

# The Age of Geospatial Data Ethics



Today, we are seeing a sudden awakening around the topic of data ethics, writes Abigail Page. Although ethics have always existed, the recent scandals around Facebook and Cambridge Analytica have changed the tone of the discussion – especially as we learn that our personal data is actually a monetizable resource. These recent developments, which have received the full glare of the media spotlight, should be considered as a ringing alarm clock that is impossible to stop.

On the positive side, these scandals have forced citizens to ask some important questions: what happens to my data, how much do I want to share, and what does it mean when I give it away? It has also forced us to question how, as individuals, we can balance the huge benefits of integrated services with the knowledge that somewhere in pages of terms

and conditions we're allowing our most personal details to be used (if not exploited) for political or commercial agendas.

Location, as we all know, has a very particular value. My personal details are, for example, of particular interest to third parties if they can be tied to where I may vote and where I shop - especially since my socio-economic habits can be extrapolated to make assumptions about how to influence others with similar behaviour.

And of course, we're not just consumers – we're practitioners too. We live in an increasingly digital literate society where we need to deal with an ever-increasing amount of data. This brings with it not just management considerations, but ethical ones also - as was highlighted during the well-attended AGI Scotland annual event in February, which had a whole programme stream dedicated to the issues of security and privacy.

During the event, Don Smith – an expert on Cyber Security on an international level – illustrated his presentation with real and extreme examples of Russian attacks. His message was simple, yet extremely important: human behaviour enables the compromise of corporate organisations.

Another related issue which was discussed was that of the significant impact which GDPR is having on today's organisations – including AGI. In order to demonstrate the wide-ranging impact of GDPR, attendees were introduced to examples such as the British Geological Survey's Borehole Records and, in particular, how yesterday's legacy recording methods may not meet today's stringent criteria for protecting personal data. This led to an animated debate during the event which centred around the potential dangers associated with misinterpretation of such criteria. Today's organisations may, therefore, be forced to take a highly risk-averse approach concerning the use of core reference data (such as addressing), which is a vital part of our national data infrastructure.

I'm watching with interest to see whether the recent events may have an impact on our government and regulators. Following the Facebook scandal, will we see changes of substance during 2018? Closer to home, how will the government and the agencies dealing with our national data infrastructure handle citizens' concerns? This is an enduring concern, and one that our new Geospatial Commission will no doubt be considering within its ambitions for a national spatial data strategy. By enabling better use of geospatial data for the growth of the UK economy, with clarity on the management and governance of data for the public good, building confidence with citizens will be a key focus of the Commission.

Before we reach GDPR deadlines in May, there's a great event coming up in April that I'm super excited about. We're working with the Royal Scottish Geographical Society to stage an event at the Edinburgh International Science Festival. Our expert panel will be throwing the spotlight on the real innovations in uses of geospatial data. We've evolved over the past 30 years: simple mapmakers have become a data-centric community of innovators and thought leaders – and we've made advances that wouldn't have been dreamed of in the past. I'm interested to see just how much this is recognised by the audience – and to what extent, following the most recent Facebook scandal, privacy and ethics play a part in the debate! I hope to see you there.

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