EXCEL ‹‹‹‹‹‹

By Bill Jelen

Imagine a Clip Art Gallery for Data

Microsoft recently released a preview of a new add-in called Data Explorer. This add-in for Excel 2010 or Excel 2013 allows you to quickly browse public data sets, download a set into Excel, and then create a recipe of steps needed to clean and shape the data set for your use. Excel remembers the steps to shape and clean the data and will apply those when you choose to refresh the data.

Data Explorer can be downloaded for free from www.microsoft.com/en-us/download/details.aspx?id=36803. Be sure to download the version that matches your installation of Excel (either 32-bit or 64-bit). To determine your version in Excel 2010, go to File, Help. On the right side of the screen, there will be a section labeled "About Microsoft." The first line will list the version number. If it ends in (64-bit), you will download the 64-bit version of the add-in. In Excel 2013, go to File, Account. Click the About Microsoft Excel button on the right side of the screen. This opens a dialog box that contains pages and pages of copyright information. Look all the way to the very top of the dialog box for an MSO number. If that ends in 64-bit, then you have 64-bit Excel.

After installing Data Explorer, you will have a new Data Explorer tab in the ribbon. There are icons that allow you to do an online search for data or download a file, database, or other data sources from the Web. Some interesting options include importing a list of all files in a folder (use Data Explorer, From File, From Folder) or Facebook (Data Explorer, From Other Sources, Facebook). There is also a Settings icon. Click on that and check the box labeled Advanced Query Editing.

Searching for Data

When you choose the Online Search from the Data Explorer tab, an Online Search task pane appears on the right side of the Excel screen. Type a query such as "Population by State" and hit ENTER. Data Explorer returns a list of possible results. Each entry lists a title, source, data, and a two-line description. You can hover over any item in the task pane to see a preview of the data in your worksheet. While Data Explorer's first search result offers population density by state, it doesn't have the actual population. The next several results are for Brazilian and Mexican states. Find the

result "States and territories - List of U.S. states and territories by population." (When I ran the query, it was usually the sixth or seventh result.) Click on that entry in the task pane to retrieve the data into Excel.

Filter and Shape the Data

Online data will infrequently match exactly what you need. I only need the state name and population so I can do a VLOOKUP, but this particular query returns 13 columns of data with rather strange headings such as "Population_estimate_for_July_1___2012." There are also some extra rows, such as "The Fifty States" and "50 States + DC."

Click on the Filter & Shape button in the Table Tools Query ribbon tab or in the Query Settings task pane. A Query Editor window will appear with a preview of your data. Right-click on any column heading to access a menu where you can hide, rename, or transform the column (Figure 1). Each heading has a dropdown where you can use the standard Excel Filter choices to hide specific rows.

A Steps panel appears on the right

Figure 1
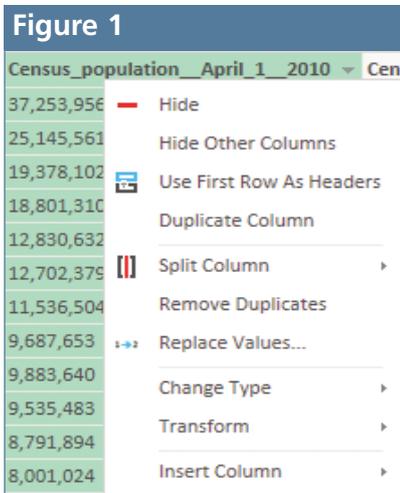
Figure 2

Figure 3

side of the Query Editor. Expand this panel to see a list of the steps that you've taken so far (Figure 2). Select a step to see what the data looked like at that stage in the process. If you apply a step and don't like the result, click the X next to that step to delete it. To see the details for a step, first go to the Setting icons in the lower right of the Query Editor and choose to Show Formula Bar. When you select a specific step, its details will then appear in the formula bar above the data.

Notice the Paper icon in the top left of Figure 2. You can click this to see the query language that Data Explorer is generating for you behind the scenes. You could theoretically
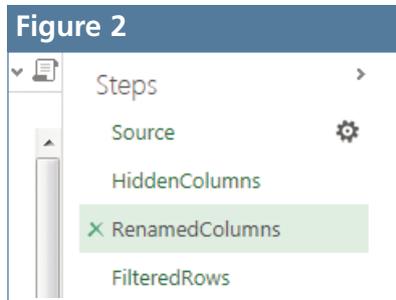
edit the query here as well, but it's easier to use the right-click menu in the Query Editor.

Click Done when you are finished shaping your data, and the completed data set is returned to Excel, as shown in Figure 3. The amazing part is the Refresh button. When you click that, the Data Explorer will go back to the Web, pull in current data, and reapply all of your filtering and shaping steps.

Expanding a Child Column

One of my first queries after installing Data Explorer was to import a list of
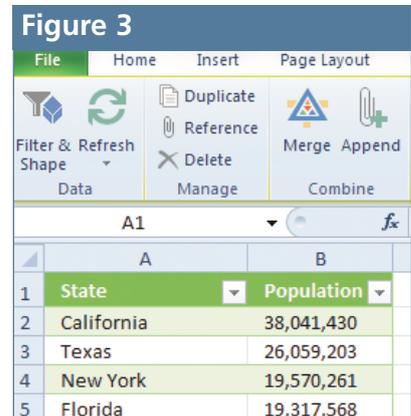
all the files stored in my DropBox account in order to figure out which files were taking up too much space. While Data Explorer offered Name, Extension, Date Modified, there was no Size column. Instead, an Attributes column appeared with a hyperlink for "Record" and an odd Expand symbol in the header. This represents a child table of values. Click the Expand symbol and choose which items you would like to embed into the current table (see Figure 4).

Data Explorer will make it far easier to retrieve and later refresh data sets from the Web. **SF**

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Figure 4