

WHERE ARE WE GOING?

PEOPLE ARE WORRIED ABOUT SHARING THEIR LOCATIONS, BUT SHOULD WIDER NEEDS BE CONSIDERED, ASKS **ALISTAIR MACLENAN**

In 2019, Twitter support made an announcement in a Tweet – how else would they do it? – that was as revealing about people's attitudes to personal location information as it was generally ignored by the wider population. Including me.

"Most people don't tag their precise location in Tweets, so we're removing this ability to simplify your Tweeting experience. You'll still be able to tag your precise location in Tweets through our updated camera. It's helpful when sharing on-the-ground moments."

On the face of it, this seems sensible. If people are not using a feature, then why would a company continue to provide it?

However, there is an obvious follow-up question for all of us working with the location-based technology, data and techniques that we understand can provide huge benefits to everyone on the planet and knowing that so many people rely on services that are based on their location: why is the general public so wary about sharing their locations as a matter of course?

Way back in 2009, Twitter's big news that it was adding geotagging to its platform was somewhat overshadowed by the

release of the Google Chrome OS the same week. Nevertheless, I remember thinking that this could be the moment that will see the geospatial industry bridge Geoffrey Moore's famous chasm that divides the small number of 'early adopters' from the masses of the 'early majority' of users.

A decade on, is this evidence of another false geo-dawn or simply a reflection of people's lack of trust for social media platforms? Is the geo-bridge still standing proud and strong across the geo-divide?

I promise never to use the geo-prefix again.

The paradox that people publicly share nearly every aspect of their personal lives but not where they are is not unique. Selfies are a modern phenomenon, but the Metropolitan Police in London recently announced that its trials of facial recognition using its public cameras had 'come to an end' in the face (I know!) of some pretty fierce protests. San Francisco legislators have gone further and banned the use of facial recognition in their city, citing infringement of individuals' rights.

Supporters of facial recognition believe that it would keep the wider population safe if a known criminal or terrorist were

recognised somewhere they shouldn't be. However, this argument will fall on deaf ears if everyone has to have their face analysed for this to be achieved.

And so it seems with people's locations.

The wider benefits of everyone sharing their locations are myriad. At a superficial level, a Tweet containing a location will instantly alert anyone in that local area to join a fun opportunity. But one containing the location of a terrorist attack is potentially lifesaving.

A further twist is that people won't share their location with other people but will blithely provide it to Twitter in return for specific location-based information Tweets – something we used to call adverts!

Does it make sense to allow private companies to benefit from knowing everyone's locations while wider society cannot?

This spring, legislation will come into force here in the UK that will make everyone have to 'opt out' of donating their organs after their death, to increase the number of organs available for transplant. This decision overcame religious and personal beliefs and was enacted because it will be in the interests of the majority.

How long before we are prepared to sacrifice our locations for the same purpose?

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