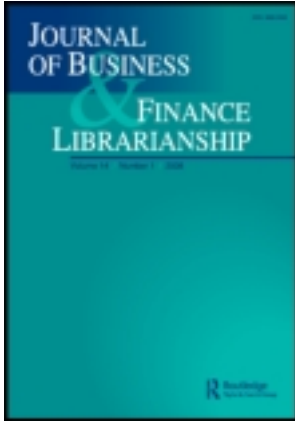


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Social Explorer

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Database Review

Introduction

The column reviews subscription databases of possible interest to the readers of this journal, with a primary focus on business-related databases. If you are interested in doing a review, please contact:

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Social Explorer

INTRODUCTION

Social Explorer originated at Queens College at the City University of New York in 1999 in an attempt to map census tract population data back to 1910 for the *New York Times* using paper sources that had small area data for eight cities prior to standardized census tract data being introduced in 1940. In 2003, the site socialexplorer.com was launched, and four years later a subscription module was made available. As of 2010, the database is distributed by Oxford University Press. Since its origin, the mission of Social Explorer has been “to provide quick and easy access to current and historical census data and demographic information.” One can obtain information through both tables and mapping. It was selected as an outstanding reference source in 2010 by the American Library Association’s Reference and User Services Association.

CONTENT

Social Explorer has both a free and a subscription (premium) version. Both use summary and public use microdata from the U.S. Bureau of the Census

along with religion data to produce aggregate data. Both also include carbon dioxide emissions maps down to the census tract level derived from the Vulcan Project (<http://vulcan.project.asu.edu/>).

In the free version of Social Explorer, the 2000 Census is the only source available in the reports (data) module one can begin with. In the free maps module, one can begin with any census. After generating a map, one can then produce a report. However, the free version offers a limited number of variables. The 1990 Census does not include categories such as industry, employment sector, transportation, foreign born place of birth, or ancestry. Whereas for 1980, one would not find group quarters (1990 has noninstitutional group quarters, but institutional group quarter is only available in the premium service). For 1960, all income variables are premium (whereas 1970 through 2000 has selected income variable available for free). This inconsistency of what is freely available across censuses would make research extremely frustrating if not impossible for researchers trying to follow trends over time. For almost all variables, the premium version provides additional content. The other major difference is the level of geography available for analysis. While the free version allows access down to the census tract and county level, the subscription version also allows zip code and census block group. More importantly, the free version only allows mapping (with the exception of the 2000 census). The actual statistics are not available for view.

While the focus for products such as Social Explorer and a competitive product, SimplyMap, is often on the mapping capabilities, economists and business researchers need the underlying data. Information from the American Community Survey is not included in the free version through either mapping or reporting. Both versions provide a helpful finding tool for locating an address, zip code, county, or other place of interest. In both cases, the site is filled with essential documentation for each source as well as user guides, methodologies, and questionnaires.

Public Law 94-521 prohibits the U.S. government from asking questions based on religious affiliation. From 1906 to 1936, the Bureau of the Census collected information obtained from religious organizations in the Census of Religious Bodies. With religion often playing an important role in elections as well as being a lucrative marketing demographic, the Association of Religion Data Archives (www.thearada.com) and the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (www.asarb.org) have provided researchers and marketers with information on this demographic. Social Explorer provides free access to mapping for data derived from the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies' (www.asarb.org) publication, *Religious Congregations & Membership in the United States* for 1980, 1990, and 2000. An update is expected in 2012. For this information one has to start with a map and can then produce a report down to the state level. The subscription version allows additional detail for major religious groups, evangelical,

mainline, and other denominations. The subscription version also includes 2009 religion data from InfoGroup. This data includes maps for counties, and special census areas, as well as point maps of the actual congregation locations which are expected to be updated annually.

A regular blog incorporated into Social Explorer mixes serious topics (literacy, the elderly, redistricting, ethnic enclaves) with amusing stories to provide examples of how the data can be used to present a case or story. An example was Faye Dunaway being evicted from her upper Eastside Manhattan rent stabilized apartment. Social Explorer used American Community survey data to compare her rent to other rents in that area along with median income data. Other topics have included “Carmageddon” (event in Los Angeles that led to the temporary closing of a major highway) in which Social Explorer used commuting data from the American Community Survey and “The Rapture” where Social Explorer used its religion data to predict who would be saved.

USABILITY/INTERFACE

When content is derived largely from publicly available sources, one typically considers subscribing in order to get a single place in which to obtain the data in an easy-to-use interface that ideally will not require librarian assistance. While much of the data is derived from the Census Bureau, it is typically difficult to obtain data for many places or topics without having to run dozens of searches. When a database is designed properly, librarians should be providing additional clarity on content and which sources to use, not spending time on how to use an interface. Social Explorer excels in this area.

To create a report, one first chooses level of geography (nation, region, Census division, state), with further breakdowns by county, county subdivision, census tract, block group, or zip code. One can choose a single place or many. One then chooses the table(s) to display based on topic. Tables are then produced. If you click on a table, the accompanying documentation pops up. One can then download to Excel, .CSV, or Tab delimited files. Import and label information is available for STATA, SAS, and SPSS.

To create a map, first select the source(s). Then choose the desired variable(s). You can then zoom in, zoom out, or pan using simple tools on the control panel. You can then use a rectangle to select areas. A clear legend on the side provides a clear understanding of the map. One can print, export your map to an image file, or create a report. If one created multiple maps, it is then easy to import them all to a PowerPoint presentation.

While it is unlikely the researcher would need help, extensive help is available online as are many useful examples to illustrate the possibilities.

Social Explorer is compatible with Internet Explorer, Firefox, and Google Chrome. In my experience, this database works better in Firefox when using the Windows environment. For Macintosh, one can use Firefox, Safari, or Chrome. Flash version 9 or higher is required for mapping. Their site indicates one can use additional browsers but requests one to contact the vendor. Due to the complex functionality, Social Explorer states all information may not be accessible to all visually impaired users. One can easily see when data is updated and can keep up with changes through RSS feeds, Twitter, and Facebook. Users can create personal accounts to save searches. Usage statistics are available on a monthly basis.

WHO WOULD BENEFIT FROM THIS DATABASE?

Researchers needing easy access to long-time series of U.S. socioeconomic data will benefit greatly from Social Explorer. Whether needing quick mapping or an easy method to produce tables, one can trace the socioeconomic progress of the people of the United States back to the first census of 1790.

COMPETITION

For more recent periods of time, there is competition from commercial companies such as Geographic Research's Simply Map (www.geographicresearch.com/simplymap/) and PolicyMap (www.policymap.com). Simply Map offers information of use to business and economic planners such as the Economic Census and add-on modules for marketing data from Experian and Mediamark, as well as company location information from Dun & Bradstreet. PolicyMap offers additional real estate and crime data. At the 2011 American Library Association Annual Conference, Social Explorer announced future plans to begin including data from the Economic Census and County Business Patterns. This will provide much needed content so that the researcher could investigate not only individual data but also business and industry data.

The bulk of the data in Social Explorer comes from the U.S. Census Bureau. Data from the 1990, 2000, and 2010 censuses are free on the Census website (www.census.gov) along with the American Community Survey data. In addition, select summary statistics from 1790 to the present are also free in PDF format. The free American Fact Finder also provides free mapping and tables for recent censuses. The Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) from the Minnesota Population Center provides individual-level census data back to 1850 from the census as well as the American

Community Survey and is available free to registered users. The National Historical Geographic Information System (NHGIS) freely provides aggregate census data and GIS-compatible boundary files for the United States between 1790 and 2000 to registered users. While the data on these sites is free and requires in some cases only registration, the data is not user friendly.

PRICING AND LICENSING

Free 30-day trials are available for the subscription version. Annual subscriptions are available for institutions (university, public library, business, government agency). A somewhat unique feature is that an individual can subscribe on a three-month or annual basis. Pricing varies by institution.

THE BOTTOM LINE

In today's economy, it is often difficult to justify purchasing repackaged information. However, the reasonable pricing of Social Explorer should allow most institutions to get past that hurdle and focus on the incredible historical depth and usability of the product. Until the Economic Census and County Business Patterns are added, business libraries may have a hard time justifying this product. However they should partner with general reference and those focusing on economics, history, and sociology to consider adding this source that cuts across subject boundaries.

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