

## Opinion Column

**TO:** Denis Wood  
**FROM:** Tom Koch  
**CC:** Scott Freundschuh, Editor, *Cartographic Perspectives* (CP)  
**RE:** Your Essay "Cartography is Dead (Thank God!)" (CP45, 4-7)

Dear Denis:

I really liked your opinion piece in the recent *Cartographic Perspectives* (2003, V45). I just can't figure out why Scott would choose to run it. I mean, dude, it's going to create a passel of problems.

Shorn of its rhetoric, your argument is pretty simple, and pretty much irrefutable. Cartography has everything to say about a profession that makes maps, a discipline whose brief has been the mechanical design, crafting, and critique of this type of two-dimensional graphic argument. It says little about the maps themselves, or the content they contain, and in the age of computerized mapping, well, the discipline-as-it-was is dead.

The etiology you offer is interesting but irrelevant. It doesn't matter that the word is a nineteenth century artifact "coined" as a Portuguese neologism ("cartographia") by the Viscount de Santarem in 1839. Nobody cares that "cartography" entered the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1859 or "cartographic" in 1863. All that is simply a rhetorical device that says the word is too new to be sacred, too Victorian for us to care about. Lots of good, useful words entered the English language in the nineteenth century, and their relative modernity is no reason to disparage their use.

Nor does it matter in itself that the cartographic product academic cartographers love to discuss in journals like *Cartographica*, say, are mostly professional artifacts done mostly by working stiffs at the direction of PhD bosses at the behest of this or that employer. That's all true, but like, so what? And I mean, Denis, you were one of those academics for more than 20 years, a fellow who made his way in journals like *Cartographica* by commenting on the atlases, maps, and cartographic arguments of others.

The real problem at hand is, if *Cartography is Dead (Thank God!)*, what do you think they should call this rag, and this society? To continue to call the journal of the North American Cartographic Information Society (a geographically limiting, clumsy name) *Cartographic Perspectives* carries a whiff of necrophilia, of holding the decomposing corpse of a dead discipline to our collective bosoms. Yuck.

To think of a new name means carefully considering what to keep of the corpus, and what can safely be buried. In its short history, cartography has been about a set of tools no longer in use, or now used so frequently and so casually they require no special home. The techniques of drafting and inking and lettering that George McCleary once tried to teach me in his Introduction to Cartography at Clark University (1971) are gone, dead, already buried. They've been replaced by the digital equivalents embedded in *PhotoShop*, *Corel Paint*, *ArcView*, *ArcGIS*, *Maptitude*, and a score of other programs.

What was once a craft has been democratized out of existence in precisely the way of other *nineteenth century* crafts like typesetting and

manual layout. The hard work of crafting projections, of figuring out the algorithms of a Thiessen Polygon as an analytic tool, of calculating a spatial mean: all are booked into the mapping programs we have available at an unreasonable but affordable price.

The old cartography is work done, not work to do. The mechanics of projections (see, Kaiser and Wood, 2001, *Seeing Through Maps*. Amherst, MA: ODT, Inc.), the basics of production and reproduction are known. The result is embedded in the electronic mapping programs available to most students. The work that remains, the work UNdone, is as much theoretical as it is computational. The real work, however (as it has always been) is what mapping is about, and how it can help in the address of specific problems.

Cartography was never about, knowing. It was about a type of presenting. It was never about the subject. It has always been, to borrow from Mark Denil's (2003) piece "Cartographic Design: Rhetoric and Persuasion" (CP45: 8-61), about the signal rather than the content a map attempted to distill. Mapmaking as a craft, a profession, and a pseudo-science has never been about mapping; a manner of thinking that is relational and ecological from the start. Cartographers and cartographic commentators have wanted us to believe otherwise. *That's* why we need to drop the word, that's where the deadwood lives.

Cartography is about Arthur Robinson's *Early History of Thematic Maps* (1972); as if all maps did not have a theme, were *not* products of authorial intent. It's the stink of scientism and the arrogant assumption that mapmakers need not know anything about the subject they are hired to map, or any map they choose to discuss. Whether it is GIS or another mode of making, there is no science inherent in mapping, whatever the Big Names would have us believe.

Denil (2003) puts it nicely: cartography and cartographers "would seem to mistake the signaling for the communicating" (p. 25). Now that's a thought. The *American Heritage Dictionary* says to communicate is "to make common," or "to make known" (from the Latin *communicâre*). It insists the focus be upon a subject to be communicated, a perspective to be announced. Cartography has typically been ignorant of the subject of the maps it presents, a "science" that pretends specific topical expertise it lacks.

The question isn't Mark Monmonier's *How to Lie with Maps* (1991), or charts, or statistics. That assumes one knows the difference between truth and lie in a subject in which one has expertise enough to judge. The question is—or should be—how to *think* with maps, and where that thinking, as opposed to any other, may lead us. This is precisely what the major cartographers have not had, real knowledge about the mapped subjects they critique. Ed Tufte (1972) knew nothing about cholera when he attempted to discuss John Snow's 1854 Broad Street Map in his seminal *Visual Elements of Design*. Neither did Monmonier (1991) when he commented on the same map in *How to Lie with Maps*, and more recently, in his 1997 *Cartographies of Danger*. As a result, they made serious errors about what Snow had to say and how he tried to say it.

Mapping thinking is not about the map, but about the way we put together the things that are important to the subject at hand. Maps are attempts to take that something and distill an argument about it onto a graphic page. The Cartographic "scientists"—the professionals—tend to drop the ball when they apply a cartographic critique in ignorance of the subjects the maps distill. You can't communicate if you don't know what you're talking about. If GIS is a science, as Nadine Schumann would have us believe, it is a science of ignorance, a continuation of the same old

thing. This is necessarily true because GIS is just another way of mapping the relation between things, albeit one sufficiently democratic that even I, who am sight impaired, can partake.

If we go with your premise Denis, and kill the word cartography, excising it from our language, lets kill the idea that mapping is about the signal rather than the content, the data and not the information derived from its consideration. Let's do away not simply with the word, but with the false scientism that gave us first cartography-as-a-science and more recently GIS-as-a-science.

This journal, this society, therefore, needs a name change, doncha think? The magazine isn't about *Cartographic Perspectives*. It's better than that, or it can be. It's certainly not about "information", that strange distillation of specific sets of data in a manner that presents us a firm aggregation of facts in a comprehensible fashion. Information is the punch-line of the story, not the narrative of its solution. So . . . what to call this non-cartographic, non-information subject the magazine seeks to present?

I thought about *Map Thinking*, but rejected it as too static. Then I thought of *Mapped Perspectives*, journal of the *North American Mapping Society*. It's descriptive and unpretentious—both good things, I think. But the society's name is cumbersome, and the "North American" limited and imperial. Why not just call it the *Society of Maps and Mapping*, hey? After all, how maps are made is less important than the way we try to distill relations on a page. And whether we live in Saskatoon or in East Anglia shouldn't matter a wit.

Then I had a brilliancy, a mind stroke, as we say here in British Columbia. Call the society what you will, the name of the journal is clear. They should just call this rag *The Power of Maps*. I'm sure your publishers (Guilford, 1992) won't mind that.

#### **About the Author**

Tom Koch (<http://kochworks.com>) is the author of 13 books, many of which use maps. Tom is a geographer, gerontologist, and medical ethicist with appointments at the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University. His book *Cartographies of Disease and Health* is scheduled for publication by ESRI Press in 2006.