The Internet has spawned the development of virtual communities or virtual social networks which generate and share information with one another, and with the public at large. Volunteered geographical information (VGI) refers to user-generated content that is made available as base data on public mapping websites or as third party data overlaid on virtual globes such as Google Earth and NASA World Wind. Several attempts have been made to determine and categorise what motivates the contributors of VGI. However, while the contributors themselves might generally understand VGI, this is not necessarily the case amongst geographical information professionals at large. We used a questionnaire to explore this by gathering data on the perceptions held by geographical information professionals of virtual globes, VGI, and spatial data infrastructures (SDI). These perceptions are important because they influence how VGI and virtual globes will be used in the future for more formal SDI environments of official mapping agencies and other official custodians of spatial data. The questionnaire was administered at a meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in April 2009 and at another in Ekurhuleni, South Africa, in June 2009. The results are reported on here. Some of the results confirm previous research, while others raise questions that warrant further research.

1. Introduction

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the use of spatial data is that the same common, base data sets are used by many different users for many diverse applications. Hence, there is a growing need to share and organise spatial data across different disciplines and organisations, which has resulted in the development and implementation of spatial data infrastructures (SDIs) and of the theory and notions behind them. An SDI is an evolving concept about facilitating and coordinating the exchange and sharing of spatial data and services between stakeholders from different levels in the spatial data community [Hjelmager et al. 2008]. An SDI is more than just the technology of a geographical information system (GIS): it is generally considered to be the collection of technologies, policies and institutional arrangements that facilitates the availability of, and access to, spatial data. It provides a basis for spatial data discovery, evaluation, and application for a variety of users and providers [Nebert 2004].

The Internet has spawned the development of virtual communities or virtual social networks which share data with one another, and with the public at large. This user generated content is most obvious in websites such as Wikipedia [Wikimedia 2010], the free, online encyclopaedia in many languages, consisting of contributions mainly from the public at large, rather than from domain experts.