

# Who's data is it anyway?

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This is an underpinning and frequently avoided question throughout all the commercial sectors that rely upon the re-use of Public Sector Information (PSI) to create value-added products for end users. But it should not be so <sup>1</sup>.

Public Sector Information, is just that. It is information (of whatever kind) generated by enterprises that are government owned, run or commissioned at public cost (i.e. paid for out of revenues raised through taxation). One might therefore suppose that, fundamentally, such data “belongs” to the “public”; that is it belongs to those who have ultimately funded its generation, its management, handling and storage. But is this how ownership of these data are seen by those who, on behalf of the “public”, undertake the generation, management handling and storage of them?

Sadly, no. In fact, those government organisations responsible for these tasks on behalf of the public all too often regard the data as “theirs”, that is they see it as “owned” by them and to be provided to others only as a concession in return for some consideration such as a license fee or re-use fee, and not at all if, in their judgement, to do so might somehow make life too much harder for them. This is particularly (but not exclusively) so when those “others” lie within the commercial sector of the economy and intend to re-use the data to provide value-added products and services to the overall benefit of the economy in terms of employment and the generation of relative wealth.

A clear example of this thinking is to be found in the field of meteorology. Here the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO), the international Agency of the United Nations that co-ordinates meteorology world wide, has passed a Resolution of its Executive Council (WMO RESOLUTION 40 CG XII (1995)) that effectively allows all National Meteorological and Hydrological Services (NMHS) to withhold the free provision of meteorological data that they have generated or hold (other than a strictly limited sub-set that in practice is too difficult to protect) to any organisation other than another NMHS. This deeply protectionist measure is rooted in the concept that the data “belongs” to the NMHS and not to the “public” who paid for it. In publicly available documents that can be found (with some searching) on the WMO web site, one can find statements such as:

“However, in some cases, the competition with private service providers has led to conflicts. Among the key issues that cause concern are *access to NMHSs data and information* (my italics) and the possible reduction in services provided by NMHSs.”

This mindset, is surely not one that a UN Agency charged with representing the interests of the entire meteorological sector world wide and not just those of the NMHSs, should support or encourage? The data are not “theirs” they are “ours”. They belong to the public and, subject to a reasonable charge for the additional work of retrieval and re-transmission; they should be freely available to us all.

[1]A detailed exploration of the nature and status of meteorological data can be found in:  
Ton W. Donker; Access to and re-use of public-sector environmental data  
And information. Policy developments with a focus on the european hydro-meteorological scene.  
*Polish Academy of Sciences, Geographia Polonica, Vol. 80 No.2 (Autumn 2007).*