

The AGI Foresight Study - The UK Geospatial Industry in 2015

An Expert Paper



The Public Policy Environment

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Predicting anything about the future is a challenge, whether five days, five months or five years ahead, particularly in these times of rapid change. Five years ago Tony Blair was still Prime Minister, hardly anyone had heard of Barack Obama, London had not yet won the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, and the role of China in the global economy continued to be on the 'up'. The significance of 9/11 on global affairs was just emerging and the likelihood of protracted engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan growing stronger. If we had undertaken this exercise five years ago who would have predicted the Credit Crunch and the first black American President.

All views of the future must therefore be carefully qualified. Although we may look at trends of the past and project these forward, perhaps adjusting and adapting for things we know, we cannot be entirely certain about the outcome. There are of course certain key events that we do know will take place, and can factor these into our thinking, but uncertainty remains as to the outcome and our response to them. There will always be surprises, and major events that we cannot predict or expect; and these, if on a significant scale, can greatly influence public policy development. Although these trends may continue, great events and great men (or women) will influence the outcomes. Doing justice to such possibilities is difficult, but nearly impossible in such a short paper; one can only limit considerations to the macro level, and identify the key elements that will influence the sphere in which we operate. Therefore I will first consider trends, before looking at some key events that are known before considering the uncertainties.

We live, work and play in a global economy, influenced significantly by what is no longer a trend but a fact of life – globalisation. The reality of this has been brought home significantly by a disaster in the global financial markets, the way in which political leaders in the world's 20 most developed economies have stepped in to shore up national economies. The financial meltdown of the last year to eighteen months are not the result of national economic policy decisions, they arise from international markets. The concerted efforts to shore up the banks was taken clearly and explicitly to avoid a total meltdown of our banks and prevent the queues of savers trying to withdraw their savings as seen during the Northern Rock problems, and extend to all our High Street Banks. The consequences of this decision are significant and potentially will be the single most important influence on developing public policy over the next five years.

Perhaps the next greatest significant trend is the emergence of China as a global economic power. China has seen remarkable economic growth, and continues to despite the crash in western financial institutions. There is little doubt that over the next five year the USA – China axis will be the most influential in terms of global politics and the global economy.

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The trend of greater European integration has over the last year or so been delayed whilst countries consider ratifying the Lisbon Treaty. This trend towards greater integration will not continue into the future given the substantial knock back following the French and Danish referenda, and the original Irish 'No' vote. Whether Europe can or will exert significant global influence (rather than 27 different views on global affairs) will depend on whether the Czech Republic ratifies the Lisbon treaty, and the degree to which the new offices of President and the new Foreign supremo will have the 'clout' required.

The UK's place in the world has changed, and Britain is still getting used to our new status and role. During the last five years the US-UK 'special relationship' has influenced our position on the world stage, but this influence is now waning. The current US President has African roots, influenced significantly by a view of European and British power as spent Imperial and Colonialist forces and was born and brought up in Hawaii and the far east – he is more likely to look to the Pacific than Europe. And yet Britain remains cold towards Europe. Our influence on global affairs in future is likely to be through Europe, and its influence on our affairs continues to increase – even in Geographic Information with INSPIRE – it is inevitable that our interest and future will lie and develop further this side of the Atlantic. Whether this is allowed to develop further will depend on when the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty takes place – if not before the general election then a Conservative government has committed to a referendum on it. Therefore (as ever) our approach to Europe remains unclear and uncertain.

One of the key trends over the last five years has been the sheer rapidity of change, and the pace of events. The speed with which technology can inform and communicate means that events move and develop quickly. Technology and new media have had a key role to play over recent years in influencing decision and reactions. Perhaps the best example of this is the election of Barack Obama. Two years ago he was a little known Senator, but with prospects. His campaign, initially to gain the Democratic nomination and then for the Presidency, deployed new media to maximum effect. Texts and emails enabled those who signed up to be sent messages directly, and almost instantaneously from Barack Obama on issues of concern, allowing community champions to get his message on these issues out to the voters immediately. This was the most powerful example of using technology to communicate directly with voters ever seen, and it worked the other way too. It allowed community activists to communicate with the campaign so that grass roots views were known on key issues quickly. This trend has not, as yet, been fully taken up by public policy makers, but this is emerging as a powerful tool through which policy development will be influenced, providing a direct way in which future consultations on key public policy matters can be developed and carried out. The use of email, text, twitter and other tools to engage directly with the public will feature heavily in the forthcoming UK general election as well. The Conservative Party website has "Cameron Direct", subscribers can receive a personal message from David Cameron on a regular basis. Labour have similar approaches, but not yet the personal contact with their leader. It is likely that these tools will be used extensively in the coming months.

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One of the more significant and worrying trends in recent years has been the disengagement of the electorate from the democratic process. Fewer people are engaging in policy developments, a sense of disillusionment with politics and politicians has influenced this, and this disillusionment has only increased with scandals about MPs' expenses. This trend is directly counterbalanced by the use of popular voting in so-called reality TV shows, where significant numbers of the public contribute to the success or otherwise of budding singers, dancer or wannabe personalities. Whether it is possible for the policy makers to attract the same degree of interest in the democratic process as exists for the "X Factor" or "Strictly" is unlikely, but one might see a greater use of the technology tools that enable such engagement, and that this may become more pervasive in our day to day lives.

One of the interesting trends in recent years has been the power of the internet to allow direct engagement on matters of interest. Until recently we have relied heavily on "experts" deciding on what is of interest, and what "quality" is. For example, music stores have limited shelf space, so they made a limited number of CDs available from which the public could choose. Now the public has access to the full range of music, and can explore and download virtually any music title. This same trend is apparent with knowledge – in the past we relied heavily on experts to interpret knowledge and present this expert determination to the public as the authoritative position. Now through Wikipedia, a single authoritative source is no longer the only one accepted. We are seeing the same trend in news, movies, fashion and many other fields; our reliance on experts to analyse, collate and present what they think we need to know is diminishing. It may be possible that in future we rely less on the voice of the expert, and more on a collective view determined through the new media, driven by new technology and personal mobile devices enabling direct engagement in the democratic process, at anytime and anywhere. "Ask the audience" could take on a whole new dimension! Such trends will not accept expert opinion (just as in the "Strictly" the judges' views can be turned over by popular vote), but will be factored into the decision making process. Taking this trend even further, the degree to which the current form of representative government is required may be challenged, and the potential for more direct engagement with voters may develop rapidly.

Of course such trends signal changes for those in our communities who do not have access to technology, services or information. The social changes we see will create new groups forms of disadvantage, perhaps a technologically disadvantaged category is emerging resulting not only from a deficit in their education, employment or other factor, but also ability to access and use technology to participate in society – this would not only apply to those unable to vote or engage in policy consultations, but also more generally in society – for example the recent introduction by on-line check-in only by Ryanair (with a charge levied for those who check-in at the airport) signal a trend where computers are required and become essential to manage everyday matters. In the drive to reduce costs it is possible that government and public service providers increasingly expect the citizen to engage with it through technology, requiring access to such technology and an ability to use it.

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Furthermore as we see a drive to lower costs of delivery in public services we see a reduction in the direct provision of such services – such as fewer post offices, and fewer benefit offices; reducing the number of walk-in service provision has had a significant impact on costs. This means that the location of such facilities becomes critical, and their accessibility for those who need them also critical. Centralising benefit offices, and other public service points of delivery is an important way to reduce cost. Their location close to where most demand exists will become more important, and accessibility to public transport routes from those areas that most need them.

The final trend that I have space to note here is one of constitutional reform within the United Kingdom. This is less apparent to those in England as such reform affects people in the devolved nations more apparently and more directly. Similar reform was rejected in England when the North East regional assembly failed to get off the ground, resulting in the so called mid-Lothian issue (where a Scottish MP can vote on matters affecting English citizens, but English MP's cannot vote on devolved Scottish matters). However, devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland has had a significant impact on the day to day lives of those living in these devolved nations, with local politicians, not those in Westminster, having a significant degree of influence on the issues which matter to the citizen – notably education, health and delivery of local services. There is an emerging trend in the non-English Nations of the UK of exerting an increasing degree of autonomy from Westminster and Whitehall departments – although some matters (such as defence and tax) are reserved to Westminster, many others are devolved. The one area where this is not occurring is in the coordination of European policy and legislation, in which Whitehall Department still lead – however its implementation is often by local departments. It is probable that over the next few years devolution will be further stretched and tested, even to the point of testing the Union itself, but much will depend on the outcome of the general election in 2010, and further elections to devolved assemblies in 2011. Given the local nature of devolved assemblies, and their impact upon public services, it is a factor of some interest to the AGI in terms of influencing how GI is used by government.

Over the next five years there are a number of key events that will significantly influence the development of public policy. The first and most significant will be the next general election which must take place by 3 June 2010. The second most significant will be the elections to devolved administrations most of which will occur in 2011. Both general and devolved elections will set the tone and pace of public policy development over the next five years. Those governments that are elected will be hampered in their ability to deliver on political objectives due to constraints imposed by the fiscal environment brought about by the recent financial stimulus packages. The UK operates on 3 yearly financial planning windows, currently known as comprehensive Spending Review. The next period begins in April 2011 and continues until March 2014. All UK political parties are signalling that significant steps will have to be taken to address the budget deficit, with cuts to public spending and increases in taxes required. These are dangers also of inflation. The scale and nature of the cuts are beginning to emerge now, and it is widely expected to be painful. The debate about scale, nature and

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timing of such cuts will rage over the coming months and right up until the election. Whoever wins will then have a few months to develop practical plans for the budget and therefore the full impact will not become apparent until late 2010. Given the emphasis on financial efficiency that will inevitably emerge, the key focus and contribution of geographic information to developing public policy will be how it will assist in identifying cost savings, or deliver existing services more efficiently. In such financially difficult times it is highly unlikely that government will consider anything that requires more taxpayer funds (such as promoted by the 'free our data' campaign). In fact I expect it to be inevitable that key government agencies currently responsible for significant and crucial elements of the UK national geographical infrastructure (such as Ordnance Survey) will be sold to the private sector, or the commercial elements spun out to the private sector, unless they gather strong arguments as to how they add public value, and that this value warrants continued government intervention.

In conclusion, the shape of the geospatial industry in 2015, will be one influenced significantly by key global trends of a US-China dominated world economy, with the UK having to play an increasingly important role within Europe, as the only way in which its reduced global influence can be exercised, although this is uncertain still. The pace and technological nature of change will continue to influence all spheres, and technology will be increasingly used to more fully engage the citizen in the democratic process, and public policy formulation process. There is significant potential for geographic information to assist in this process, but also in ensuring the socially and technologically disadvantaged do not get left out. The biggest influence on developing public policy in the next five years will be the outcome of the general election and devolved elections over the next two years. Whoever succeeds will have the unenviable task of determining how to deliver public policy objective within seriously reduced budgets, and the emphasis will be on delivering efficiencies and cuts to public services. Again, the health of the geospatial industry will be dependent upon how well it is able to contribute to government identifying efficiencies and delivering them. In this regard the influence and importance of devolved nations will increase. Allied to the cost reductions will be the likely exploitation of government held information assets; there is little prospect of money being spent on allowing 'free' data, and it is far more likely that key government geographic information providers will be sold off, or the commercial arms spun out of government. In this context how geographic information adds value will be the key focus and the case for continued government intervention will be examined very hard.

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