

# Collaborative Librarianship

---

Volume 7 | Issue 2

Article 7

---

2015

## Who's Out There? The Power of Spatial Data

Lori Bowen Ayre

*Galecia Group*, [lori.ayre@galecia.com](mailto:lori.ayre@galecia.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship>



Part of the [Information Literacy Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Ayre, Lori Bowen (2015) "Who's Out There? The Power of Spatial Data," *Collaborative Librarianship*: Vol. 7: Iss. 2, Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship/vol7/iss2/7>

This Viewpoints is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Collaborative Librarianship by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact [jennifer.cox@du.edu](mailto:jennifer.cox@du.edu), [dig-commons@du.edu](mailto:dig-commons@du.edu).

---

## Who's Out There? The Power of Spatial Data

### Keywords

Spatial data, library services

## Who's Out There? The Power of Spatial Data

Lori Bowen Ayre ([lori.ayre@galecia.com](mailto:lori.ayre@galecia.com))  
The Galecia Group

Library communities today are not just melting pots, they are roiling stews of people moving in and moving out. Sometimes it seems like our communities are changing almost as fast as technology! So how do we get a handle on serving that dynamic community? How can we identify the services they need if we don't really know who they are?



The good news is that there are data and expertise out there to help a library understand more about the people living in the shifting neighborhoods that make up its service area. Using data in the library system combined with census data and other spatial data, a library can learn who is and who is not using the library. They can identify areas of growth and plan for a new library, and they can learn who lives in that growing area to ensure the collection and services reflect their needs.

Spatial data are any data that can be mapped to locations. Geographic information systems (GIS) and navigation systems like TomTom and Google Maps are commonly used examples of systems that rely on spatial data. The great thing

about spatial data is that anything you can connect to a place becomes spatial data. There are thousands of data sets that do just that. Census data is one rich resource that provides demographic information like income, age, housing, education, race, spending habits, behaviors, and much more. And all these pieces of information can be associated with your own patrons. And, while you cannot look up the income, age, race or spending habits of an individual patron, you can learn these things about census blocks within your service area. This neighborhood-level information is called "market segmentation" data. You can also overlay transportation information, planning information, health information -- and any number of the thousands of data sets that exist -- to learn more about your service area.

For example, using census data and transportation data as well as your library data, you might find that there is a large pocket of low income people in an area that are not using your library and it's probably because of the lack of public transportation options for them; getting a bookmobile out there or setting up some kind of 24-hour library or dispenser might be just the thing to make contact with these folks. Perhaps a new immigrant community has taken hold in one area of your county. Does the nearest branch to this new emerging population have the services they need as new immigrants? Does the collection have material in their native language? These are the things you can learn from spatial data .... if you know how to use the tools and interpret all that data!

One company, [Civic Technologies](http://www.civict.com), has been doing just that. They've been providing library services around spatial data analysis for over ten

years. I must have seen one of the first presentations they ever gave at a library conference because it was that long ago. It blew my mind. The concept is so powerful and yet so simple: if you can map information to a location (e.g. latitude and longitude), you can learn things – a lot of things. And these things can help you make better decisions. In 2011, Gina Milsap wrote an excellent article for *InfoToday* describing how she used market segmentation data in the formulation of their strategic plan (<http://www.tscpl.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/P.MLS-3368-R.pdf>). I know she still relies on that data in her excellent work at Topeka and Shawnee County in Kansas.

For many years, the folks at [Civic Technologies](#) were the only game in town. I think there was a kind of aversion to it on privacy protection grounds. Did it feel like snooping on our patrons? Or maybe it was just a technology that was too complicated for many of us to grasp, but now that we rely on our phones to tell us about everything around us, we've let go of some of our privacy concerns in favor of the convenience of finding the nearest Starbucks. Making use of spatial data has been slowly catching on in libraries. Now [Civic Technologies](#) has competition from [Orange Boy](#) and [Gale](#). Even [Esri](#), the biggest player in all things GIS, now markets to libraries.

So, before you take another strategic step, consider investing in spatial data. Learn what there is to know about the world around you – one latitudinal step at a time.