

# The AGI Foresight Study - The UK Geospatial Industry in 2015

## An Expert Paper



## GEO-ETHICS

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### Scope

Shakespeare's Hamlet has it that 'there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so'. Powers and Vogel<sup>1</sup> suggest 'in essence, ethics is concerned with clarifying what constitutes human welfare and the kind of conduct necessary to promote it'. Hodgson<sup>2</sup> attempts to codify this into duties to be fulfilled for an action to be considered ethical:

- Dignity of life: the lives of people are to be respected.
- Autonomy: all people are intrinsically valued and have the right to self-determination.
- Honesty: the truth should be told to those who have a right to know.
- Loyalty: promises, contracts and commitments should be honoured.
- Fairness: people should be treated justly.
- Humaneness: our actions ought to accomplish good and we should avoid doing evil.
- The common good: our actions should accomplish 'the greatest good for the greatest number of people'.

Within the surveying community, FIG's statement of ethical principles and model code of professional conduct sets down four ethical principles:

- Integrity
- Independence
- Care and competence
- Duty

This all may seem rather abstract and removed from the day-to-day world of the GI practitioner. This short paper will show why it is not – indeed, why it is perhaps one of the key issues that the GI industry has to pay heed to if it is to be considered a profession, one of those self-governing entities which are required to balance the needs of a client with the needs of society at large (thus placing an additional dimension on the decision-making process).

### Current Position

Many ethical issues currently impact GI practitioners in their work today. Some of these bring the industry into the media headlines – the balance between privacy, and effective and efficient services, for instance. Is oblique aerial photography a crucial tool in valuing properties without disrupting home owners, or the 'spy in the sky' which the middle market media consider a completely unacceptable

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intrusion? Indeed, does it meet the requirements of Article 8 of the Human Rights Act 1998? This same issue has vexed the media regarding Google's Street View product.

GI practitioners are also often involved in bringing together and combining many different datasets, using their skills to draw the most likely conclusions from the data and explain the range of possible outcomes. This work may on occasion touch on data protection issues, given that the Information Commissioner has in the past indicated that the combination of datasets may infringe the Data Protection Act even if each dataset by itself does not.

These issues indicate the conflicts – or at least challenges – that exist where social and technological standards and changes rub against one another. They can then create political and economic challenges.

The previous section has indicated particular ethical issues which affect professions. It is therefore appropriate to ask whether the GI industry is a profession. Professions are expected – by government and the public – to have clear regulatory frameworks in place about who can practise the profession and who can't, and what action is taken against those who transgress. Many working in the GI industry are professionals of other disciplines – whether the general professions of Marketing, Accounting and the like, or the related professions of surveying or law. Is there a requirement – or a benefit – in the GI industry growing itself into a profession, with the regulatory challenges that go with that? Or is the GI industry just that – an industry? Indeed, even more generally, where does the industry/ profession start and finish? Is data collection per se a part of the GI industry? Is software development? And where does the industry and its individual members add value? There is an undoubted shift in answering this question to the analysis of data, rather than the pure task of collecting it – what, then, is the role of the industry/ profession in setting this requirement down in any professional competencies that it declares?

Linked to this last question is the role of commercial vendors in the industry. They are a powerful voice, being heard at the top levels of US Government, for instance. They operate far beyond purely commercial entities – but, at their heart, they have a return to make for their owners. What is their place in the industry, if it wishes to be a profession (and that is an 'if')? Can employees of such firms serve as officers of the professional body, for instance? Many GI bodies go through this consideration – the GI Panel included industry representatives, for instance, but the Location Council does not.

These are profound and far-reaching questions. The GI industry needs to have answers to them if it is to develop, flourish and be understood!

### **Anticipated Changes**

In many ways, the next few years are going to be spent grappling with the challenges that are currently present but may become yet more dominant. The tension between privacy and effective services is yet to be resolved. The different political parties in the UK all are struggling with it – the conservative media

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shout about spies in the sky, yet the party is committing to deep public spending cuts; the Labour Justice Secretary admits to a House of Lords Committee that he is inconsistent between wanting to tell government once of a change of address, but being very worried about privacy issues around the sharing of data across government. The GI industry, with its historical record of pushing the technological boundaries (from Limelight to Satellite as a past exhibition of OSNI's history had it), is enmeshed in this debate – which reinforces the point that so much data is about place.

Another growing challenge which is already clear is the 'green' challenge. The effective use of our planet's limited resources affects all of us. The GI industry is expected to – and should – have something particular to offer in this area. As a profession, we have to consider the wider effects on the environment, as well as the requirements of our client. I wrote the following ethical dilemma ten years ago: 'whilst undertaking a site survey for a private sector client, it becomes apparent to you that the client intends to ignore potentially serious environmental impacts of the development of the site. You reflect on your obligations to your client and to the community. What do you do?' This dilemma remains a key one.

The matter of professions more generally remains 'in play' politically. Can professions be trusted to regulate themselves, or will they do so at the detriment of society? If so, how should government correct this market failure caused by an imbalance of information and therefore of power? The GI industry has not yet seriously had to address this question, as it has not considered itself a profession – bodies such as RICS and the recently-chartered ICES have considered such issues and 'certified' those GI experts who wish to be certified. Yet AGI actively promotes an accreditation – that of Chartered Geographer. Is this the sign of a nascent profession? Will such an accreditation become mandatory for those wanting to hold themselves out as GI professionals? The toe is in the water; the challenge is to decide whether to jump in, or to get out of the water and leave regulation to others.

Globalisation will also continue. Many GI professionals already work in more than one country. This exposes them to further ethical issues. A second dilemma from ten years ago states: 'as a partner in a firm of surveyors, you have successfully won a tender for some work in a country where bribes are considered a normal part of doing business. In your own country, bribes are illegal (or, at the very least, not accepted practice). Will you use bribes to get the project completed successfully?'

Another aspect of increased globalisation is the right to work in other countries. Aside from legal rules on immigration and so on, there are the particular issues of recognition of competency across borders, and whether mutual recognition can prove this or whether certification is required. ISO/TC 211 considered this in its Technical Report 19122; CLGE and FIG continue to work in the area of mutual recognition but it is a very slow process (which seems finally to have come to fruition in the Asia-Pacific). Going further back into the fundamentals, the UN maintains codings of professions. The surveying profession is scattered around this coding list, something which many professionals believe is holding

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back a coherent understanding of what the profession is. The surveying profession has been lobbying the UN and ILO for changes to the coding for well over 10 years with little affect.

### **Impact of changes upon the Geospatial Industry and upon customers**

The particular challenges for the GI industry of general societal changes have hopefully been summarised in the previous section, as illustrations are necessary to understand the ethical concepts.

### **Scenarios**

The basis of two scenarios for the future is the decision of whether the GI industry is a profession or not. This is perhaps the fundamental decision facing the industry, and AGI in particular (which currently exhibits facets of a professional body, and at other times facets of an industry lobby group).

The scenarios would then be:

1. The GI industry is not of itself a profession, but many individual members of it are regulated elsewhere (RICS,...) The industry is seen by the public at large (if it is recognised at all!) as a commercial industry.
2. The GI industry decides to organise itself into a coherent GI profession, with rules of entry and membership (including standards of competency, which are policed by the professional body). The profession exercises effective self-regulation, which is accepted by members and stakeholders.

There is of course a sub-strand of scenario 2, which is that the regulation is imposed externally, either because self-regulation of the GI profession is deemed to have failed, or through a general government decision to regulate all professions through law.

The impacts of this decision can hopefully be seen through the issues raised in the rest of this paper. AGI needs to decide which way to turn.

### **Summary of the Five Key Points**

1. GI, and the GI industry, needs to get itself much better understood, along with the benefits it can bring to the citizen and society, so as to inform the debate on the ethical challenges raised in this paper.
2. The GI industry needs to define what it is – and what it isn't – and where its boundaries are.

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3. The journey from a representative group to a professional body is a long and arduous one. Is it a journey that AGI wishes to make – given societal expectations, it isn't a journey that can be half made, which is perhaps where AGI is today?
4. If the journey is to be made, is it as a stand-alone GI profession, or as part of another professional grouping?
5. AGI needs to become a trusted spokesman on key social and technological issues, and to have a strong, high profile.

### References

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Henderson, V. E., *The Ethical Side of Enterprise*, reproduced in Chryssides, G.D. and Kaler, J.H., *An Introduction to Business Ethics*, Chapman and Hall, 1993

<sup>2</sup> Hodgson, K., *A Rock and A Hard Place: How to make ethical business decisions when the choices are tough*, AMACOM Books, 1992

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