

Stimulus

In the June issue of *GIM International* I joined Ed Parsons, Google's geospatial technologist for Europe, Middle East and Africa, in advocating making data accessible. This reasoning behind this rest on four essential end-user needs: open, interactive, changing and well-designed data. For the public sector, with its role in collecting, storing and managing geo-data, I would like to add another piece of advice: make data free! The debate about paying or not paying for geo-data has been a long and heated one, as outlined by Van Oort and Bregt in their article [To charge or not to charge](#) this month. They also focus on the question of whether users should pay for geo-data produced by government and institutions, and thus funded by taxpayer's money. The conclusion arrived at by these authors, both at Wageningen University in The Netherlands, is 'free access', with a few exceptions, when 'feasible and justifiable'. The rationale here is that charging might erode the user base of publicly funded data and therefore end public support for spending a lot of money on data hardly used by the public.

I totally agree with the above, and would like to add at least one other reason that has made me a fervent advocate of free data.

I think it reasonable to assume that free data will stimulate the economy in a way that is very much needed in this downturn. This is also the view officially held by European Union governmental bodies, culminating in the INSPIRE Directive of 2007. The credo is: if it has been publicly paid for, it should be free to the public as well. In Europe, where almost every state can uphold a different policy towards making data freely available, this command from Brussels could mean a lot of new companies creating added value on free data for markets so far unknown. I recognise the danger of the business model for semi-public organisations. They have often been forced into working on a commercial basis using publicly funded data, driving their businesses on charging the users for it. But that's all part of the deal; acting in a commercial environment forces you to alter and tweak your business model every now and then. So there should be no reason against opening up to the general public all databases containing datasets gathered, processed and stored throughout the years, including all those entrepreneurs who see a chance to build viable business models based on geo-data without the need to invest heavily. It could deliver new services and products, jobs and substantial growth. So let's get on with it - it could be a very worthwhile economic stimulus just now.