Locus Charter

(Draft v2.0 as at 12 October 2020)

The Locus Charter[1] is a proposed international set of principles and guidance for ethical and responsible practice when using location data.

Our Vision

A world where location data is utilized for the betterment of the world and all species that live in it.

Who we are

An international collaboration of governments, organisations and individual practitioners seeking to ensure the ethical & responsible use of location data throughout the world.

Audience

The Charter is written for all organisations that use location data and who have responsibility for activities that create, collect, analyze and store location data.

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[1] Locus is the latin word meaning place

Preamble

The Locus Charter proposes that shared understanding of risks and solutions relating to uses of location data can improve standards of practice, and help to protect individuals and the public interest, while gaining the benefits of geospatial technologies.

Why now?

Data about places, and people in places has an ever-growing number of uses. One person is often the user of a mobile map and at the same time the object of tracking in digital mapping by organisations they are not aware of. There can be many purposes and potential costs and benefits in play, aggregated up to city, national and international scale. How the costs and benefits from mass and multiple use of location data are distributed is a new dimension of power relations, adding to and sometimes intensifying existing imbalances of power.

The public, the media, governments and professionals in many fields are all becoming more aware of harms that can result from actions in the many data ecosystems that now operate around us. The growing field of data ethics is concerned with responsible and sustainable use of data in the interests of people and society. It is now clear that data-driven applications can come with specific kinds of risks, including of undue manipulation, discrimination, opacity and undermining personal privacy. Data ethics is probably most advanced and (at present) most urgently explored in relation to Artificial Intelligence and online activities, including influencing. Focused data ethics principles and guidelines can improve understanding of rights, obligations and responsibilities, and so support better decision-making. Dedicated ethical guidelines inform decisions in domains (eg rights relating to data and affected by applications of data); sectors (eg telecoms), professions (eg data scientist), or categories or descriptions of data (location, personal).

In this broader context, users of location data should have the tools and the language to explore and discuss the potential harms that could emerge from their activity, to manage risks, justify methods, and communicate how they make decisions. Since the earliest maps were drawn, ethical questions about geography and geospatial activities have been raised. However, the complexity and multiplicity of location data applications now possible has created new risks and opportunities that are different in kind and scale. Data ethics guidelines have to date, not considered location data, or seen it as only another type of potentially identifying personal data. We can learn from data ethics development in other fields, and ensure that in future, specific issues relating to location data are properly considered as part of the wider data ethics landscape.

Location data and ethics in practice

We hope the Locus Charter will stimulate discussion, debate and the development of guidelines and frameworks, in the firm belief that people working with geospatial technologies should recognise the potential impacts of our new location data technologies, and should promote good data ethics and practice in their fields. We see this as an essential part of delivering the benefits these technologies offer, and increasing recognition of geospatial applications among other mature enabling digital technologies.

A position or coordinate is not truly powerful until it is combined with other place based information, giving it greater context eg. people, flora, fauna, infrastructure, atmospheric. And so it is critical that we have a broadly agreed approach to how we handle the information about people and places. We believe that common understanding of risks and potential solutions will help geospatial data

professionals make better, more informed decisions. We also believe that the wider public, in many ways subjects of location data applications, will benefit from common terms and principles for understanding how location data is used, and where necessary holding data users to account.

We note that geospatial data professionals - like people in other data sectors - have a strong commitment to making applications work better, but most had relatively little training on data ethics in their field. In any case, the potential impacts of uses of data have changed enormously as far more data and more granular data has become available. Our experience throughout the Benchmark Initiative has been that these professionals will value practical tools and terms for understanding ethical questions and resolving any conflicts and risks.

Practical guidelines have to include acknowledgement that contexts and technologies continue to evolve. Digitisation and datafication continue to move at speed, changing impacts and benefits in new areas, and changing what is possible and what is desirable. It is unlikely that we can now anticipate accurately and in detail the potential challenges and opportunities that might emerge from the nexus of Artificial Intelligence, the Internet of Things and geospatial technologies a decade into the future, any more than methods of manipulating opinion on social media could have been predicted in detail a decade ago. The speed of change is part of the challenge to making good decisions.

We believe that we can all make better decisions if many perspectives from all around the world are brought together in a shared expression of what characterises responsible, informed professional practice with location data.

Principles

Quote from UN-GGIM Integrated Geospatial Information Framework

"Having access to the right data and at the right time is crucial to good decision making. It is data that provides new levels of insight into our past, present and future. For this reason, governments, businesses and the community need to know they are using the most accurate and authoritative data for planning, analysis, navigation and visualization – good data underpins good decisions. " IGIF Pathway 4 Data [2]

Principle One

- People should understand and be aware when their location information is being collected

Principle Two

- Personally identifiable location data should be respected, protected and used with informed consent

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[2] https://ggim.un.org/IGIF/documents/SP4-Data_10Jan2020_GLOBAL_CONSULTATION.pdf

Principle Three

- Good location data practice adheres to the data minimisation principle[3]

Principle Four

- The same rights that people have in the physical world must be protected in the digital world

Principle Five

- When collecting location data relating to vulnerable people and places one should take care to balance the benefits being sought with the potential for harm.

Principle Six

- Care should be taken to understand bias in the data that is collected

Principle Seven

- The more context data that is combined with location data the more powerful. Measures should be put in place to prevent identification of a persons location

Principle Eight

- The individual or collective location data pertaining to a people, flora or fauna should not be used to discriminate, exploit or harm.

Principle Nine

- People should have access to what location data is being collected about them

Principle Ten

- Avoid undue intrusions into people's lives[4]

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[3]
https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/principles/data-minimisation/
[4]
https://www.urisa.org/about-us/gis-code-of-ethics/#:~:text=On%20April%209%2C%202003%2C%20the,make%20appropriate%20and%20ethical%20choices.

Organisation/Practitioner Pledge (to be completed)

To actively pursue responsible and ethical use of location data in all aspects of my work to the best of my ability.

This draft has been prepared by Ben Hawes & Denise McKenzie from the Benchmark Initiative with support from Katie Cann & Chris Tucker of EthicalGeo. Should you wish to contact the team with comments please do so at benchmark@geovation.uk