

# Interview with an Anonymous Graphics Reporter

**Anonymous**  
A Graphics Reporter

**Aileen R. Buckley** (she/her)  
Esri  
abuckley@esri.com

*A conversation with a graphics reporter for a widely circulated American newspaper revealed the unique nature of the role, work, and ethics of graphics reporting. Operating under intense deadlines, graphics reporters must carefully balance the newsroom's need for speed and pressure for performance with the cartographer's meticulous attention to detail and iterative mapmaking process. Collaboration between the news reporter, graphics reporter, graphics editor, and, ultimately, the reader, can both facilitate and hinder the graphics report's work. Knowing that many people, some with the power to make decisions with serious consequences, will read their maps, graphics reporters operate under pressures that, while not unknown to other mapmakers, do not affect them as frequently. Guiding their decisions and actions in this high-stakes, high-pressure environment are the ethics of both journalism and cartography, which don't always converge.*

**KEYWORDS:** graphics reporter; reporter; editor; newsroom; deadline; pressure

Newsrooms cartographers work in an environment with specific tensions that their colleagues outside of journalism rarely experience. Many of us work under the pressure of a deadline, but in a newsroom most deadlines are same-day, measured down to the minute, and have no flexibility. The newsroom cartographer's (or "graphics reporter's") attention to detail, careful handling of data, thoughtful development of design, and use of iteration to achieve higher quality constantly runs up against the newsroom's need for speed and pressure for performance. Add to this atmosphere a frequent lack of access to the reporters whose story is being illustrated; data that is potentially incomplete, questionable, or hard to understand (for example, in a different language); and demands from editors who are more concerned with story completion than the details of these hurdles, and you have an inkling of a graphic reporter's workday and work environment.

Graphics reporters overcome some of their handicaps by reusing previous map designs, making use of in-house databanks (and having a deep knowledge of pre-processed data available externally), developing collaborative relationships with colleagues, and undergoing review and oversight by their graphics editors. Despite these assistive resources, errors are bound to occur; however, the ramifications for errors on maps in the media are often far graver than for many other maps. Consider how many people

see the maps (and may spot any inaccuracies), who may use the maps (like politicians and military officers), and how the maps may be used (for example, to make serious political or military decisions). All of these considerations place cartographers in the news industry in an unusual position, not just in their place of employment, but within the field of cartography. While other cartographers also work under tight deadlines, like those supporting military operations and emergency services, graphics reporters are also under pressure to create products for the general public—an audience composed of people widely varying expectations and expertise.

Above are some of the conclusions I drew after a lengthy, illuminating, and at times emotional conversation with a graphics reporter in a major American newsroom. That reporter wishes to remain anonymous, but their stories, thoughts, and concerns are summarized below. Quotes by the reporter are based on a transcript of our interview, lightly edited for clarity by the reporter, myself, and the *Cartographic Perspectives* editorial team.

The first question I asked was, "Are you ever faced with ethical issues in your job?" to which our graphics reporter immediately responded, "Absolutely, every day." To illustrate, they shared some of the issues they were facing at the time while making maps about the Gaza–Israel conflict:



© by the author(s). This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>.

*How do you ethically portray zones of territorial control? How do you overlay infrastructure, that Hamas is alleged to have used, on the maps? If you map the zones of control and civilian infrastructure, could that imply a relationship between the infrastructure and a particular militant group? If you map the two things together, are you implying correlation or causation? For example, if you place a hospital on the map near a Hamas tunnel, you're implying that the two are connected. If there's a broader media narrative about Hamas using hospitals as covers for tunnel entrances and that's being used to justify the bombing of said hospitals, your map may have just played a part in the decision making that led to a bomb being dropped on a hospital.*

*any of my messages, and the map really has to run. Do I shut down the whole map, slow down the whole article, email ten different really high-level people, and say, "I'm sorry. I'm this random graphics person, but I'm going to put a stick in the works because I feel a little bit uncomfortable?" No one's going to say, "No," but every single force is saying, "Don't do that. Just don't say anything. Just keep your head down." Because what are the chances someone is going to say, "That's wrong"?*

Even while producing a map under a tight deadline, our graphics reporter was still committed to "right map making," as [Steven Holloway](#) would say, with careful consideration of things like color connotations and bias:

I asked them about what one does in a situation like that:

*There was one map where we had rather coarse data on tunnels in Gaza, and I was told to put hospitals on that map, which obviously implies a relationship, particularly because one hospital location happened to be very close to one end of one of those tunnel polylines. I said, "I'm not going to make this correlation because I don't know what that's going to imply. And I don't want to be held responsible for that." Even if the tunnel was actually next to the hospital, I don't know that there's a correlation. I don't want to make that statement unless I'm 110% sure. There's just no way to be that sure. Also, a lot of the data was coming from a source that I know has intentionally lied to or misled us multiple times in the past. So, I don't trust them as a data source. I don't want to make the map that way, because it could lead to bombs being dropped on people.*

*How do you depict Israeli troop movements inside Gaza? Do you label them as blue? Do you label them as red? Because red looks more aggressive, red looks more like it's part of a war, red looks like they're the invading force. One time, I was making a Gaza map, and I borrowed from our existing symbology for military actions, which used red. We'd been using this symbology for some very early Israeli maps, so I put these polygons where the Israelis were clearing urban areas around Al-Shifa on the map. I showed the polygons as red, and I labeled them in red as Israeli urban cleared zones. I got a comment from an editor saying they wish they'd reviewed my map earlier because they would have asked that I changed the color, because red made it look like the Israelis were invading Gaza. To some people, that's a very clear example of putting bias on a map. Making the map one way would say, "They're invading Gaza," but making it another way would say, "They aren't invading Gaza."*

As they grapple with these ethical challenges, graphics reporters are still working under the pressure of the omnipotent "deadline." With the deadline in sight, speed and accuracy run a tight race for the lead:

Reporters and editors know that decision-makers read their work. Our graphics reporter took that knowledge to heart and sometimes found it a heavy burden to bear:

*What if you have a list of points, and you're not sure if they're valid or not, but the reporter's not responding to your emails and the map has to run? I can't double-check all these points, and I don't speak Arabic. I can try to fact-check them with tools like Google Translate and OSM, which are pretty good, but I can't meet the standards we put text to. I don't want to put twenty points of battle zones on a map if they're not actually there. And the reporter's still not answering*

*The newspaper is read by people high up in government, high up in the military, high up in the global economy. And if they see Israeli troops with red polygons, they're probably more inclined to think negatively of Israel than if it was blue. So, I'm making the decision when I'm sleep-deprived, stressed, tired, getting bombarded by emails. And I think to myself, "That's going to be in front of a senator within 48 hours." There's no room to think about those implications.*

*Because it's not technically wrong to symbolize something as blue versus red. But it still has a ripple effect.*

*end, editors can say, "Just do the first thing that I told you to do." Reporters don't have that kind of power.*

On the other hand, the gravity of making a map that can have a lasting legacy also gives a sense of ethical agency to our graphics reporter:

But despite their authority, not all editors have the same cartographic training as their subordinates:

*Working in a major newsroom, it can feel like you're at the center of history. Modern history is written in the press—so much of it. If you're working on an important article for a major newsroom, that article is going to become the center of the developing historical narrative. I know that history is something that is written by people with agendas, with schedules. And being at the center of it and seeing it from around you, created by people you know, adds this immense weight to every little decision, because it feels like you're taking that decision and putting it in the giant catalog of human history. In some sense, it actually makes it easier to justify saying "no" because I feel like I'm answering to the long arc of history rather than just to my annual evaluation.*

*I once had to have a meeting to convince an editor that interpolating colors in a gradient for a raster was OK.*

Mapmaking in a major newsroom does not always happen as a consistent procedural process. Sometimes the normally collaborative institutional structure provides enough gaps that more independent agendas can take hold:

*There was one case where I had been working on a story for such a long time that I knew as much about it as the reporter did. And the reporter had a very different take on a piece of source testimony than I did. I thought their take was misleading, and they wanted the graphic to be changed to fit their view. They were so dead set on it at such a bad time that I deferred to them. In this situation, I decided the stakes weren't ridiculously high. But it's still the case that I let the map be made less accurate in my view, just to get the wheels moving again. Which, from an ethical point of view, feels compromised.*

The constant interplay between the news reporter, the graphics reporter, the editor, and the readers underscores the collaborative nature of journalism. Each stakeholder plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative, visual appeal, and overall impact of the article. The reporter provides the content and story, the graphics reporter enhances it visually, the editor ensures coherence and accuracy, and the readers ultimately interpret and engage with the final product. This dynamic interaction highlights the multidimensional process of creating a compelling and informative newspaper graphic that resonates with its audience. Graphics reporters, and ideally their graphics editor, have the expertise and sensitivity to understand that both data errors and misleading graphic representations can distort interpretation in ways unique to non-text narratives:

Even though the nature of journalism is collaborative, sometimes our graphics reporter finds themselves alone in making the kinds of qualitative and fact-checking judgments that, in theory, should be corroborated during editorial review. And the deadlines continue to loom:

*The problem is that sometimes the reporters don't think visually whatsoever, sometimes they don't know what data is useful, and sometimes they just are not responsive. Sometimes reporters can be obstructive and can influence the process that way. Normally you want to defer to the reporter when it comes to information, because they're supposed to be the source of the information. The editor is the decision-maker when it comes to the graphic, how it's presented, where it's placed, but the reporter is the source of the information. In the*

*It's never explicitly said, "Oh, thinking about this ethically takes too much time. Don't do it." No one's ever going to say that because people don't want to think of themselves as being against that ideal. But there's almost this atmosphere of pressure where you want to deliver a result, you want to get the map done, you want input from the reporters, you want to get it all tidied up. Those things can't all be accomplished if you're busy hemming and hawing over ethical concerns about the best way to display the data. You quickly find out that that behavior is not rewarded. Speed is rewarded, provided there aren't any first order errors, like you put a label in the wrong place, or you label the wrong city, or the number on the map is different from the number in the legend. Those are the errors that editors*

*care about. As long as you don't make any of those, you can basically waive anything else.*

*It's the second order errors—the ones that aren't so obviously on the surface and aren't so easily detected. Because maybe the people who know about them aren't going to be looking at the figure, or they're not the sorts of things that can be quickly parsed into an error. Those are the ones where the ethics become really muddy, and they're the ones that I'm trying to think about while I'm making the map. But there's no room to think about them, and there's no space given to thinking about them. And there are really no consequences you feel if you don't think about them.*

Our graphics reporter also reflected on the tension between the written word and the graphic representation, as well as the newspaper article and its comprehension:

*Knowing what that map is going to be used for and who is going to be seeing it, you obviously want to make the best case possible for accurately representing the science in a communicable way, but that may go against the overall bent of the article.*

*Taking climate change as an example, an improper framing is going to contribute to an improper understanding of climate science, which is going to, on a broader level, affect popular opinion about climate policy and the significance of climate change. And in that sense, you've kind of contributed to the problem, but in a way that's never going to directly come back negatively on you. And it's certainly not something that thinking about is going to reward you for in the newsroom. They just want a graphic.*

*But, what if the map gets out there and someone makes a comment? Or you see some way that the map's been misused? That's very different from a formal correction that will impact you at a career level. If you make a map and put a city label in the wrong place, that is going to become a correction. You're going to have to fill out a form, and the map's going to have to be edited. OK, great. Whatever. But if you make a climate map that doesn't accurately convey the scientific data, although not in a way that's necessarily an error but an improper framing of the issue? Very likely, you're never going to get an email about it.*

So far, I've focused this summary of our conversation on the internal workings of the newsroom. But our graphics reporter also had something to say about reaching outside the newspaper enterprise—for data, ancillary information, and more:

*When you work in a major newsroom, it can be this entity looming behind you. If you have that newspaper's name in your email handle, people will freak out and throw data at you. It's like a college trying to recruit you. They'll give you a giant baggie with a sweatshirt in it. Other groups, depending on their affiliation or origin, are going to look at you very suspiciously. Because they'll be thinking, "What's this corporate goon doing talking to us?" So, it's an added factor you have to think about. Sometimes it's very easy for me to get data, but then there are other times that I find it difficult to build up trust with groups because of my affiliation with my newspaper.*

Our graphics reporter acknowledged that their position lies under the overarching umbrella of professional journalism, and that ethics in journalism also applies to graphics reporting. One of the four principles in the Society of Professional Journalists [code of ethics](#) is "Seek Truth and Report It," which, in part, admonishes journalists to, "Recognize a special obligation to serve as watchdogs over public affairs and government." Another principle is "Act Independently," which cautions against activities or situations that "may compromise integrity or impartiality or may damage credibility." During our conversation, our graphics reporter spoke to these ethical standards:

*Our newsroom doesn't want to give anyone outside of the newsroom any control whatsoever, unless it's for legal reasons, over a story being published or not. So, one part of journalistic standards is, "It's OK to piss off a source once they've already given you information, and if they don't necessarily approve of the way it's being portrayed, tough shit." Which makes sense if it's a political story and a politician gives you a sound bite, and then that goes into an article showing that the politician's not so great, and the politician's upset about it. It's great that the politician doesn't have any power over whether the article goes out. So, this ethical standard makes sense.*

Cartographers are often trained differently. In many cases, our desire for the map to be an authentic representation of

the story, theme, or situation drives us to seek verification and endorsement from authorities on the subject. The following story illustrates how our graphics reporter experiences a conflict between these motivations and journalistic ones:

*We were working with the archaeologists talking about some archaeological data for a story, and I asked them how they would prefer the data be presented to properly keep the locations anonymous, because with archeological data that's obviously a very big deal. The archaeologist was appreciative and gave me some pointers that I could incorporate. But I got a talking-to from my editor, who said, "Don't do that. You never want to give a source any say over how the graphic is constructed. We're the ones who decide that, not them."*

For our graphics reporter, there was some comfort in partaking of the impartiality and objectivity that is, in part, related to ethical journalism, which (according to the Society of Professional Journalists) “should be accurate and fair”:

This kind of conflict, between the ethics of the journalist and the ethics of the source, can take a toll on some

members of a newsroom. Taking a step back can help avoid being overwhelmed:

*For a lot of these issues, I have no personal relationship to them. I'm not going to likely be personally exhausted by having to work on any of these difficult topics on top of all the other forms of stress I've already have to deal with. That means that a lot of people who would actually be able to counteract the structural biases of a major newsroom that go into these problems don't make it because they just get completely burned out.*

As I suggested earlier, cartographers in the news industry are in a unique position. At this juncture, I would also propose that they are of a certain ilk. Not all cartographers could work under the conditions that graphics reporters do—I am pretty sure I couldn't. Nor do all cartographers have to grapple with such weighty ethical issues—or at least not as often. It seems it takes a certain breed of cartographer to survive and thrive in a major American newsroom—and likely many other newsrooms. After writing this summary, I have greater empathy for graphics reporters who are working under conditions that I personally would find oppressive, yet they still provide us with maps that help us better understand our world in significant and timely ways.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

---

Thanks to my co-editor for this special issue, Nat Case, for his help framing this article. And many thanks to our anonymous graphics reporter for allowing me to share their stories, trusting me be their voice, and giving me the latitude to frame our conversation.

