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Introductory Essay: Technologies of Mapping

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Introduction

Technological foundations of cartography are crucial to understanding the contemporary nature of maps. Over hundreds of years there have been many new technical developments concerning the capture of data about the world, the processing of geographic information, and the production and design of representational media. Earlier shifts in the mode of production of mapping focused upon the emergence of printing technologies in Western Europe in the Renaissance period, which facilitated the mass production and dissemination of maps printed on paper. A progressive shift took place from manuscript production, to printing based on woodblocks, copper engraved plates, lithography and, by the twentieth century, to photo-mechanical technologies (Mukerji 2006; Cook 2002). Meanwhile changes in data collection were reflected in changing modes of surveying, such as the systematic development of triangulation associated with the rise of national and military mapping agencies (Biggs 1999; Seymour 1980), and the application of photogrammetry in the early twentieth century (Collier 2002). New technologies were also deployed in the projection of data (Snyder 1993, excerpted as Chapter 2.9).

These developments, and how they were exploited by individuals and institutions to their advantage (e.g. different sea charts aiding more successful navigation and the expansion of trading empires), have profoundly affected the mapping process at different times resulting in many distinct modes of mapping (Edney 1993, excerpted

as Chapter 1.10). This introductory chapter focuses in detail upon just one of many technological transitions (Monmonier 1985, excerpted as Chapter 2.2), the latest in a series of shifts through which mapping has passed and explores how different technologies are enrolled into a working series of practices and mapped artefacts.

The dominant technology of contemporary mapping is computing, which has emerged over the last fifty years to underpin digital cartography. Various specialised hardware, sophisticated software applications, databases and video displays operate as powerful socio-technological agents because they provide means to automate and augment existing cartographic process as well as opening new channels for mapping to be undertaken. As Tobler noted in his prescient article in the 1959 at the beginnings of the process: 'It seems that some basic tasks, common to all cartography, may in the future be largely automated and that the volume of maps produced in a given time will be increased while the cost is reduced' (p. 534; excerpted as Chapter 2.5).

Digital cartography then exploits processes of automation and augmentation through technologies for data capture (e.g. satellite imagery, GPS, laser ranging tools), the handling and processing of data (e.g. CAD, GIS and desktop publishing applications), the efficient storage and rapid distribution of vast quantities of data (e.g. database software, hard drives, servers, data networks, the Internet) and the delivery, presentation and interactive uses of maps (e.g. widespread availability of high resolution display screens, affordable laser printing, embedded multimedia

1 documents, streaming 'live' to location-aware mobile
2 devices).

3 Computers, as so-called 'universal machines', appear to
4 offer unprecedented advantages in the quest for more
5 accuracy and efficacy in map production. In terms of
6 technologies of data capture, for example, it can be argued
7 that computers, and the assemblage of measurement/
8 imaging/sensing technologies, have brought improved
9 and more mimetic ways of knowing the world and appear
10 to be the next step on the 'path to perfection' in mapping.
11 For example, locational precision has become widely and
12 easily available through GPS and the ever-increasing spa-
13 tial resolution of satellite imaging. Data can be logged
14 automatically and continuously without human interven-
15 tion. Indeed, cartography's ability to accurately capture the
16 world has been transformed by digital photogrammetry,
17 remote sensing, GPS-based surveying and mobile mapping
18 (Jensen and Cowen 1999, excerpted as Chapter 2.8; Li 1997,
19 excerpted as Chapter 2.10). Advances in digital data capture,
20 processing and geovisualisation not only enable us to
21 'see' the world in greater depth (Pickles 2004), but also
22 to 'see' new things (including virtual spaces), in new
23 temporal registers.

24 Technologies of cartographic production have often been
25 explained through narratives of scientific progress. As a
26 consequence, the history of cartography tends to be written
27 as a history of technique (Crone 1953), with an underlying
28 assumption that rational decision making leads to the
29 adoption of improved technologies and updating institu-
30 tional practices when they become available. For example,
31 in much of the writing – both applied and scholarly – the
32 computerisation of cartography is bound-up in progressive
33 discourses of scientific advancement and increasing accu-
34 racy and depth of knowledge (Goodchild 1999, excerpted as
35 Chapter 2.6; Monmonier 1985, excerpted as Chapter 2.2).
36 This fits within with a long running storyline of progress in
37 cartography: art becomes science, florid designs become
38 formal display, the named cartographer becomes an anon-
39 ymous technician; see also discussion in Chapter 1.1.

40 However, whilst it is clear that digital cartography has
41 some distinctive qualities with respect to previous modes of
42 mapping, we argue it would be naive to assert that com-
43 puters give rise to ostensibly *superior* mapping to other
44 modes. The ideas and techniques underpinning carto-
45 graphic practice has always been a contested across time
46 and space. As such, we should be careful not be read the
47 present prevalence of digital cartography as a simple and
48 progressive path of innovation and adoption, that inevi-
49 tably leads to better mapping of the world, any more than
50 earlier applications of technologies *inherently* led to prog-
51 ress. Rather we would argue that change is messy, contin-
52 gent and partial. Developments unfold in fits and starts,

proceeding with leaps and failures. Whilst undoubtedly
digital data capture and new computerised mapping sys-
tems can supply more detail and more cartographic data to
be displayed on-demand, it is questionable as to whether
they deliver better or more objective representations of the
world than previous methods and technologies of map-
ping. Maps tend to be judged on how well they commu-
nicate, not according to their level of detail. Further, many
spaces of human culture remain unmapped and are per-
haps unmappable, despite sensors and sophisticated GIS
software (Muehrcke 1990, excerpted as Chapter 2.7).
Moreover, as a new technology is adopted, the role and
power of individuals and institutions is reconfigured: there
are always winners and losers due to innovations and new
practices and relations (see discussion in McHaffie 1995,
excerpted as Chapter 2.3). For example, with the rise of
internet-based mapping, the role of national mapping
agencies is weakened with respect to commercial data
providers, and software engineers and interface designers
start to displace professionally-trained cartographers
(Wood 2003).

Characteristics of digital cartographies

The development and rapid diffusion of digital technolo-
gies in the last three decades has affected all aspects of
mapping, changing methods of data collection, carto-
graphic production and the dissemination and use of
maps. This has been termed the 'digital transition' in
cartography (Goodchild 1999, excerpted as Chapter 2.6;
Pickles 1999; Rhind 1999) and it is continuing apace (for
example, developments in mass market satnav systems or
innovative mobile mapping services; see later). As such the
computer is a vital component in understanding the milieu
in which new forms of mapping practice are emerging.

While the detailed social and technical histories of the
digitisation of the cartographic industry are complex and
largely unwritten, it would be fair to say that, in the last
couple of decades, mapping practice has been almost wholly
subsumed in a rapid convergence of spatial technologies,
such that today professional cartography operates as a
rather marginal 'end service' component of the multibillion
dollar GI industry. Nowadays, the majority of maps are
digital and created only 'on demand' from geospatial
databases for temporary display on screens. The heyday
of published unwieldy folded map sheets and heavy paper
atlases is past: they are being replaced by the rapid tech-
nological development of GIS, spatial databases and real
time mapping systems; the potency of these developments is
most evident perhaps in terms of web mapping.

1 Developments in networking technologies and computer-
2 mediated communications, and the rise of the World-Wide
3 Web from the early 1990s, have meant that digital maps
4 are now very easy to distribute at marginal cost and can be
5 accessed 'on demand' by many (Peterson 2003, 2008). One
6 of the first examples was the Xerox PARC Map Viewer,
7 launched online in June 1993 by Steve Putz. (The map is
8 no longer online, however background details are avail-
9 able at <www2.parc.com/istl/projects/www94/iisuwwww.
10 html>). Commercial online mapping and driving
11 instructions were pioneered by the internet portal Map-
12 Quest.com in the mid 1990s, which by the turn of the
13 century had already generated more digital maps than
14 any other publisher in the history of cartography
15 (Peterson 2001). Since launching in 2005 the popularity
16 of Google Maps with its open API (Application Program-
17 ming Interface), has inspired an explosion of new online
18 mapping tools and hacks (Geller 2007, excerpted as Chap-
19 ter 2.12; Gibson and Erle 2006). These web mapping
20 services are seemingly 'free' at the point of use and are
21 encouraging the casual use of cartography (the substan-
22 tial capital costs of granting no-cost public access to
23 detailed topographic maps and high resolution satellite
24 imagery is being met, in part, by revenues from geo-
25 graphically-targeted advertising, but it is also being
26 heavily subsidised at the moment by large corporations,
27 like Google and Microsoft as they seek to entice users to
28 their sites and to dominate the marketplace for online
29 mapping). There is even the prospect that expensive,
30 complex, standalone GIS will begin to adapt and evolve
31 around a web services mapping model (Sui 2008).

32 Digital cartography has exploited the affordances offered
33 by computer software and the flexibility of screen display to
34 deliver maps in new media forms and other new modes of
35 user interactivity. As the map itself became a fully digital
36 text, many of its basic properties changed. It became almost
37 infinitely malleable and responsive to the user, such that
38 pre-digital, paper mapping seems stilted and somewhat
39 lifeless. A multitude of maps can be generated from a single
40 database in GIS, many design options can be explored at
41 marginal additional cost. The map itself is an interface to the
42 world that can be directly manipulated by users – zooming,
43 panning, selecting layers, querying (Cartwright 1999,
44 excerpted as Chapter 2.11). Rather than reading off the
45 surface of a map, we become increasingly immersed within
46 the mapping experience. Just as the word processor has
47 reconfigured the practices of composing text, so the GIS has
48 profoundly changed the making of maps. Of course this does
49 not mean necessary better maps (Muehrcke 1990, excerpted
50 as Chapter 2.7) just as using Microsoft Word does not
51 guarantee readable prose. Cheap, powerful computer gra-
52 phics on PCs and increasingly mobile devices, however, do

enable a much more expressive and interactive cartography,
potentially available to a growing number of people.

The pervasive paradigm of hypertext as a way to structure
and navigate digital information has also influenced digital
cartography. Increasingly, maps are used as core compo-
nents in larger multimedia information resources where
locations and features on the map are hot-linked to pictures,
text and sounds, to create distinctively new modes of map
use (Cartwright 1999, excerpted as Chapter 2.11). In design
terms, the conventional planar map form itself is, of course,
only one possible representation of spatial data and new
digital technologies have contributed to much greater
diversity of cartographic-related forms including, pseudo
three-dimensional landscape views, interactive panoramic
image-maps, fully three-dimensional flythrough models
(Dodge *et al.* 2008; Fisher and Unwin 2001; Geller 2007,
excerpted as Chapter 2.12). It has also reinvigorated long
standing but marginal forms of mapping, including carto-
grams and globes, and facilitated the construction of many
new kinds of cartographic projection that could not have
been calculated without computers (Snyder 1993, excerpted
as Chapter 2.9).

Developments in computer graphics, computation and
user interfaces have also begun to fundamentally transmute
the role of the map from the finished product to a visual
tool to be used interactively for exploratory data analysis
(typically with the interlinking of multiple representations
such as statistical charts, three-dimensional plots, tables
and so on). This changing conceptualisation of the map is
at the heart of the emerging field of geovisualisation, which
in the last five years or so has been one of the leading areas
of applied cartographic research (Dykes and Wood 2009,
excerpted as Chapter 3.12; MacEachren and Kraak 2001,
excerpted as Chapter 1.11).

Although not universally the case, it is evident that the
emergence of digital cartography has also made mapping
much more available, fostered a good deal of creativity and
widen participatory options (Goodchild 2007, excerpted as
Chapter 4.10; see also discussion in Chapters 4.1 and 5.1).
More people have the option to become mapmakers
themselves, without needing to master a wide range of
technical and technological skills, be it via simple 'map
charting' options in spreadsheets to produce basic thematic
maps of their own data, through desktop GISs such as
MapInfo and, of course, with a plethora of online tools
(Geller 2007, excerpted as Chapter 2.12). As more and
more people 'bypass' professional cartographers to make
their own maps as and when required, it is possible that
the diversity of map forms and usage will expand;
although access to 'point-and-click' mapping software
itself is no guarantee that the maps produced will be as
effective as those hand-crafted by professionally-trained

1 cartographers (Chapter 3.1). More recent developments
 2 in so-called ‘volunteered geographic information’ are
 3 also dependent on raft of digital technologies for collab-
 4 oration (Goodchild 2007, excerpted as Chapter 4.10;
 5 Elwood 2008). The emergence of open-source cartogra-
 6 phy, exemplified by the OpenStreetMap project, also has
 7 the potential to challenge the commercial commodifica-
 8 tion of geospatial data by developing a ‘bottom-up’
 9 capture infrastructure that is premised on a volunteerist
 Q1 10 philosophy (see also Colour Plate Five, page xx).

11 The widespread provision of GIS tools and online map-
 12 ping services is significantly shifting access to mapping and
 13 spatial data, as well as altering user perception of what a
 14 map should be. There are clear signs that cartography will
 15 be seen as simply one of many available ‘on demand’ web
 16 services. As the digital map display becomes more flexible
 17 and accessible, it is also, in some respects, granted a less
 18 reified status than the analogue paper map of the past.
 19 Maps are increasingly treated as transitory information
 20 resources, created in the moment, and discarded immedi-
 21 ately after use. In some senses, this devalues the map, as it
 22 becomes just another ephemeral medium, one of the
 23 multitude of screen images that people encounter everyday.
 24 Cartographic knowledge itself is just another informational
 25 commodity to be bought and sold, repackaged and end-
 26 lessly circulated (McHaffie 1995, excerpted as Chapter 2.3;
 27 Pickles 1999).

28 However, technological innovation also seems to be
 29 pushing digital cartography towards personal mapping.
 30 Here, web mapping tools generate maps tailored to answer
 31 specific queries with the point of interest lying at the centre
 32 of the display, whilst directional controls mean one can
 33 move about the map seemingly at will and without arbi-
 34 trary constraints of sheet boundaries as with paper pro-
 35 ducts. The mundane power of the so-called ‘slippy’ map is
 36 now so common as to be noticed only when it is not
 37 available on a digital mapping system. Mobile devices,
 38 locational awareness and ubiquitous mapping delivered
 39 to the palm of one’s hand seem to put the user at the very
 40 heart of the map, and crucially this kind of ‘me-map’ can
 41 dynamically update in time with the moving user. The
 42 synchronisation of map and body makes for a new and
 43 highly compelling form of cartography (Meng 2005,
 44 excerpted as Chapter 3.11). The perceptual power of the
 45 digital ‘me-map’ to intimately connect people to place is
 46 further enhanced by use of the first person perspective
 47 display: one is looking *into* the world, rather than down
 48 *onto* it. This can be seen, for example, in the scrolling
 49 isometric view pioneered by TomTom satnavs and the
 50 ground-level Google Street View mapping. Such views
 51 present the world in new ways and the sense of interactivity
 52 seems to change who controls the viewing. They are also,

importantly, fun to use with game-like qualities of explo-
 ration and play (Churchill 2008). It is somewhat ironic that
 making maps more personally focused also serves the
 interests of corporations and states, as they can operate
 as surveillant technologies – typing a postcode into a search
 boxes generates a unique map for the individual but also
 reveals to the mapping site what that individual is inter-
 ested in at that moment in time. In contrast, looking up an
 address in a paper street atlas leaves behind no trace of
 mapping intent.

Interestingly, in the future, much of the growth in
 personal mapping will come from people gathering geos-
 patial data as they go about their daily activity, automati-
 cally captured by location-aware devices that they will
 carry and use (Ratti *et al.* 2006; for overview discussion see
 Thielmann 2010). From this kind of emergent mobile
 spatial data capture it will be possible to ‘hack’ together
 new types of maps, rather than be dependent on the map
 products formally published by governments or commer-
 cial firms. Such individually made, ‘amateur’ mapping may
 be imperfect in many respects (not meeting the positional
 accuracy standards or adhering to TOPO-96 surveying
 specifications for example), but could well be more fit-
 for-purpose than professionally produced, general carto-
 graphic products. There is also exciting scope for using
 locative media to annotate personal maps with ephemeral,
 micro-local details, personal memories, messages for
 friends and so on, that are beyond the remit of govern-
 mental cartography or the profitability criteria for com-
 mercial cartographic industry. An example would be the
 work of artist Christian Nold’s on-going emotion mapping
 project (www.emotionmap.net), as well innovative work in
 affective mapping (Aitken and Craine 2006, excerpted as
 Chapter 3.10).

Cautions and caveats in digital cartographic developments

In some respects, then, the outcome of the digital tran-
 sition can be read as a democratisation of cartography
 (Rød *et al.* 2001), widening access to mapping and
 breaking the rigid control of authorship by an anon-
 ymised professional elite. However, if one looks more
 closely (and sceptically), the freedom for people to make
 their own maps with these types of software tools is
 strongly inscribed in the design and functionality of
 the software itself. The maps one can make online are
 only the maps the services allows one to make. Many
 people make their own maps with Google’s service
 but these all ultimately still have the look and feel of a
 Google Map and are constrained by the tools that the

1 corporation provides. Indeed, the majority of people still
 2 do not have the time or skills to break free from the
 3 functional constraints that the software imposes (also see
 4 Fuller's (2003) analysis of the framing power of Microsoft
 5 Word on writing and Tufte's (2003) critique of Microsoft
 6 PowerPoint on how people give presentations). Google may
 7 currently make a vast amount of spatial data freely available
 8 online (supported by advertising) but it is subject to their
 9 terms and conditions of use and raises the risk of monop-
 10 olistic provision (Farman 2010, excerpted as Chapter 5.11;
 11 Zook and Graham 2007).

12 Further, interpreting the digital transition should not
 13 merely be about plotting technical 'impacts', but should
 14 also involve assessing the political implications of changing
 15 social practices in data capture and map authorship. Being
 16 wary of linear narratives of progress, one should not read
 17 the digitisation of the map as seamless, unproblematic or
 18 inevitable (Pickles 1999). Technological change is always
 19 contested, driven by competing interests and received in
 20 different ways and at different speeds in particular insti-
 21 tutional settings (McHaffie 1995, excerpted as Chapter 2.3;
 22 Harvey 2001). Technology is never a neutral actor. It is
 23 shaped by social forces and bound up in networks of power,
 24 capital and control of new institutional practices in the
 25 processes of cartographic digitisation. The benefits and
 26 costs of change are always uneven. Government agencies
 27 and large commercial mapping firms have invested heavily
 28 in digitisation not from enlightened ideals to improve
 29 cartography, but because it serves their interests by max-
 30 imising efficiency, reducing costs by deskilling production
 31 and by boosting revenues. The popular discourses of
 32 digitisation in cartography and elsewhere are often uncrit-
 33 ical, driven in large part by the hype of the vendors of
 34 hardware and software, and IT consultants offering
 35 'solutions'. The reality of the 'messy' social aspects of
 36 digitisation are glossed over in techno-utopian fantasies.
 37 There are risks, uncertainties and resistance to technologi-
 38 cal change that rarely get reported or recorded (e.g. the loss
 39 of craft skills; the risks of investing in technology instead of
 40 labour; the industrial disputes that often follow from
 41 technological innovation etc.).

42 The digital transition in cartography has made it more
 43 urgent to understand the wider social milieu in which maps
 44 are produced and disseminated. One needs to realise that
 45 the path of digitisation in cartography has been driven in
 46 large part by militaristic interests in various guises
 47 (Clarke 1992, excerpted as Chapter 2.4; McHaffie 1995,
 48 excerpted as Chapter 2.3; Cloud 2002). The underlying
 49 geospatial technologies and capture infrastructures (such
 50 as satellite imaging and GPS) are still dependent on state
 51 funding and imperatives of territorial security. Rather than
 52 becoming more democratic, one could argue that the

surveillant power of the cartographic gaze is deepening,
 particularly after 9/11 (Monmonier 2002), accompanied by
 a fetishisation of the capability of geospatial technologies to
 'target terrorism'. The mundane disciplining role of digital
 maps in systems of computerised governmentality con-
 tinues to grow, for example in consumer marketing and
 crime mapping (Crampton 2003, excerpted as Chapter 5.8;
 Farnham 2010, excerpted as Chapter 5.11). Such surveil-
 lance requirements are also a hidden driver in the devel-
 opment of new mapping techniques for internet and mobile
 services. In conclusion, Pickles (2004: 146) notes cautiously:
 'As the new digital mappings wash across our world,
 perhaps we should ask about the worlds that are being
 produced in the digital transition of the third industrial
 revolution, the conceptions of history with which
 they work, and the forms of socio-political life to which
 they contribute.'

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