

Re-Purposing atlases for post-truth forms of media. A proposal for geovisual enquiry and discovery

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Abstract

The question for this contribution to the workshop is “How can atlases be viable modes of geovisual communication?” Because of its systematic organization, addressing this question in regards to geovisual analytics involves considering data, their representational possibilities and the potential graphic and cartographic representations. An emphasis on the creation of atlases as a curatorial undertaking puts these issues in the creative potential for data representation and joining semantics and semiotics. Given the possibilities of contemporary geovisual techniques atlases can better support data exploration and understanding of analysis and visualization. Conceptually, the approach outlined here draws on modernist exhibit concepts developed after World War I and refined in the post-World War II era. An “atlas as exhibition” for contemporary media is a hyper-dimensional narrative framework for geovisual inquiry and discovery that empowers science with data as well as acknowledges the mythical and political roles of atlases to align them with analytical and expository goals.

In the post Gutenberg-Galaxy atlases in this form are currently everywhere in the DIY culture of hackerdom and post-truth, but how they organize geovisualizations comes in different degrees. But should atlases aspire to unify rather than divide? Should they focus on inform (neutral presentation) rather than polemicize (problematize)? The question that concludes this presentation is, accordingly, “do we then need to call it an atlas?” Answers to this question will range related to the degrees of embodiment and abstraction required or aspired. The range of responses suggests the potentials for re-purposing atlases in various modes from/with the artistic to scientific.

The emphasis in the presentation will be on describing an approach for re-purposing atlases as geovisual data analysis and exploration media. Starting from exemplary work from the World Geo-Graphic Atlas (1953), its designer’s reflections, and contemporary exhibit narration, the presentation considers newer artistically-orientated and info visualization orientated atlases ranging from collages to geographical indices concerning visual organizational frameworks that support geovisual inquiry and discovery connected to data. This connection, through linked (open) data, makes specific extensions of the atlas possible that can address questions and support geospatial analysis. The challenges of balancing semantic and semiological flexibility and structure are essential to resolve. A digital curatorial concept seems relevant to cartographic and GIScientific creations of atlases. The depth and breadth of atlases may vary in how they develop and sustain suitable flexibility for changing approaches and contexts of geovisual inquiry and discovery; no matter what we call them.

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