

Mapmaking for the masses

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Sites such as Wikimapia and OpenStreetMap are empowering citizens to create a global patchwork of geographic information while Google Earth is encouraging individuals to develop applications using their own data.

According to Michael Goodchild from the University of California in Santa Barbara, ‘volunteered geographic information’ has the potential to be a significant source of geographers’ understanding of the surface of the Earth. Its most interesting, lasting and compelling value to geographers lies in what it can tell them about local activities in various geographic locations that go unnoticed by the world’s media, he says. His review has just been published online in Springer’s *GeoJournal*.

Goodchild’s paper looks at volunteered geographic information as a special case of the more general Web phenomenon of user-generated content. It covers what motivates large numbers of individuals (often with little formal qualifications) to take part, what technology allows them to do so, how accurate the results are and what volunteered geographic information can add to more conventional sources of such information.

Goodchild identifies Web 2.0, georeferencing, geotags, Global Positioning System and broadband communication as the enabling technologies. In his opinion, self-promotion and personal satisfaction from seeing their contributions appear online are the primary motivators for individuals to take part in volunteered geographic information. However, Goodchild also identifies the potential for individuals to attempt to undermine its accuracy.

He concludes that “collectively volunteered geographic information represents a dramatic innovation that will certainly have profound impacts on geographic information systems and more generally on the discipline of geography and its relationship to the general public.”

Source: Springer

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