

Voluntary Geography Input

In the future, mapmaking will be done bottom-up and no longer monolithically from the top down. The regions that will most benefit from this new approach will be the developing ones. The message broadcast by Google's evangelising geospatial technologist Ed Parsons is never one that falls easy on the ears of the community. Because it can make for rather uneasy listening, can't it, to hear somebody forecast the end of your profession, or at least the beginning of the end? On the other hand, it's also a message that finds a welcome - delegates regularly flock through the corridors of conference centres to hear Parsons preaching about the future in keynote speeches here, there and everywhere. Maybe that's because he's always willing to shed quite a visionary light on the future.

During AfricaGeo, held in the Cape Town International Convention Center, CITT, Cape Town, South Africa, from 31st May to 2nd June, Google prophet Parsons shared the wonderful example of the remapping of Southern Sudan. This brand-new nation found its territorial maps needed updating. A combined Google Mapmaker and SatSentinel effort between January and April of this year collected and collated more than 12,000 edits, immensely bulking up the available geo-information on Sudan. The edits involved roads, schools, hospitals and landmarks, including their local names, providing a great foundation upon which the government and other institutions of the fledgling country can base future decisions and policy. A project, if ever there was one, clearly demonstrating how Voluntary Geography Input (VGI: specific terminology for user-generated content involving geo-information) is bottom-up mapmaking ultimo forma.

The comforting thing about Ed Parson's message is always that he still comes across as a geospatial technologist preaching to his own community of the like-minded; marching a bit ahead of the troops, maybe, but never forgetting where he comes from. Even VGI will need to be assessed, certificated, and geo-referenced to the millimetre. In this sense it's no way a beginning of the end. What we're looking at is merely bottom-up helping top-down. No, not monolithic anymore, but delivering better products. So in that sense it could be described as some sort of end of the beginning.

The professionals will have to start consulting all those interested bloggers out there, the voluntary editors, wiki-contributors and so on, in order to equip themselves, the experts, to deliver better products. This is no different than what's happening in other fields: music, IT, software, journalism, you name it... in all of these areas bottom-up is now working together with top-down - layperson hand in hand with the professional. And in that sense Parsons' message isn't even all that visionary; merely an abstraction of what's already happening elsewhere.