

# Online Maps – A free and powerful resource

On holiday recently in West Cork, a woman stopped her car to ask me directions, a common enough event. As I answered her question, I noticed a printout of a Google Map and directions on the passenger seat. This told me two things. First, people are using online maps in Ireland as part of their travel plans. Second, when you get to small rural villages, you might still have to ask.

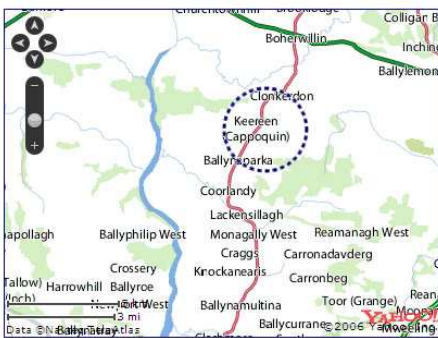
Maps on the Internet have come a long way, and here in Ireland they came later than elsewhere, probably because of our lack of a postcode system. Ordnance Survey have had digital maps for many years, but the resource wasn't available freely online.

There are now detailed street level maps of Waterford city and county available free on the Internet. The principal sources are Google Maps, Yahoo Maps and Microsoft's Live Maps, and they are largely based on the same data that's used on Car Navigation Systems.

## Property and Planning

The potential for online maps is already being harnessed. Property website DAFT uses Google and Yahoo maps and in many cases the placement, based on address, is very accurate. However, the accuracy in rural areas and villages such as Dunmore East is poorer, due to use of townland names. This issue will only be addressed properly when we finally get postcodes.

### Property Location...



Location map from DAFT.ie

Local Authorities are using online maps on their websites to show locations of planning applications. This is particularly useful as they don't just show current applications, but also applications from the past, making it very easy to track recent planning history in an area.

## Business Resource

Because the resource is free, it has many potential uses in business. Websites can have accurate maps showing their location. Tour operators can show the locations of places on their itinerary. Recently a friend who works in the health service organised a meeting in Clonmel and emailed her colleagues with a link to Google Maps showing the location.

A client of mine runs training courses around the country and has a map of each hotel on his website.

I'm particularly delighted to see this development, as I remember only too well the frustration of not being able to have proper rural maps online. In 2001, I was project manager for the Irish Hotels Federation, developing their first major website for all 1000 members. Digital maps were limited then, and we had to get 1000 individual maps made. A mapping company used an automated process to create the maps, but there were a lot of flaws, especially for rural locations. The system then couldn't even find one of the hotels on the Waterford Quays, and I had to tell the mapping company where it was.

## Driving Directions

The online maps also include driving directions, but these are of course dependant on the systems ability to find a location. Google could find my house in Tramore but Yahoo could only locate the town of Tramore itself. The driving directions list road names, junctions, which way to turn and distances between junctions.

3. Turn **left** at **Convent Hill** 387 ft

← 4. Turn **left** at **Hennessy's Rd** 315 ft

5. Continue on **Castle St** 446 ft

→ 6. Turn **right** at **N25** 0.4 mi 2 mins

← 7. Turn **left** at **R675/Tramore Rd**  
Go through 1 roundabout 1.4 mi 3 mins

However, they are 'unworldly'. Computers just can't manage advice like "... go past the church and take the second left, if you see Murphys Pub you've gone too far"

## Postcodes

In other countries postcodes are the heart of online maps. Postcodes of course existed before digital maps were available. Their accuracy and simplicity make them the first choice, although users can put in addresses if they don't know the postcode.

Because we don't have a postcode system in Ireland the online maps have had to make do with addresses, with the consequent problem of rural addresses being a bit hit and miss. Once postcodes are introduced, they will then have to be factored into mapping databases, and this may take some time. Certainly whichever online mapping solution incorporates postcodes first will have a clear advantage over their competitors.

## Satellite images

All three major mapping solutions have satellite imagery associated with them. Unfortunately the scale of the images is still poor and they don't represent much of interest to business yet.

Interestingly, the Gplan application used by Local Authorities has aerial photos instead of a map once

you zoom in to the closest detail. These images are at a far higher resolution than the satellite images and if made available as a resource itself would be very beneficial to businesses.



Aerial view of Dunmore East from Gplan

## Advertising

Free online map resources are being provided eventually as a means of location-based advertising and promoting businesses. Google currently has a search facility with the maps, although it's not yet good enough to be considered valuable. Yahoo still can't find any businesses or services within its maps in Ireland.

However, business searches and advertising based on a map of where one lives or is visiting is a powerful tool. Consumers benefit from seeing where the business is and getting directions. Businesses benefit from being able to accurately target advertising and promotions.

Because it's free, and easy to access, online mapping is going to change the way businesses promote themselves. Unlike some technologies, online mapping isn't just for big companies with big budgets. It's going to impact retailers and service providers, and not just those in the hospitality business. Those who grasp it will give themselves a very clever competitive advantage.

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A more detailed article is available at <http://www.webwizards.ie/maps>

