

chapter 6

Final thoughts



The atlas of cyberspace that we have presented here is wide-ranging but is inevitably a subjective sample of publicly available maps at a particular point in time. Although we kept adding new examples up until our December 2000 deadline, we are sure that several new and innovative mapping methods will have been developed by the time this book is published, and we encourage you to seek out other maps of cyberspace. Moreover, while we have provided some commentary, we would suggest three supplementary activities.

The first is to actually try out some of the spatializations. Using the software is in many ways the only way of gaining a full comprehension of the sophistication of the maps or spatializations developed and appreciating how they work. This is particularly the case for immersive and dynamic spatializations, which are not best represented on the printed page. Many of the examples we detailed are freely available on the Web or to download. Good starting places include VisualRoute (page 65), NewsMaps (page 118), Chat Circles (page 174), and Map.net's 3-D cityscape (page 147).

The second activity is to investigate the story behind a map, following the links within the text to explore researchers' and company websites and the articles they have written about their work. Often, the story behind the map is as interesting as the map itself. In order to investigate the maps and spatializations, and to keep up with new developments, we suggest that you visit <<http://www.cybergeography.org>>, an evolving repository of articles and examples of maps and spatializations, with up-to-date links to appropriate websites.

The third activity is to use the discussion detailed in chapter 1 to question the images displayed and to think through ways in which the maps and spatializations might be improved – and why so many of our examples, although interesting visually, fail in practicality. Because of this last point, we have sometimes been asked whether the maps and spatializations are, and will continue to be, nothing but 'eye-candy' – nice to look at but of little practical or analytical use. Although some maps are undoubtedly little more than this (which might be

expected, given the prototype status of many), a number of these views of cyberspace improve our understanding of it and others hold great potential. For example, although there are problems with ecological fallacy (see page 5) in relation to maps of infrastructure, the maps still reveal important information about the extent and capacity of different networks, and they also provide valuable insights into how social and spatial relations are being transformed. Such spatializations, even though having limited use at present, provide a useful experimental basis from which more practical methods can be developed and from which widespread application is likely to emerge.

Given the debate about 'eye-candy' or usefulness, we think – based on our research – that there are a number of ways that a project of mapping cyberspace can be advanced. They are:

- to more fully explore real-time mapping, using dynamically generated data through measuring the network itself;
- to develop sophisticated spatially-referenced and temporal data sources;
- to ensure these data are standardized;
- to produce informative meta-data about underlying data;
- to explore ways of determining the relative accuracy of spatializations and to acknowledge and display potential errors;
- to improve spatial legibility – that is, to establish how easy the map is to interpret (drawing on cartographic theory and cognitive science);
- to test the usability of spatializations, using those data to update mapping techniques;
- to study the effects of spatialization on the media mapped;
- to establish collaborative links between disparate groups working on related themes (and we hope that this book might help in the process);
- to appreciate and account for ethical and privacy implications of mapping cyberspace;

- to examine the effects, on the maps themselves, of the social context within which mapping takes place;
- to extend the coverage of maps and spatializations to include media that have so far received little attention, such as email; to include any new media developed; and to account for current trends, such as mobile access devices, broadband access, the continuing diffusion of technologies across and within societies, and the end of English-language dominance on the Web.

Although there is a long way to go, we are confident that the utility and power of mapping cyberspace will be revealed in the coming years.

And remember: there is no one *true* map of cyberspace.

