

Selling PSI – a public task?

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In most countries there are authorities that are committed to sell the information that they have created for other purposes, as part of their public task. Since the information they hold is stored in their databases they can easily sell it on the market. Sometimes these businesses goes under the name of trading funds or in my country (Sweden) they are called information providing authorities. This is big business when it comes to maps, real estates, company information or weather information. The money created covers daily production, goes into the development of new products and the surplus is sometimes delivered directly to the Government .

If you are a re-user you often have to buy information from this kind of authority and re-sell it on the market. You are then buying value added data since, in many cases , the raw data is not available. The price is set by the authority and can sometimes be very high if the authority is making costly product development or if you have to pay for their service organisation around their products. As a consequence of their product development, you sometimes as a re-user meet your information provider on the market in the shape of a competitor and have to find some way to compete and make money on your own products. Your product is the result of value adding to the already value added products that you bought. That can sometimes be really tough.

This, sadly, is the situation in many markets. Is this what we want? To have to compete directly with PSI Holders? No , what you want is to buy information from an authority that is not on the market. And of course you want to buy raw data, so that you can get a fair price and have the margin that you need to add value to the information and still be able to offer a reasonable price to your customers. Adding value to existing value added data often results in prices that are too high.

To have a situation that supports existing and new PSI re-users, I think it is necessary to regard the sale of public data not as a public task but as a task for companies dedicated to disseminate information on the market. If the Government wants to stay in this market they have to follow the same rules as other re-users, which means not being part of a PSI Holder organisation, not having the advantage of exclusive contracts with PSI Holders and having an economy under the same rules as their competitors.

The Swedish Competition Authority has recently published a report stating that authorities shall not add value to raw data to be actors on a competitive market. You can find the same conclusions in another report from a special Swedish Administrative Committe specially designed to investigate the meaning and range of the public task in Sweden. I think both of the reports are correct in their conclusions. Neither the Government or local authorities should sell information on the market. It is not their public task. They have other things to do instead of competing with private companies , who work as professional PSI re-users on the market.

The EU Commission has in their review of the PSI Directive also highlighted this situation and is encouraging member states to look into the meaning and range of the public task when it comes to PSI. We are waiting for the member states to do this. If Member States look into the meaning of their public task they will see where the skills are to add value to public data, create new products , market and sell the information to different customers, namely inside the private actors on the market. And they will understand the need for fair play on the market without the government as a competitor.

We are waiting for actions taken by the member states to create better conditions for the PSI re-users

on the market.

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