

EAB

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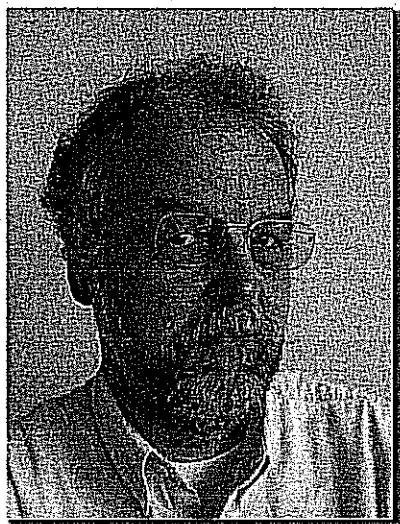
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Financing National Mapping Agencies

The retention of basic topographic maps as a military secret, unavailable to other users, is not justified in an age of satellite imagery and easily obtainable road maps. Should National Mapping Agencies (NMA) recover their costs from these users or should NMA products, as a component of fundamental services in modern nations, be free to all? There are numerous arguments for a



positive response to the first part of this question and numerous other arguments to support the last. The 'cost recovery school' may argue that financing for the NMA can not otherwise be guaranteed in the current economic climate. Will topographic mapping then really be abandoned? Topographic mapping is necessary for the defence of the territory, but also for general administration. In the past, the production of standard topographic maps was cost-effective for the military. It is probably still cost-effective today. Another point is that more than fifty per cent of current expenses are recovered from users. Unfortunately, most of this income comes from other state services and hence represents a very costly shift of expenses. Another argument is that payment leads to products better satisfying user needs. I believe this not to be desirable; public services are then brought into direct competition with geo-information producing

companies, whilst these enjoy an unfair advantage through cross-subsidies. Furthermore, public services are notoriously difficult to manage with an eye on cost-effectiveness.

The general policy within Europe is cost recovery, whilst in the USA topographic data collected by the USGS is available for the cost of copying and may be freely used. It is stated that the European regime and its generally higher quality of topographic maps (as compared to those of the USA) are related factors. However, other factors, such as population density, are more important. Comparing the size of the markets, the geo-information business is more than ten times larger in the USA than in Europe.

What is the 'correct price' for geographic data? Cost of production? The cost of production often includes acquisition expenses reckoned over a gathering period of an entire century. However, these are sunken costs and should not be considered. Only the costs of ongoing data collection for maintenance, production of original maps and reproduction - with today's web-publishing systems very close to zero - should be included. Most costs are independent of the number of users. Users buy data if benefits exceed costs. Some users are willing to pay more because they benefit more. Any form of payment requires administration. This adds costs, often very substantial, on both sides. Some NMA in Europe allow free use of some of their data provided that it is used only once, non-commercially and for one particular application. Complex arrangements, including provision for royalties and so on, are involved in the creation of new products for sale. Many business ideas cannot be realised because arrangements to acquire the necessary data from an NMA are not available within the 'business window of opportunity'. Direct fees are leading to reduced use and thus to loss of common wealth.

What is the solution? The task of the NMA should be restricted to the collection of data and production of standard products as required by defence and other state agencies. These datasets should be made available on the Web, without restrictions but also without guarantees. Citizens, education, science and business may then access this data free of charge. Business is free to offer any derived product for which it thinks there is a market. Public administration would not now be competing with them. An increase in business to a level comparable to that in the USA is likely to generate more state income through VAT than the cost of topographic mapping, which is about one Euro per inhabitant per year.

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