standards for Digital Geospatial Metadata.

<http://www.alexandria.ucsb.edu/public-documents/metadata/marc2fgdc.html>

FGDC is the Federal Geographic Data Committee which is an interagency committee that promotes the coordinated development, use, sharing, and dissemination of geospatial data on a (U.S.) national basis.

Developers of all stripes are using location aware API's and maps to drive innovation in many of the standard offerings as well as inventing new ones. Do you know where your virtual users are? There are issues and we need to provide intelligent and informed advice and opinions on this. Privacy, safety, security, etc. are all in play, yet again, and we're well prepared to comment. Again, these are information applications and we should have an informed opinion to guide our host organizations. Playing with such apps for real will be a net gain that gives us experience, authority and a solid foundation for our recommendations and guidance. We really do rock. And now we can know exactly where that rock is!

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