

Free Data

Virtual London, developed by order of the mayor and paid for by the taxpayer, ran in Google Earth but used data from OS MasterMap, a framework owned by the national mapping agency Ordnance Survey. The agency holds the copyright on all data derived from OS Mastermap and licences government bodies and institutions by fee to use it.

But London boroughs werenotallowed to put Virtual London on freely accessible websites unless Ordnance Survey was paid per user. Google Earth and the Centre of Advanced Spatial Analysis tried to arrange with Ordnance Survey to pay just one licence fee legitimising use by Londoners and others, but they were refused. The breakdown of further negotiations led to a defeated Virtual London team announcing their model would not be run on the web in Google Earth.

The Guardian Technology Free Our Data lobby thinks Ordnance Survey should open up its database because it's paid for by taxpayers and should therefore also be available to them. I agree with the lobby on opening up resources to the public. Certainly in this case, but in many more as well. And not just because the information gathered, processed and modified by Ordnance Survey is paid for by taxes.

Not all data acquired, processed and maintained by government and therefore funded by the taxpayer should be freely open to the public. Think for instance of intelligence data, or other information kept secret for security purposes. But in the OS scenario there's another reason. This digital era throws up new business models almost every day. Instead of sitting on the old one, national mapping agencies as institutions funded by public money are duty bound to go along with the new. Their right to future existence may depend on it. Holding defensively on to an old prerogative will not help them survive in a highly competitive and digital world where information is free and paid for by others than the user.

P.S. The GIM International team would like to meet you at Intergeo in Leipzig. Visit ourstand No. I3.146/Hall 3and share with us your remarks, suggestions, questions and answers.

P.P.S. From October GIM International is to give you even better coverage of news in geomatics by updating you every week, instead of just fortnightly, through the GIM International e-newsletter. If you are not yet receiving the newsletter, go to the [website](http://www.gim-international.com/content/article/free-data) and subscribe now!