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Title: NYC State of the Map US 2015 : the conference report, New York, USA

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OPENSTREETMAP FOUNDATION

NYC STATE OF THE MAP US 2015
New York, 6–8.06.2015

The 2015 edition of *OpenStreetMap US* State of the Map conference took place in New York, from 6–8 June. The event was held at the United Nations Headquarters, a strong reminder of the international nature of the project, with this event attracting 834 participants from 41 countries. It is easy to appreciate the merit of the conference, just by taking a look at the variety of topics covered, the range of disciplines involved, and the many experts from diverse areas of science presenting there. It is impossible to address all the presentations made during the event, due to the sheer scale and the diversity of themes, so this report concentrates mostly on key topics rather than on the almost innumerable individual speakers.

The conference was opened by Kate Chapman, chairperson of the OpenStreetMap Foundation, who spoke about the foundation. OSMF is a non-profit organization based in the UK and run by volunteers. She also explained the role of the seven OSMF working groups, among them a License Working Group, and emphasised that OSM is open largely thanks to the hard work of LWG, which deals with all the legal issues surrounding the project. These days, legal and licensing queries arrive from all parts of the world on a daily basis. She also indicated that nearly 20% of the foundation's budget (in total around GBP 100,000) is spent on legal matters each year.

A number of the speakers described their use of OSM to benefit mankind. Some came from national or local government, others from non-governmental agencies or from organizations involved in international collaboration, including the provider of the venue, the UN itself.

During the panel "Government & OpenStreetMap Landscapes, Perspectives and the Horizon", Bibiana McHugh (TriMet) countered a number of the classic arguments against the use of OSM data for serious purposes. These include claims that crowd-sourced data cannot be trusted, and that the quality will never be as good as authoritative data. TriMet's experience was that, for their purposes, OSM could compete with the alternatives on all

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[1] The author gave a presentation at the conference under the title "OpenStreetMap and Copyright Law – Open Work or Open Marriage?!" She received funding for her participation in the conference from the Ministry of Higher Education by means of a grant for Young Scholars for the Project *"Open" Authorship of Digital Maps by Example of OpenStreetMap and WikiMapia"*.

[2] The author is an active mapper, a former member of the board of the OpenStreetMap Foundation and of the LWG.

levels. An important emphasis in the presentation was on the importance of governments making data available to OSM, with the reminder that this requires them to fully resolve all licensing issues. To facilitate this, she advocated the setting up of a "one stop shop" to which government agencies could submit their data through the endorsement of one single licensing agreement. Such a solution was seen as greatly beneficial to agencies lacking the resources to hire legal counsel for this purpose.

A consistent theme in many presentations, and in many *ad hoc* conversations, was the subject of licensing and of the legal framework in which OSM operates. Most community members and users of map data, when confronted with legal dilemmas, find it difficult to find reliable answers to their questions. The area of digital map data is still very new and the concept of open map data newer still. Even as OSM matures as a project, with map coverage and detail growing at an ever-accelerating rate, the maturity of the understanding of the legal element is lagging behind. This is understandable – mappers tend not to be lawyers, and, although individual mappers may have specific viewpoints on how they wish their data to be used, the mapping community does not speak with one voice on the matter. In addition, lawyers are not well represented in the community, meaning that legal discussions have low levels of participation and professional legal expertise is in short supply.

Although niche discussions of this aspect of OSM have taken place since the earliest days of the project, for many years it remained an academic problem, as OSM was not widely known, the quality of the data was less uniform across the world and early-adopter-users of the data tended to be themselves community members, whose legal exposure was low or non-existent. We see now that, with the great success of the project, many users or would-be users of the data set require much greater clarity about what they can and cannot do.

OpenStreetMap's license, intended in a large part to remove the risk that OSM data could be cannibalised and incorporated into a closed data set, can create uncertainty or obstacles for any users wishing to use OSM data together with data from another source. Users and their lawyers still find themselves short of firm examples of what is and what is not legally sound. This is one of the paradoxes of open licenses – on the one hand, they set out to offer great freedom, and they do so. On the other hand, however, those restrictions that do remain may create challenges even for good faith users of the product.

No OpenStreetMap conference would be complete without at least one presentation on "bots" – software agents that robotically edit the map. As a project that owes its success to crowdsourcing, i.e. to the mobilisation of a *human* crowd, OSM has its share of community members who are sceptical as to the appropriateness of mechanised editing on any level. From a legal standpoint, bots are interesting on an additional level because of the uncertainty of how the concepts of copyright law can apply to work carried out by a non-human.

In short, the participants had a huge variety of presentations to choose from, and plenty of opportunities for follow-on discussion, whether between presentations, in the gardens of the UN HQ, during the many organised evening social events, or at the final day's "Hack Day" near Washington Square surrounding NYC University.