



Case study: Tracking Mobile Phones in Mobility Research

In an article published in the scientific journal *Nature* a team of researchers affiliated with a U.S. university observed that the daily movements of human beings follow “simple reproducible patterns” that can be simulated with a “single spatial probability distribution” (González et al 2008, p. 779). Their findings are potentially significant to scientists concerned with spread of infectious diseases, traffic forecasting, emergency response, and other diffusion processes related to human mobility.

The authors base their conclusions on the movements of mobile phone users whom the authors tracked using records provided by an unidentified private telecommunications company. One set of records included the locations of the nearest cell phone tower to every call made by a sample of 100,000 mobile phone users over a six-month period. A second data set included the locations of 206 GPS-enabled mobile phones recorded every two hours for one week. Although the phone users were not informed that their locations were being tracked, the telecommunications company did disguise their records so that individuals could not be identified. Both data sets were acquired in an unidentified European country. Nonconsensual location tracking is illegal in the U.S.

Controversy ensued when *Nature* readers and news organizations learned that mobile phone users were tracked without their knowledge or consent. Authors argued that informed consent was unnecessary, since the Institutional Review Board at the U.S. Office of Naval Research (the agency that sponsored the research) determined that the study did not involve human subjects.

In response to the controversy the researchers’ university has assembled a panel to advise its own IRB about the ethical implications of location-based research. You have been asked to participate in the panel as a subject matter expert on geospatial technologies. Should the researchers in this study have been required to acquire informed consent? Under what conditions do you recommend that the IRB insist that human subjects’ locational privacy be protected?

References

Borenstein, Seth (2008). Study secretly tracks cell phone users outside US. Associated Press, June 4, 2008. Retrieved June 9, 2008, from

http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20080604/ap_on_hi_te/tec_cell_phone_tracking

Dobson, Jerome (2009). Big brother has evolved. *Nature* 458, 968 (23 April) Retrieved 9 November 2009 from <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v458/n7241/full/458968a.html>

González, Marta C., Hidalgo, César A., and Barabasi, Albert-László (2008). Understanding individual human mobility patterns. *Nature* 453, 779-782.

Levine, Felice J. and Joan E. Sieber (2007). Ethical issues related to linked social-spatial data. Appendix B in Gutmann, Myron P. and Paul C. Stern, Eds., *Putting People on the Map: Protecting Confidentiality with Linked Social-Spatial Data*. Washington DC: The National Academies Press.

Northeastern University (2008). Prof. Barabasi discusses groundbreaking research on human mobility in *Nature* cover story. June 6. Retrieved June 6, 2008 from <http://www.research.neu.edu/news/?id=87>

Smith, Kerry (2008). Mobile phones demystify commuter rat race. *Nature News*, June 4. Retrieved June 10, 2008 from <http://www.nature.com/news/2008/080604/full/news.2008.874.html>

Resources for educators

Suggested discussion points, relevant GISCI Rules of Conduct, and further resources related to this case study are available on request. Send request to David DiBiase (dibiase@psu.edu) along with contact information (including your position and affiliation) and a brief description of how you plan to use the case.

Suggested citation: David DiBiase, Francis Harvey and Dawn Wright (2009) Case Study: Tracking Mobile Phones in Mobility Research. GISProfessional Ethics Project <http://gisprofessionalethics.org>

Reviewers: Michael Davis (Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions, Illinois Institute of Technology), Chuck Huff (Department of Psychology, St. Olaf College), and Matthew Keefer (Division of Educational Psychology, University of Missouri-St. Louis).

This work was supported by National Science Foundation (NSF) grant # GEO-0734888. Any opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the NSF.

Terms of use

Authors license this work under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA

