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Column: INSPIRE - Where Is The End-User?



Written by Lars Brodersen



As the INSPIRE (INfrastructure for SPatial InfoRmation in Europe) Directive proceeds, Lars Brodersen wonders where the end-user fits into the process. "And THEN! Then ..., yes, what then? What is INSPIRE actually? Who is gaining what by INSPIRE's implementation?"

For the past 5 to 10 years the GI-community in Europe has been talking about INSPIRE (INfrastructure for SPatial InfoRmation in Europe). Now we are getting there. Last year the EU-commission issued the directive for INSPIRE, and this year the national implementation laws are being created and discussed. Excellent! Geo-data is for the first time on the EU-agenda. What a success! Congratulations to those who made it possible!

And THEN! Then ..., yes, what then? What is INSPIRE actually? Who is gaining what by INSPIRE's implementation? I will try to discuss the qualities of INSPIRE on the basis of the Directive and the Danish INSPIRE Bill. The Danish INSPIRE Bill might be different from the bills in other European countries. However, I don't think they differ very much, as the Danish bill has been written by some of those experts who have worked on INSPIRE during the past years. And if the Danish Bill were very different it would actually point out

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one of the possible weaknesses of INSPIRE; i.e. if the different countries' implementation becomes different, of what use is INSPIRE then?

On a general level it seems that the development of INSPIRE has been driven by technology more than by values or by user's usage. The directive and the bill both point out that technology-implementation and the creation of metadata will be central elements in the coordination and the harmonisation of geo-data in Europe.

If you read the INSPIRE-directive you will see that the technical content of INSPIRE is very much about data-handling issues and about metadata. The other big item in the directive about implementation strategies and implementation responsibilities. Very little attention, if any, is paid to end-users and end-user's usage of the resulting geo-information. It seems to me to be a risqué path to follow (to focus mainly on technology and implementation strategy).

I'm sure that we all can find and can remember several IT projects, both big and small, both private domain and public domain, that have failed severely mainly because the project strategy was to 'put electricity' to what was already there. Or projects that were supposed to build a web-service portal on top of what was already there, without considering how much sense it would make to reconsider values, apparatus, content, interaction, and expression before launching a new media.

It has been investigated and has been proven many times that it basically isn't good enough to think that problems can be solved just by switching from one media to another – without reconsidering values, apparatus, content, interaction, and expression.

As a consequence of the technology focus of the Directive and the bill miss descriptions basic elements belonging to a geo-information standard (which INSPIRE actually is).

Elements like:

- what values are the driving forces? What is it that we want to be able to do better in the future, better than we can today? In this connection it can not be emphasised too strongly that data-exchange in itself is not a purpose; data-exchange is a means.
- a clear distinction between values, apparatus, content, interaction, and expression.
- a description of the plan; i.e. whether this INSPIRE is a one-time thing or part of a bigger plan.

The technology-focus might also be the reason why both the Directive and the bill miss justification for the choices that have been made, like:

- why is the target group limited to public authorities?
- why have those services, that are described, been chosen?
- why have those subjects been chosen, that are described in the appendixes?
- are the subject-data sufficiently defined?
- what is actually to be understood by INSPIRES's concept of 'metadata'?

The lack of these elements makes it hard to see how the present Directive and the according bill can deliver a consistent and functional basis for an adequate and efficient infrastructure for geo-information in Europe.

The target-group is described as mainly public authorities. Why are 'ordinary citizens', 'private industries' and 'research' not mentioned? One could argue that e.g. 'ordinary citizens' do not have anything to do with INSPIRE as INSPIRE is about data

exchange and not about end-user usage or engagement. I agree that INSPIRE is about data exchange, but still: data-exchange is not a purpose in itself, data exchange is a means. Why do we exchange data, and who should benefit? I suppose that the 'ordinary citizens' somehow are gaining something at the very end of the line. This could easily be pointed out as an argument.

How do 'the ordinary citizens' benefit from INSPIRE? One could say that geo-data is not relevant to ordinary citizens, and therefore INSPIRE has nothing to do with ordinary citizens. To that I will reply that ordinary citizens already are the major user-group of geo-information. They do not use geo-data, but they do use a lot of geo-information. Ordinary citizens should never be confronted with data, but they suddenly do look for information based on geo-data. And I'm quit sure that this citizen-usage will increase in the upcoming years.

To make it short: I find that the Directive and the Bill lack definitions of used concepts. Defining concepts is a basic necessity when working with standards.

Therefore, it would be useful and fair to point out what the values are for the ordinary citizens.

It is also difficult to see how the industry, private enterprises will benefit from INSPIRE, as it is difficult to see how INSPIRE will benefit from the industry and private enterprises. Actually, the industry and private enterprises do not appear in the directive and the bill. How can a European geo-infrastructure become consistent and functional when the industry and private enterprises are not part of the game?

Despite the fact that the public authorities are mentioned as the target group it is actually difficult to see how they will benefit. The public authorities are supposed to supply the INSPIRE-infrastructure with metadata for those data that they produce. One can guess how public authorities will benefit, but is that good enough (that we all will have to guess)? Also for public authorities data-exchange is not a purpose in itself. Therefore, point out what the benefits will be, please!

Back to the metadata. It is not completely clear to me what is actually thought of by the listed metadata. Is it really out of the question that all the listed metadata-types can be misunderstood? Will everybody involved in usage, in production, in database-handling, in exchange-actions etc. understand the same thing by the listed metadata-subjects?

I wonder, as there will be very, very many different producers and users of all sorts, with different education, different skills and different purposes all over Europe involved in the game. If just a few of them understand something different from the rest, then the big goal could be in jeopardy. A national mapping authority might understand the metadata-subjects differently from a data-producer. A data-producer might understand something differently from the mapping-authority and from the database-software-producer. Not to speak from the end-users and the ordinary citizens who look for at product declaration. To make it short: I find that the Directive and the bill lack definitions of used concepts. Defining concepts is a basic necessity when working with standards.

All this lead to my conclusions. INSPIRE is either a repetition of a classical defect when designing systems, where the solution to the problems is sought by introducing new technology (as the only thing), or, the present version of the DIGEST directive is the first prototype in a longer process of development. Presuming it is the latter; it should be said loud and clear, and the plan should be presented.

I have been told, by some of those involved with the development of the Directive, that some of my concerns are well known, and therefore does the present directive represent what is achievable at present. I have been told that this was the one and only chance to get in contact with the EU-commission. This might well be so, and that is fine. It is actually excellent that we have got an EU Directive on geo-data. Congratulations to those who managed to do this. But there is still lot of work to do before we will be able to solve the problems that initiated the whole thing.

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