Something for Everyone in the Industry - GEO Business 2016

GeoBusiness returned to the Islington Business Design Centre for its third year with a larger exhibition, more visitors and, if anything, an even buzzier atmosphere. The industry's biggest players seemed to have bigger stands and more new suppliers were displaying their wares, reports Richard Groom.

Inevitably, delegates had to make choices between concurrent conference sessions and workshops, whilst also catching up with friends and colleagues. This year it was made a little easier as the conference was concentrated into a single stream and the workshops became five streams.

Robots and 'Us'

The first session of the first day started with inspiration in spades. Tom Cheesewright, an 'Applied Futurist' gave the audience his vision of the geospatial future. The future is, according to Cheesewright, a mix of human and machine, where the machine does more thinking than it does today. It was interesting, but perhaps somehow obvious and perhaps a little spooky, that he predicts that machines will have the same sense organs as humans. They will be able to see and hear and react according to their senses as well as analyse what they see to determine what to do next. The future, Cheesewright says, is a synthesis of the physical and digital organic living built environment which can develop and evolve, populated by autonomous organisms... and 'us'. Unfortunately, every 'autonomous organism' in the sci-fi world is of the competitive rather than the collaborative kind. Clearly they will need to get on board with BIM!

Setting aside concerns about world peace, this brave new world is good news for 'geospatial', because, as we know, everything happens somewhere, so the autonomous organisms... and us, will need map data to find our way around.

Clumsy Cars, Toothbrushes and Hats

The euphoria brought by this thought was however shortlived, as Ed Parsons, from Google, said that navigating is actually the easy bit. The bigger concern for the Google car is bumping into objects that have not been mapped, such as other road users. He introduced us to the 'toothbrush test'. The toothbrush is a necessary part of our lives and we buy one regularly. The aim of Google is to deliver products that pass the toothbrush test. He suggested that Google Maps, with a billion users has passed the test. Arguably, Google Glasses did not pass but Cheesewright suggested that augmented reality is yet to have its day, so perhaps the glasses will eventually pass the 'old toothbrush test'.

Parsons structured his talk around hats. We started off with a construction hard hat – no stereotyping there then. This is worn by 'traditional' geospatial people with a reverence for precision and care, and a reputation (deserved or otherwise) for protectionism. Then along comes the 'hipster hat', worn by people who hide complexity behind APIs and make our precious geospatial data available to everyone.

They give access, just as Uber gives access to taxis, without owning any vehicles and without the user having to master the intricacies of GIS.

Clever Tractors

Professor Gianvito Lanzolla from the Cass Business School asked 'what triggers digital transformation'? His answer was converging technologies. He gave two examples. The connected tractor is a tractor with technology to ensure that it delivers fertiliser in the right quantity to the right part of fields, so it is using GNSS, remote sensing and communications. Similarly, Rolls Royce monitors its aero engines throughout their working life so that the company can target maintenance – reducing aircraft turnaround times and reducing risk of failure.

Addressing the World

Gary Gale from what3words said that maps on their own are not enough and that the distribution of geospatial data is not uniform around the globe: London is bathed in it whilst in other places is it sparse. He claimed that 75% of the world has an inadequate, poor or no addressing system. Even in Britain, he was able to quote negative house numbers, the same house number and street name four miles apart amongst a dozen similar examples. His company's solution is to divide the world into three-metre triangular tiles and assign three words to each one. Three words are easier to communicate than latitude and longitude.

Technology and Society

Parsons, Lanzolla and Gale then joined chairman Andy Coote on stage for a panel discussion on the subject "Emerging technology and applications – how to examine the societal benefits of what we do". Like the opening pages of 'A Tale of Two Cities', discussion centred around opposites and contradictions: freedom v. regulation, privacy v. accessibility, society v. technology.

Regulation, the panel pleaded should be informed and should not stifle. Privacy is viewed differently by different cultures and indeed age groups, with younger people more willing to be open. The problem is not so much the handing over the data as ensuring that it is used for the purpose it was intended and nothing else. Rigor and freedom were also debated, with a consensus that it is the product that is important and should be subject to appropriate standards and regulation, not processes and certainly not process for process sake. Other discussion points concerned the 'democratisation' of data and the pros and cons of large monopolies against SMEs. In Silicon Valley monopolies are seen as 'good' because they are able to sustain innovation, whilst in Europe we put greater value on the competitiveness generated by SMEs. But are we happy, said Lanzalla, to see the monopolies take all, whilst everyone else fights over the scraps?

Meanwhile in the Exhibition...

Outside the conference and workshop sessions there was plenty of activity on the exhibition floor. Indeed the level of interest even held up well on Day 2, which bodes well for the future.

Viewing GeoBusiness a few days after the event, it was certainly a success as the exhibition grows and organisers Diversified Communications discover what does and what does not work. For this reviewer, the highlight was the panel discussion on the first day. The exhibition had a friendly atmosphere and nothing seemed to be missing: whoever you needed to see was there.

Overall, the conference is perhaps not quite there yet. There is value in independent technical presentations but delegates could choose only between high-level talks in the conference or workshops from suppliers that would inevitably be biased towards their wares. Also, over a hundred people submitted abstracts to the organisers and consequently many will surely have been disappointed. Hopefully, they will not be put off from offering their contributions next year.

With every year this event gains confidence and momentum. And that must be good for us all.

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