

## Mash it up good

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When I was little, my mother would perform particularly deft surgeries at the supper table to encourage us to eat the recommended daily ration of each food group. My younger siblings refused to eat their meat unless it was carved into bite-sized pieces. The rest – the three veg – had to be squashed with the tines of a fork until it resembled baby food; a formless, lumpless green-grey mass of potato, broccoli and pumpkin.

My mother created mashups.

In Jamaica, mashup means to obliterate, to destroy. In the case of dinner, my mother succeeded in vanquishing any memory of the source of those vegetabley tastes. On the web, mashups are at the core of what people call Web 2.0 or the recombinant web. Mashups on the web are created by people who seize the opportunity to do something new with information and applications that are available online, for free.

For many, Web 2.0 is a sort of global operating system that innovative programmers are becoming adept at manipulating. Google originator, Vint Cerf recognises that “mashup stuff is a wonderful way of allowing people to find new ways of applying the basic infrastructures we’re propagating...a major source of ideas for applying Google-based technology to a variety of applications.”

Mashups help Google grow.

For instance, Google Maps has been used by many enterprising web entrepreneurs to extend the usefulness of their websites. Websites that offer a service get plenty of traffic which in turn means bigger advertising revenues.

When Paul Rademacher became frustrated with the pages and pages of ads for rented properties in a popular classified ad site called craigslist, he hacked his own solution – a Web site that combines craigslist rentals with Google Maps. Rademacher’s website features maps of areas with virtual pushpins to indicate where there are rental properties. If you mouse over one of these the details come up on screen. Nifty.

Mashups can be used for social good too. Wired magazine reports that a number of mashup websites are targeting politicians and congressmen by providing ordinary citizens with data that expose the backhanding that drives government policy. Maplight.org investigates the correlation between votes cast and dollars spent.

The article explains how maplight has shown how the logging industry gets away with cutting down ancient forests – by giving nearly twice as much money to politicians as environmental groups did.

We are entering an era of “radical transparency” aided by new web tools. Today, information that was previously invisible to ordinary citizens, unless they were prepared to follow a lengthy paper trail, is available at the click of a mouse on websites like Maplight, Opensecrets.org and Follow the Money.

In South Africa, where connectivity stats stand at 68 citizens in 1000 (compared with Iceland where almost two-thirds of the population is connected), this kind of thinking is a long way off, but should fit well into our mashup culture.

Since the end of last year, Johannesburg has been searchable on Google Maps (maps.google.com) at street level (major streets only) and Cape Town’s map shows major routes and unmarked secondary streets. There is a satellite function where you can view aerial photographs of an area and zoom in on it. A hybrid map shows a combination of the two. You can bookmark your house and email the map to a friend.

Google Maps is just one application designed to be improved upon; an invitation to everyone to discover, unearth, up-end, unravel,