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Words From the Chair

Cartographers seem to be going through an identity crisis. I think there may be several reasons for this, but the topic of the Plenary Session of the Charlotte meeting of the AAG confirms that the topic is out in the open. The title, "Has GIS Killed Cartography?", seems to suggest that cartography, at least geographic cartography, is being swallowed by the GIS juggernaut.

So what is going on? One personal observation is that I've received very few inquiries from employers wanting cartographers, but many inquiries from employers wanting students trained in GIS. Even though in many cases, the job primarily involves the creation of statistical maps from census or business data. The perception of these people is that a "GIS" person is required to fill the job. Software vendors have led many to believe that just about anything that involves using their product to make a map is GIS. It sounds hi-tech, so of course, businesses want people who know GIS. Interestingly, one of the few calls I received inquiring about cartographers came from ESRI (the ARC/INFO people). They really needed students who were well-trained in cartography. Maybe they're on to something.

Another observation is that GIS has really enabled spatial analysis and many fields which made occasional use of maps are producing many of them. The map is no longer so closely linked with the field of geography. Because maps are so easily generated by the new software, there is the perception that most anyone can make a good one. An expert (i.e., cartographer) isn't needed and some have suggested that cartography is now more "democratic." While the idea of being able to customize maps and other displays quickly is important to the emerging field of what MacEachren refers to as geographic visualization, it frankly has resulted in a lot of bad maps. Ultimately, the new software may increase interest in cartography as users discover that some understanding and thought is necessary before running the software.

A third observation is that computer technology has changed fundamentally the way maps are created and has thereby created a certain amount of stress for cartographers schooled in the old ways. The technology change is occurring at a dizzying pace and many software packages are truly useful. Most artistic effects can be rendered through drafting programs and new software will generate projections, drape maps and images over surfaces, and generate animated displays. Cartographers quite rightly feel that it is not possible to keep up with all the software and hardware options that are constantly appearing. Also, the new technology hasn't done away with problems - old spilled-ink horror stories are being replaced by ones about crashed hard drives, software conflicts, and damaged databases. Sometimes there is the desire to throw up one's hands and go rummage in the closet for the Leroy pens. Things seemed simpler back then.

A final observation is that cartographers have lost their "space." By that I mean that those designated laboratories and darkrooms where trained practitioners performed their mapping craft have disappeared. Many map users had little understanding of the equipment and processes that were used in map production, but were content with the fact that after a time a map came out the door. Now the old labs have been converted to other uses (i.e., GIS) and the equipment has been removed. Cartographers now typically share facilities with others.

So, then, has cartography been killed by GIS? Definitely not, but it has been overshadowed by all the interest in GIS. Visibility could be increased by reaching out to new map users through the presentation of cartography seminars at conferences and through the promotion of cartography courses in departments using GIS on college campuses. GIS vendors may find themselves doing more to promote the field since cartography is so important to the successful use of their products. On the other hand, GIS has resulted in many more maps being produced by more people. Certainly many of these people will want to learn more about cartography once they begin to see the power of maps for understanding spatial problems.

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