



# GEO-ETHICS SYMPOSIUM

## SETTING THE SCENE

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## PAST:

### WE ARE NOT STARTING FROM SCRATCH

- **Geo-ethics has tradition in our field (Brian Harley 1991)**

In a famous roundtable debate on "Ethical Problems in Cartography" in 1990, **cartographers defined ethics as professional ethics** -- the *"principles of conduct guiding the practices of an individual or professional group"*, which for meant being *"precise, accurate and exact."* Brian Harley suggested then that the greater ethical dilemma is that the map must be a socially responsible representation of the world. He asked: *"Can there be an ethically informed cartography and what should be its agenda? [...] Can we debate cartographic ethics in the narrow arena of internal practice, looking for a pragmatic code of professional conduct, or should we be concerned with transcendental values that go to the heart of social justice in the world at large?"* Harley was ahead of his time. Socially responsible innovation is now part of the Dutch and European research agenda.



# PRESENT:

## IN THE AGE OF BIG DATA, GEO-ETHICS HAS NEW URGENCY

### OPTIMISTS

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- **On Privacy -- Techno-optimists** like [Hal Varian, Chief economist of Google](#), claim that *“nowadays, people have come to expect personalized search results and ads.”* Google wants to do more. Instead of having to ask Google questions, Google should *“know what you want and tell you before you ask the question. [...] That vision has now been realized by Google Now [...] Google Now has to know a lot about you and your environment to provide these services”*. Varian wonders why *“this worries some people”* since we share such knowledge with doctors, lawyers, and accountants whom we trust. Varian: *“Why am I willing to share all this private information? Because I get something in return ...”*



# PRESENT:

IN THE AGE OF BIG DATA, GEO-ETHICS HAS NEW URGENCY

## OPTIMISTS



- **On Contracts -- Techno-optimists** like [Hal Varian, Chief economist of Google](#), argue that *“because transactions are now computer mediated, we can observe behavior that was previously unobservable and write contracts on it. This enables transactions that were simply not feasible before ... Computer-mediated transactions have enabled new business models ...”* For instance, if someone stops making monthly car payments, the lender can *“instruct the vehicular monitoring system not to allow the car to be started and to signal the location where it can be picked up.”*



# PRESENT:

## IN THE AGE OF BIG DATA, GEO-ETHICS HAS NEW URGENCY

### PESSIMISTS



- **Techno-pessimists**, like [Prof. Soshana Zuboff](#) of Harvard, argue that the assault of companies like Google on our geo-located behavioral data is so sweeping *“that it can no longer be circumscribed by the concept of privacy and its contests. This is a different kind of challenge now, one that threatens the existential and political canon of the modern liberal order defined by principles of self-determination that have been centuries, even millennia, in the making. I am thinking of matters that include, but are not limited to, the sanctity of the individual and the ideals of social equality; the development of identity, autonomy, and moral reasoning; the integrity of contract, the freedom that accrues to the making and fulfilling of promises; norms and rules of collective agreement; the functions of market democracy; the political integrity of societies; and the future of democratic sovereignty.”* In other words, Zuboff argues that **what people living in western societies consider the GOOD LIFE is in danger.**



# FUTURE:

## NEITHER TECHNO-PESSIMISM NOR TECHNO-OPTIMISM

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- In this symposium, our entry point is that geo-information technology is **malleable** and we, geo-information scientists, have **social responsibility and agency to shape technology**.
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- **Possible questions to raise in setting the scene:**
  - 1. In the era of big data, can there be an ethically- informed GiScience/EOScience and what is its agenda?
  - 2. Is this an agenda about professional GIScience ethics or also about the social responsibility of GIScientists?
  - 3. How to foster debate with students and research collaborators on the **GOOD LIFES** (there are different conceptions of what is a good life) in the Northern and Southern contexts where we conduct research?



## LITERATURE

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Harley, B. (1991). Can there be a cartographic ethics? *Cartographic Perspectives* 10:9-16

Varian, H.R. (2010). Computer Mediated Transactions, *American Economic Review* 100(2): 1–10

Varian, H.R. (2014). Beyond Big Data, *Business Economics* 49(1): 27–31

Zuboff, S. (2016). [The Secrets of Surveillance Capitalism](#), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 05.03.2016

**LETS HAVE A  
GOOD INFORMED  
INTERACTION  
AND DEBATE**

Thank you