

Mapping's Complicated Media Impulse

Denis Wood

Abstract

The use of “media” as a catchall for varieties of communication, especially for their popular print and broadcast forms, is about as old as they are, so maybe dating to the first quarter of the twentieth century. At the time this was largely confined to *mass* media – newspapers, radio, later television. Its extension, by academics, to include almost all forms of communication doesn’t date much farther back than the last quarter of the twentieth century. So the idea that “cartography is one of the oldest forms of *media*” is radically anachronistic but ... very much in tune with media’s mapping impulse, which is anything but. Of course before there was a mapping impulse in media, there was a media impulse in mapping; and while this has a long and interesting history, it more or less begins with its suppression.

As we know them, maps are about five hundred years old. There were all sorts of earlier maplike things, and even some earlier maps, but not very many, maybe one a year anywhere on the globe for the preceding couple of thousand. Not that the human ability to make maps is that recent: that’s been with us since we’ve been human, but for millennia it was very rarely exercised. I mean, what was the point? The world was small. It was very well known. As people grew up they learned it as their parents had, and they exchanged spatial information orally or used their hands or scratched it in the sand. There was nearly zero call for making maps which, as we have used the word for the past four or five hundred years, has referred to a more or less permanent, more or less graphic artifact supporting the descriptive function in human discourse that links territory to other things, so advancing the interests of those making (or controlling the making) of the maps. Because their evolution depends on the emergence of larger, more complicated societies, maps of this kind have comparatively shallow roots in human history, and in fact almost all the maps ever made have been made during the past hundred years, the vast majority in the past few decades. So many maps are made today, and they are reproduced in such numbers, that no one any longer has any idea how many. The maps printed annually by no more than the world’s newspapers easily number in the billions. All exhibit a fluorescent media impulse.

When societies in earlier periods *did* become more complicated, maps sometimes *were* called for. For the most part these had no or extremely limited media impulse – property maps in Babylon for instance, or property maps in medieval Japan – while maps with any sort of media impulse – the *Forma Urbis Romae*, for example – were rare to the point of uniqueness. And this was more or less the state of affairs when, more or less in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, pretty much

everywhere in the world maps began their maturation. This of course parallels the emergence of the early modern state, in whose service the simultaneously emerging maps played increasingly important, and increasingly strategic roles.

While the fact is that at this time the overwhelming majority of maps were made to support border control, for water management, for treaty negotiations, and for property control, none of which had particularly well-developed media impulses, maps were also made with the opposite impulse, under the pall of secrecy. These maps concerned themselves with military intelligence, the planning of battles, the defensive and offensive postures of armies, the extent of external colonization, detailed information about fortifications, and indeed anything else that state officials might construe as valuable, often extending to any map of cities or territories. Often maps were drafted in single copies for people with “a need to know,” and this at a time when the printing press made them easy to spread around. Given that this was the same time that monopoly capitalism was on the rise, maps of routes, maps of trading partners, maps of colonies were commonly for “eyes only” too. For example the maps and sketches made during Drake’s circumnavigation of the globe were regarded as state secrets, while in Spain death was the price paid by any pilot who shared his knowledge with foreigners. A Portuguese charter of 1504 banned the making of globes and it limited the mapping of the African coast to that north of the Congo, and Dutch practice followed that of Portugal and Spain. The Hudson Bay Company sealed its map archive to all outsiders, and so forth and so on.

Among other impulses pushing states to relax this control – never fully given up, operating around the world as I type – were the absolutely positive benefits to be gained from the widest possible circulation of routes, claims, colonies, borders. For example, as a bulwark against encroachments, a Qing emperor of China published an atlas that laid out what China was to the rest of the world; just as British maps of its North American territories were deployed to help readers on both sides of the Atlantic understand who was in charge. Indeed as artifacts that *constructed the state*, that literally helped to bring the state into being, maps were endowed with their strongest media impulse: they were literally pulsed out to the world to enable citizens and aliens alike to participate in their graphic performance of statehood. Territorial structures of other sizes understood this equally well, and so the media impulse of mapping became widespread, embracing estates, towns, cities, counties, provinces, states, nations, and national alliances. Today the impulse has diffused throughout the endlessly diffusing world of mapping without diminishing, however, the countervailing demand for secrecy one iota.

Maps *do* have a media impulse, though by no means all of them.