

Do-it-yourself Geography

Conferences have changed. That's what I concluded after June's GSDI conference in Rotterdam. It's all about multimedia. Scientific presentations today are always in PowerPoint and come with integrated video clips; company presentations are flashy movies accompanied by music and humour. On the retrieving end things have changed even more. The GSDI INSPIRE day could be followed live on the internet. And the event set a record for the conference centre – never had so many people been connected wirelessly to the internet at the same time. Surfers included those taking a break after presentations, and also people sitting in the audience and sharing their impressions with the rest of the world – on their blogs or via Twitter – throughout the presentations. And don't think you can attend a conference without being noticed; everybody takes photos, putting them on Flickr and other photo sharing sites. Or you could get "Flipped" by a reporter making short video interviews with a Flip camcorder, and then publishing them on YouTube. An overview can be found in our GSDI report.

As the conference was in The Netherlands many Dutch 'heroes' took to the stage. Leen Hordijk of JRC spoke about exploiting new opportunities. Each day, 250 terabytes of high-resolution images are retrieved from European Union satellites. In 2008 1.18 billion mobile cell phones were sold worldwide, most of them able to do location-aware searches. Geo-browsers are used as platforms for communities to share geo-tagged information, opening up opportunities to complement 'official' information services. As an example of citizens' empowerment, Hordijk shared with the audience the very successful Dutch Nature Calendar ('Natuurkalender'). On this site voluntary observers post information about new birds, butterflies and plants they have spotted. Due to the amazing number of participants, if anyone mistakes a blackbird for some rare species, the post is soon filtered out.

User-generated geospatial content is often called neo-geography, literally "new geo-graphy". It encompasses the active collection of data such as OpenStreetMap, and the passive collection of user-data such as Flickr tags. However, there is debate about the scope and application of neo-geography in web mapping, geography, and GIS fields. Some people believe that geography is an established scientific discipline, while mash-ups and tags in Google Earth are not; they prefer the term Volunteered Geographic Information.

Hordijk asked the audience if the advent of "do-it-yourself" mapping applications really has no value for science, mentioning that the developer of the internet site received his PhD as a result of the observations. Another positive side to neo-geography is the building of social networks, with bottom-up approaches in which users become producers of information. This is in contrast to the GSDI conference, where most of the Spatial Data Infrastructures (SDIs) were characterised by a top down, data producer-owner approach.