

Company Move for OS and Elephants in the Room



I hope I will be forgiven for putting Ordnance Survey in pride of place in my final editorial for GIS Professional. As a sometime employee, partner and customer of this British institution it has always loomed large during my professional career in the UK and, as a brand and a very highly respected national mapping agency, when working overseas. But could there be trouble ahead?

“Becoming a GovCo will not change the ownership of Ordnance Survey it will remain 100% in public ownership.” This somewhat defensive statement concluded with the announcement that “the Government and Ordnance Survey management have concluded that operating as a government-owned company (GovCo) will better place the business to act at pace in rapidly changing markets and remain at the forefront of the global geospatial industry”. This change will take place at the end of the 2014/15 financial year. Customers have been informed that they can “expect to benefit from a more efficient and focused organisation, which continues to deliver for its customers and partners.”

The announcement added that there would soon be more details of continuing Ordnance Survey “extensive support” for Open Data policy and some senior appointments to strengthen the management team. OS will continue to publish a statement of its public task, to subscribe to the Information Fair Trader Scheme and comply with the relevant Public Sector Information Regulations, including Freedom of Information.

Not content with selling off the publicly created Postcode Address File with Royal Mail at a knockdown price and creating Ordnance Survey’s expensive AddressBase with the (free) help of local government, the government is now investing over £300k via the Cabinet Office in Open Addresses (see News page 06). This completely new and (they hope) crowdsourced database of addresses is to be made available free of charge and under an open licence to all comers. Time will tell whether this is a good use of our money; a step too far for crowdsourcing; and/or nirvana for the advocates of open data.

GiSPro cannot help wondering how on earth the current one million addresses with which it is starting – some of which have postcodes cancelled at least ten years ago – will become anything like the 29m definitive postal addresses in PAF or the 35m in AddressBase Plus. Come to think of it there is no definition of an address on the Open Addresses website – by implication it is a postal address and the current database certainly includes a postcode. Neither the press release nor the website mentions the Royal Mail or Ordnance Survey, the ‘elephants in the room’. However, they both very carefully allude to the need for any contributors to check that the data submitted does not contain ‘third party IP’. Whose would that be then?

Doubtless, I will be accused of navel-gazing when we should perhaps be concentrating on arguably more important matters like the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, the crisis in our hospital A&E departments or even the European wide INSPIRE directive for making more public sector GI available to all. You will find them all covered in this issue along with the Geography of Books, the report of the final day at AGI’s sparkling GeoCom last November and three of our first edition authors reflecting on the last decade in our industry.

So I am not sure whether to laugh or cry at the news that Ordnance Survey is now stocking a pet tracking device. Good to know that our national mapping agency has got its priorities right in this age of austerity! To quote from the press release: ‘It’s been great working with the team at GPaws to make their product available in our Leisure Shop and I’m sure customers will have fun with the results.’ Oh dear!

My career in this industry began with development of what was then just digital mapping at Ordnance Survey; although I have not yet fully retired I can see that, as well as all of the serious uses for geospatial information, perhaps we should just accept that trivial uses may end up being the most voluminous and possibly the most profitable! It’s just that when we are only just achieving some of the goals that we articulated 40 years ago (in local government and utilities for instance) it is difficult to see why the serious stuff is being squeezed to death and the trivial is promoted as if it really mattered.

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