

Fast-moving Train



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Recent policy debates show a worldwide trend towards open access and reuse. Notable examples of open-access data are Landsat and CBERS imagery. Furthermore, many European public organisations are changing their restrictive policies into more open ones. This development, which is believed to be a fast-moving train that is difficult to stop, seems to be beyond the scope of Van Oort and Bregt. Although parts of their approach are similar to my proposals published in 2006, I would like to pinpoint four key issues.

USE DETERMINES VALUE

The value of information comes from its use. The benefits of the use of Public Spatial Information (PSI) are difficult to quantify, as the authors stress. However, price and restrictions limit PSI use and services. Consequently, users may opt for alternative but inferior

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data, or even collect the same data themselves. OpenStreetMap would probably be less successful were road network PSI available for free and without restrictions on use, and hence attractive to more users.

GRATIS ISN'T FREE

Free access (*gratis*) does not necessarily mean free use. Access is

gratis to, among other applications, Google Earth and OpenStreetMap, but its use is often restricted due to prohibition on commercial reuse. This is an important nuance. If Van Oort and Bregt propose to allow commercial companies and government agencies access free of charge, they should also acknowledge the other side of the coin: that some users cannot use the PSI in the way they would like to.

DISCRIMINATION

A third key issue concerns policies discriminating between similar user categories. Van Oort and Bregt propose to charge successful companies and to provide others with free access. They suggest defining a successful company as one "making a profit". However, use of such a criterion would prompt every company to make sure it recorded trading figures in red. The distinction is also problematic from a competition law perspective, as many countries forbid policies discriminating between similar users. Our solution, proposed back in 2006, is to pay royalties based on total turnover, without discriminating between companies.

ALWAYS A BILL

As Longhorn and Blakemore noted in 2008, "There is no such thing as a free lunch". Van Oort and Bregt

remain undecided about who, within the ideal funding model, should pay the bill when access is free; (reuse would, I assume, also be free). Clearly, government is imagined footing the bill. But the house of government has many rooms. To which room should the bill be addressed, and how to ensure that the room labelled 'budget' remains stable over time, or

at least sufficiently so to maintain the quality users need? For example, the UK Ordnance Survey reported a financial loss whilst "freeing up" some of its datasets at the beginning of 2010. This brings us back to the good old policy poles of cost recovery versus open access. Meanwhile, the PSI policy train runs on, picking up more and more PSI on its way towards free access and (re)use. Will this train allow our information economies to flourish in the long run, or will it overshoot its final destination?

FURTHER READING

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