Is Google Good For

Geography?

Web2.0 and the Political Economy of User Generated Geographical Knowledge

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Session organisers:

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Paper abstracts:

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The Influence of Google on Urban Policy in Developing Countries

Richard Tomlinson, Professor, University of Melbourne

Abstract:
'Google's mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful.' In the realm of urban policy in developing countries, a great deal of what one gains from Google is not so much information - a city's population, economy, history and so on; as knowledge – analyses of urban issues and potential policies as well as implementation strategies. The positions advanced are that googling urban policy issues in developing countries contributes to dominant policy perspectives; that the consequence is that the manner in which Google organizes

knowledge limits access to alternative policy perspectives and debate; and that this is not in the public interest.

The presentation is based on three claims. The first is that is that The World Bank, the Cities Alliance and UN Habitat together dominate explanations of urban issues and appropriate policies; they set the 'urban agenda'. The second, presuming that practitioners do use Google, is that doing so contributes to this dominance. The third is that Google especially serves this purpose when the query 'key words' can be used as labels whose conceptualization can be "owned" by the institutions.

The research underlying this paper consisted of googling various formulations of urban policy key words. The upshot of these searches was to demonstrate the importance of being able to label policy issues and the difficulty of finding policy alternatives. The research also included examining how Google's PageRank and text analysis contributes to this outcome.

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Has Google Homogenized our Landscape?

Tim Wallace, University of Wisconsin – Madison

Abstract:
In 1991, J. B. Harley warned that if a single set of cartographic conventions is accepted as "normal" or "natural," it may acquire a "coercive and manipulative authority." With the rise of Web 2.0, it is hard to think of a more widely accepted cartographic convention than that of Google Maps. Following its launch in 2005, a steady "Googlification" of online mapping platforms ensued: color schemes became less saturated, roads widened and fonts changed. After a few years of cartographic copycatting, many of these mapping platforms became relatively indistinguishable from one another. Now, if Google Maps and its followers are viewed as a text on landscape, they are depicting a world that is decidedly homogeneous. This issue comes into stark relief when considering the fact that Web 2.0 maps have an unknown set of user-groups, each with a potentially different focus and goal. But while these user-groups collaborate to add to the maps, they are limited to viewing in on a reduced landscape. If Google set out to create a cartographic convention that requires very little decoding or deciphering, they succeeded. But by creating this convention, have they oversimplified the landscape? Has an uncomplicated cartographic language resulted in a portrayal of a landscape that is devoid of geographical, political or cultural diversity? The purpose of this paper is to consider whether Google Maps has unwittingly "coerced" a conception of a homogeneous landscape on its users by creating a cartographic convention that has been accepted as "normal" and "natural."

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Intentional and Unintentional Biases in Google Earth and Google Maps

Elad Segev, Keele University

Abstract:

This paper explores Google Earth and Google Maps, increasingly popular media channels that often promote, directly and indirectly, US priorities and agendas through maps and images. Although many users may regard maps and images as "neutral", it was found that some of Google's depictions are political and biased, providing for a start much deeper and wider information about the USA than other countries. This biases are not always intentional and are often a result of political and economic considerations, agreements with other companies and the available market of users.
An interesting example in this context is the high-resolution imagery of military installations, which many governments perceive as a threat to their national security. Strikingly, there is a structural bias here as well: while Google Earth provides clear images of military installations in South and North Korea, Iran and China, various military installations in the USA and its allies have been censored. Since Google and many other trans-national information providers are US-based, it is suggested that the US Government has a greater ability to control and censor sensitive information than other governments.

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Tourism and Imaginative Geographies 2.0

Florian Bauhuber and Marc Boeckler,

Abstract:
Tourism can be conceived of as a space-communication nexus. Tourists move to and stay in various places and in doing so participate in the production and dissemination of imaginative geographies attached to the destinations they visit. At the same time the tourism industry, in particular destination management organizations (DMOs) are eager to strictly control the communication about the regionally bounded sights, sites and services tourists are attracted to. This hierarchical and unidirectional tourism related communication about places has been seriously challenged by the emergence of web 2.0 applications. A new species of »Geographers in the wild« has appeared on stage in myriads, contributing to the symbolic construction of tourist places via geotagged blogs, geotagged picture collections, travel communities, evaluation platforms, »social mapmaking« etc. At this point DMOs battle against »uncontrolled« imaginative geographies to regain the power over the representation of places within their claimed territory. Based on interviews and ethnographic material we gathered from participatory research this paper critically identifies three spatio-communicative strategies of DMOs to commodify the web 2.0 participation of tourists: »intrusion«, »inclusion« and »incorporation«. Firstly DMOs secretly intrude general social network services to make themselves a nodal point in the distributed communication about their places; secondly DMOs attempt to include general web 2.0 applications in their own online services to redirect internet traffic into the realm of their control. And thirdly DMOs launch their own destination network services in order to forcefully incorporate the web 2.0 activities of tourists into the regional tourism experience itself.

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Mapping Without a Net: Only for Google to Rope Us In?

Jeremy Crampton, Georgia State University

Abstract:
The possibilities of true open source, uncredentialed and non-authoritative mapping and GIS are well known. On offer is the prospect of mapping without a net in the sense that mapping need not be performed in the service of powerful elites, does not require proprietary software, and is truly amateur. In order to understand the rise of this phenomenon (aka neogeography, volunteered geographic information, or the "geoweb"), we can turn to precedents in the blogosphere. For over ten years the blogosphere has created an audience for news outside of traditional big media. An analysis of the political blogosphere offers salient comparisons to the geoweb: (1) it has created a self-sustaining news environment; (2) information flow is still dominated by the long tail effect; (3) it has not freed itself from traditional media; and (4) it has been able to effectively intervene in political discourse, but mostly at the local level. To what extent are we seeing the same developments in the geoweb? Four issues are highlighted: sovereignty; credentials (can peasants map?); independence; and censorship/surveillance. I conclude that the geoweb faces the same four problems as the blogosphere, but with specific differences. The geoweb has de-sovereigned the map yet is still dependent on proprietary software; and it has generated a class of amateur (uncredentialed) mappers with powerful local knowledges, but access to meaningful information remains problematic. In sum, the geoweb is best understood as a series of technologies embedded in socio-political governmental rationalities.

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Mapping the GeoWeb: The Spatial Contours of Web 2.0 Cyberspace

Matthew Zook, University of Kentucky and Mark Graham, Trinity College Dublin

Abstract:
Although Web 2.0 mapping services such as Google Earth or MyMaps have undeniably increased the amount of spatially reference data in cyberspace, we still know very little about the location and content of these user generated annotations. This paper measures the density of the GeoWeb via a survey of a global grid of coordinates developed by the author. While this distribution conforms to well documented patterns of Internet access and use it also highlights the ongoing reproduction of digital divides as new technologies and practices appear. Moreover, it documents the ongoing issue of who, what and where is represented in cyberspace. A parallel analysis limited to North America provides a more detailed analysis of the factors (population, economic structure, etc.) associated with high levels of user generated spatial data as well as looking at the distribution of specific types of GeoWeb data.

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Placemarks and Waterlines: Racialized Cyberscapes in Post Katrina Google Earth

Michael Crutcher and Matthew Zook, University of Kentucky

Abstract
To Follow.

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Problematizing Participation in the Geoweb: Google Maps and the Ideology of Invitation

Andrew Boulton, University of Kentucky

Abstract:
This paper takes a sustained look at the idea of invitation and the way in which it is elided within the core legitimating discourse around the geoweb - participation. That is, who has the authority to invite and thus to regulate, condition, and to deny access, has enormous implications for just what kind of 'participation' is possible. Building on an established critical GIS literature, I examine the idea of participation in a geoweb context, focusing in particular on the rhetoric around the democratic potential of the Google Earth platform. I suggest several overlapping ways in which the participatory claims for geoweb technologies are problematic, but my core contention hinges on what I term the ideology of invitation. Far from transcending the power asymmetries implicit in 'elite' cartography, I will show how 'citizen maps' and the geoweb, like 'community' GIS before it, reproduce relations of power in which the authority and interests of dominant actors (corporations, the state) and experts (cartographers, computer programmers) are affirmed above those of the 'people' whom they purport to empower. Using what I loosely characterize as a take on poststructural political economy I show how personal projects, prestige, expertise, and community on the part of participants find common cause with Google's profit motive. Central to this recapitulation of power asymmetries, I am arguing, is the remarkable power invested in act of invitation.

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Can the GeoWeb Get the Public to Care about Geography? The Positive Externalities of a Web Enabled Ecosystem

Sean P Gorman, PhD., FortiusOne

Abstract:
The massive popularity of GeoWeb products like Google Earth and Microsoft Virtual Earth has lead to concerns from many academic researchers, especially in the field of Geography. These concerns range from 1) the corporate control of geographic data to the 2) disenfranchisement of minorities and under represented locals 3) to fears about privacy and the 4) accuracy of crowdsourced data. This paper will briefly cover concerns of the GeoWeb, examining which are fears and where there has been documented abuse. In addition to examining the negative externalities of the GeoWeb this paper will also examine the positive externalities of the Web enabled ecosystem that has been built by Google, Microsoft, Yahoo!, ESRI and several open

source projects. What is the potential of this ecosystem to be leveraged by Geographers to better educate the public on critical policy, environmental and social issues? A case study on the efforts of Geographers from George Mason University and the University of Wisconsin to leverage the GeoWeb's ecosystem for geographic education will be presented.