

Eight Years On

Should users pay for geo-data produced by government and institutions? This question, posed by [Van Oort and Bregt](#), has for a long time fostered emotional, sometimes fanatical, debate. From the outset, this journal too has been a platform for the exchange of opinions (see for example the February 2003 issue). Acknowledging that there is no one-size-fits-all solution, van Oort and Bregt have developed a funding framework in which free access is the predominant model, but propound that in some cases charging is justifiable.

Speaking for myself, 'I can't find any principled argument to advocate governments charging users for geo-data products and thus acting as commercial entrepreneurs on a free market, and, if they do so, one of the consequences is that (potential) users are prevented from buying data by cost considerations: Our organisation can't afford this. So the counterproductive situation arises in which government agencies, thanks to budgetary constraints, are denied access to data that has already been created or collected by colleagues. The result is the job being done without the necessary resource, or using inferior alternatives. To charge other departments amounts simply to a costly recycling exercise, and thus a waste of taxpayers' money, rather than any enhancement of the national treasury. At the end of the day, charging brings only losses.

'From the late eighties to the first half of the present decade the free market economy flourished as never before. However, this doesn't necessarily mean that all tangible and virtual goods should be subject to free-market trade. We have to accept that there exist goods which do not belong to the category of products for which the general marketing theory is valid. To these goods belong geo-data.

'Why do governments produce geo-data at all? To make a profit? To relieve the national treasury? No, primarily geo-data is essential for good governance and for creating wealth within society as a whole. That is the fundament; the axiom underpinning any further consideration. Next comes the question as to what is the optimal economic model for achieving these goals [...] No such thing exists as an optimal economic model for pricing and funding of geo-data. All depends on national and local conditions. The main task is to find the best model in a situation within which parameters lie beyond the control of either producer or consumer. This will prevent unfruitful disputes between the camps.'

The above are paraphrased quotes from my own contribution to the 'heated debate', published some eight years back in this journal and collected in my book *Geo-information Engineering*. I'm glad that Van Oort and Bregt now bring us a solution. But is it the ultimate and decisive solution? In seeking answers, this journal would like once more to act as a platform. You want to share your ideas? [Contact me!](#)