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All about Metadata...

Chris Holcroft, while giving some tips of the 'what' and the 'why' also suggests some places where to find the compass and encourage using it!

Metadata seems to be one of those off-putting subjects for some in our profession - maybe because it is a step removed from more active mapping and analysis that many of us enjoy. Yet we also know it is increasingly important for a host of good reasons and now looms large in public sector activities such as INSPIRE. Only recently CLG announced the continuation of AGI's contract to run the national metadata service 'gigateway'.   Perhaps it is now time to polish up on the subject?

What is metadata and what about its standard?:

Metadata is the term for 'data about data'. It is the summary information or characteristics of a set of data. The gigateway service pages tell us that "In the area of geospatial information, or information with a geographic component, this normally means the What, Who, Where, When and How of the data". The only major difference between geo- graphic metadata and the many other metadata sets is the emphasis on the spatial component.   Just as a consumer looks at the label on a food product to determine the ingredients etc, so a user of geospatial data can review a metadata record to determine whether the dataset is fit for their purpose".

With the not-so-new advent of GIS and the expanding use of digital data, the benefits and requirements for geospatial metadata

are now well known. Not surprisingly then, standards for metadata documentation already exist. In the UK we have UK GEMINI which is short for 'Geospatial Metadata Interoperability Initiative'. This is the latest and preferred UK standard and will be kept in step with INSPIRE. Gemini currently sits at version 2.1. That said this version is subject to change as the INSPIRE Implementing Rules for metadata are finalised later this year. The detail is there to be digested at http://www.gigateway.org.uk/metadata/standards.html including easy-to-read guideline documents, but it important to recognize that at this stage we are 'beginners' at a definition stage for cataloging metadata in the UK. We must as a community be better at creating it and using it to better share, discover and benefit from GI datasets.

The importance of Metadata we tend to look at metadata at one of three levels and generally in sequence: discovery, exploration and exploitation. Or in simpler terms 'find it, look at it and use it'. Not all of us aspire to being librarians but we all know that being organized in what we do can help us find, recognize and re-use what we work with whether it relates to our job in GI or, for example, filing the family correspondence, bank statements and bills! Having consistently structured records about the datasets we keep allows us to better manage the potentially huge investment made in our organization's GI. It also gives us a catalogue which may be passed to intermediaries, resellers and clearing houses should this be appropriate to the business model. Duplication of effort can be cut out by ensuring awareness of the existence of datasets within and without organizations to promote the availability of geospatial data across a broader user base. Users can locate and compare all exposed and available geospatial data relevant to an area of interest or study. Data providers are able to advertise and promote the availability of their data via online services. Finally meta- data cataloguing
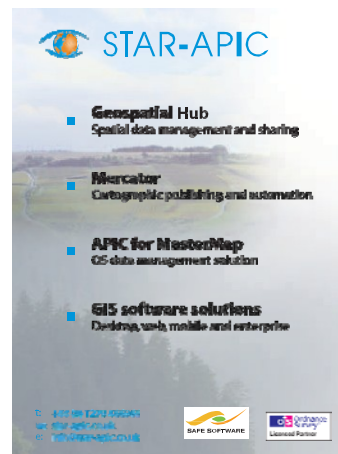
goes some way towards compliance with Government directives relating to easier access to information - Information Age Government, Data Protection and Freedom of Information Acts, Public Records Act, Crown Copyright and shortly INSPIRE etc. AGI's metadata pages are a great resource for learning more, see: www.gigateway.org.uk.

AGI would like to encourage as many different organizations to publish their geospatial metadata on the gigateway Data Locator service as possible. To achieve this, we have developed MetaGenie - our freely available software to assist people in creating metadata to internationally recognized standards. If you have metadata which you would like to publish, click here for further information, or contact our Technical Officer, Robert Turner (robert.turner@agi.org.uk) for assistance.

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