

Review of: "Analyzing the nexus between Spatial Data Infrastructure Development and e-Government"

Paul C. Sutton¹

¹ University of Denver

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

This is an interesting article describing the efforts to build a spatial data infrastructure for the country of Zimbabwe. I am a big advocate of public access to information that is relevant and vital to the public interest. I applaud this effort. From a technical perspective this approach seems sound. From a data availability perspective and power differential perspective I am concerned. The GDP of Zimbabwe is roughly 29 Billion. The annual revenue of Google is roughly 280 Billion (an order of magnitude larger). There was a time when governments were the collectors, curators, and disseminators of vital spatially referenced data such as census data, traffic data, and financial data. For example - Departments of Transportation routinely collected traffic flow data. VGI provided by driver's cell phones has allowed google, Uber, and other private sector tech companies to have better traffic data than most DOTs at lower cost. Some of that data is made available to the public. Some is not. I can imagine a 'Black Mirror' episode that has private tech companies taking over the function of the U.S. census bureau and the census bureaus of most countries in the world. Imagining how they use and limit the sharing of such data can spin off a variety of dystopian scenarios. Developing national SDIs is a good idea. However, the place to start is by reining in the power and reach of the tech industry prior to building these little SDIs. If you were a member of the public hoping to use spatially referenced information to address a grievance or solve a social, economic, or political problem using the information in a national SDI such as the one described here you would likely be David fighting Goliath. We need a level playing field for access to spatial data and right now it is skewed in frightening ways toward the private sector and away from public access.