

Framing Cartography Codes of Ethics

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Abstract:

Established professions exhibit characteristics that distinguish them as mature and respected. These include a defined body of knowledge, profession-specific publications, an accepted culture, and standardized practices. Professional organizations contribute to a profession's maturity by helping it grow in credibility, consistency, and impact. This is achieved by promoting standardization (through guidelines and certifications), trust (through ethics and credentials), evolution (through research and learning), and connection (through communities and advocacy).

With respect to trust, a profession gains credibility, builds legitimacy, and inspires public confidence by establishing codes of ethics and professional conduct. A code of ethics is often considered the pinnacle of a profession's maturity because it reflects a shift beyond technical competence toward responsibility, accountability, and societal trust. A code of conduct further contributes to this maturity by translating high-level ethical values into clear, everyday behaviors and expectations in specific contexts. In spring 2026, the International Cartographic Association (ICA) ratified a code of conduct developed under the leadership of the Next Generation Cartographers ICA Working Group (Nestel et al., 2024, 2025). The ICA is also supporting the development of cartographic codes of ethics through the work of its Commission on Ethics in Cartography (Buckley, 2023a, 2023b, 2024; Buckley and Case, 2025).

Although both aim to ensure that individuals act with integrity, professionalism, and respect, a code of ethics and a code of conduct serve distinct purposes. A code of ethics establishes guiding values that help professionals determine what is right or wrong in their work. In contrast, a code of conduct outlines rules and expectations for appropriate behavior in professional settings, such as meetings and conferences. As such, a code of conduct does not typically provide guidance on ethical professional practices—for example, the ethical mapping of protected environmental sites or the respectful use of toponyms—though it may offer avenues for discussing such issues constructively.

One of the terms of reference of the Commission on Ethics in Cartography is to identify fundamental guiding principles that reinforce ethical behavior and practice in cartography. These principles may be expressed in a code of ethics or in other documents that outline professional standards, offer guiding principles, articulate value statements, or summarize standards of practice. Such documents encompass ethical norms, behavioural expectations, competency requirements, and value-based guidance. For brevity, this paper uses the term “code of ethics” to encompass all such ethics-related documents.

We recognize that many cartographers already operate under some form of ethical guidance, whether through their employers, the agencies they work for, or the professional organizations to which they belong. However, those codes may not fully address the specific concerns, situations, and perspectives associated with cartographic practice.

Because the professional, cultural, and other environments within which cartographers work are highly varied, the commission is focused on facilitating the development of codes that can guide behavior and support accountability while taking environmental constraints into account. Just as the “rule of law” is preferable to lawlessness—even when individual laws may be contested—clear “rules of the road” within a cartographic enterprise or organization are preferable to an ethical vacuum. Codes of ethics thus provide a foundation for the discussion and refinement of ethical issues.

The commission's aim is to provide content that can be organized within flexible frameworks, enabling individuals and organizations to develop codes of ethics tailored to their cartographic practices. The goal is not to create a one-size-fits-all document, but to empower cartographic agencies and enterprises to craft their own codes, enable individual cartographers to advocate for greater specificity in ethical decision-making within broader organizations, and support professional bodies in developing codes for their members.

To achieve this, the commission explored two dimensions: the characteristics of different codes of ethics and the content within them. The characteristics help define how frameworks can be structured, while the content provides the principles, guidelines, standards, perspectives, considerations, and values that populate those frameworks. For brevity, this paper uses the term “values” to encompass all these content types. The commission examined these dimensions through a series of virtual workshops.

During these workshops, conducted in summer 2026, participants explored the content and structure of more than 50 ethics-related documents in cartography and related fields compiled by the commission. In the first workshop, participants reviewed these documents and discussed characteristics such as whether the documents were intended to guide personal or professional conduct, whether they took the form of guidelines or principles, which stakeholders they considered, and how they were applied. Participants also began identifying key values in the documents, including issues relating to trust, accountability, accuracy, and transparency.

Following the first workshop, the commission conducted a content analysis of the corpus of documents and developed a draft set of values related to cartographic practice and decision-making, incorporating insights from the workshop discussions. In the second workshop, participants evaluated this draft set of values and identified practical examples illustrating how they could apply in real-world contexts. These findings were synthesized by the commission after the workshop.

Prior to the third workshop, the commission extracted from the content analysis a preliminary set of characteristics of different codes of ethics based. In the third workshop, participants used these characteristics to propose possible frameworks and explored how the values and their practical applications could be integrated within them. Participants also examined how different frameworks could support both individual practitioners (e.g., through pragmatic guidance) and the profession as a whole (e.g., by promoting accountability).

This presentation at EuroCarto 2026 reports on the outcomes of these workshops and outlines plans for further supporting the development of codes of ethics in cartography.

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