Blind maps and blue dots: the blurring of the producer–user divide in the production of visual information

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Introduction

In the future TV will be so good that the printed word will function
as an art form only.
— David Byrne, *In the Future*, 1984

This book explores what contemporary mapmaking practices can reveal about
the ever-evolving field of graphic design. It consists of a textual part and a visual
part. The series of visualizations represent and summarize the research through
imagery. In this sense, this PhD dissertation on mapmaking is itself a map: it embod-
ies both the itinerary of my investigation—the text—and a chart for the reader to
find her way—the visuals.

I write this introduction at the end of the research process. With the clarity of
hindsight I can now describe my path as a straight line. The journey, however,
was less straightforward. The starting point was the need to understand changes
that were happening in my own graphic design and mapmaking practice. The
digitization of tools to record, create, edit, produce and distribute visual informa-
tion has triggered a process of transformation of cartography and graphic design
that I believed (and still believe) to be a fundamental change.

In the early stages of this research I tried to grasp the essence of this trans-
formation. The crux for me was the disappearance of the distinction between the
different roles in the process of the creation, the editing, production and use of
visual information. Up until the digital age, these positions were defined by the
distinct tasks performed by specialists like writers, editors, illustrators, graphic
designers, type setters, lithographers and printers. The introduction of the com-
puter as universal tool, and the interactive and coproduction formats advanced
by Web 2.0 technologies, have blurred the distinction between production and
use and between designer and user.

For a better understanding of the disappearance of the producer-user divide
it was useful to learn about the theory of post-representational cartography. Its
premise is that producing and using are not consecutive stages in the life of a
map, but rather are parallel processes. With the disappearance of the distinction
between producer and user it was useful to shift the focus from the product to
the processes of production and use. Insights derived from post-representational
cartography, experiences from my own practice, as well as theories related to
the specific case studies guided me in the investigation into three mapmaking
practices.

Intuitively, I sensed that studying the transformation of cartography could help
to better understand the significant changes happening in the broader field of
graphic design. Mapmaking is a more clearly distinguishable discipline compared

with the expanded ill-defined field of graphic design as it has developed in the digital age. To better understand the blurring of the producer-user divide, I focused my research on players who have entered the field of mapmaking since the democratization of its tools. I selected three mapmaking practices by amateurs and technology companies that appropriated technologies of mapping, designing and publishing, and investigated their tools, strategies and output.

From the steps listed above I have omitted choices that turned out to be side roads rather than junctions on the research path. Over time, certain concepts in the inquiry became less important and were discarded or replaced by more appropriate terms. In the early stages the research question was centred on key concepts like 'rhetoric', 'digital technology', and 'tools'. In a research process that builds on intuition, like this one, many ideas are discarded because they turn out to be unusable. The elements that remained were 'graphic design' as the field of research, 'the disappearing distinction between producers and users' as the development that that field is going through, 'contemporary mapmaking practices' as research object, and 'post-representational cartography' as research method. The elements were combined into the following research question: What can a post-representational reading of contemporary mapmaking practices reveal about the blurring of the producer-user divide in graphic design?

Chapter 1, Concepts and Methods, looks into the key concepts used in the research. It introduces the fields of research, theoretical framework, and the methods that are employed in the investigation. The chapter will also address the role practice plays in the research and the choice of the book as dissertation format.

In Chapter 2, Positioning, the research is situated within the ever-evolving field of graphic design. The chapter proposes a new model to better understand the transformation of the field. Building on experiences from my design and mapmaking practice I will draw parallels between graphic design and cartography. In this chapter the visual concept of the blind map is introduced to describe the permanent emergent status of graphic products.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 contain case studies of contemporary mapmaking practices by technology companies and amateurs.

In Chapter 3, The Blue Dot, different modes of cartographic thinking are used to assess online mapping service Google Maps. The chapter discusses an ambiguous approach to mapmaking as a response to post-representational cartography. I will introduce the blue dot, a visual concept that marks the disappearance of the producer-user divide.

In Chapter 4, The Strava Global Heatmap, a map produced by a social network for athletes is investigated from a technological, economic, social and cultural point of view.

Chapter 5, The Situation in Syria, looks into the practices of amateur conflict mapmakers. The chapter discusses the differences between practices of specialists and non-specialists in terms of visual strategies, production and publishing.

Chapter 6, Conclusion, proposes a post-representational approach to graphic design. The chapter also addresses the need for alternative and additional languages in multidisciplinary discourse, in research in general, and in artistic research in particular.

Notes on the Visualizations

The issues investigated in the visualizations in this book are the relationship between graphic design and the technologies that produce visual information, the development of these technologies over time, and the impact of software and hardware, and the systems in which they operate, on the production of visual information.

In essence, the visualizations in this book do two things: dissect objects and systems, and show how these evolve over time. The visualizations form series in which different aspects are highlighted or compared. The six series run parallel to the chapters of the discursive part of the book.

The aspects that the visualizations address are diverse and vary in scale, amount and visibility. This has led to a diversity of visualization formats: timelines, illustrations, scans, diagrams and legends. In general, the horizontal direction indicates time in the visualizations. The vertical direction shows difference in position, either geographically, or in terms of proximity.