In 2003 **Denis Wood** proclaimed the death of Cartography.[[1]](#endnote-1) It would probably not have been published, and certainly not in *Cartographic Perspectives*, if it had been written by anyone else but Wood. The author of *The Power of Maps*,[[2]](#endnote-2) his has been a seminal voice in the ‘critical cartographies’ which transformed how we thought about mapping.[[3]](#endnote-3)

It was not that *mapping* is pasé. Maps were, and are, being published at a greater and greater rate in every medium, including online. The focus of his ire was the 19th century *idea* of mapmaking as a craft whose practitioners sought to construct **by hand** a “value-free transcription of the environment.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Donna Haraway called it the “**God trick**,” in which the mapmaker’s knowledge was presented as austere, abstract, and impossibly objective.[[5]](#endnote-5) Mapping, in the new view, was the presentation of a phenomenon grounded in the mapmaker’s view of it, and the world.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The critiques of Haraway, Wood, and others like Brian Harley, focused on the *idea* of maps, *not* than the technologies of their making or the nature of the data presented. But in the end, all maps rely on just **three things**. First, there is the data employed in its construction. Second, there are the techniques of production and distribution. Third is the argument the mapmaker wishes to make about the nature of the world and its constituents. Critical cartographies focused on the latter, assuming the first two elements were if not constant then unworthy of comment.

U was born of the digital revolution that transferred the tools of production, from hot lead, **lithography, and hand page layout** to desktop programs that automated the heavy lifting. Projections and surface jurisdictions (national to local) were there as templates ready for filling. Its maps were not **hand-made,** craftsman’s products. But while the craft was democratized, its techniques made simpler—the basics of mapping remained the same. Maps were still like a **magician’s hat**: deep reservoirs of the unseen. The data layer was obscure, its choice and organization mostly hidden. **A Science? Never, not really**.

But if GIS was born of the digital revolution its continued evolution has led to a new reality in which automatic systems collect data presented automatically with charts, graphs … and maps. “Critical cartographies” are become “neogeographies” in which the lines between experts and amateurs are blurred.[[7]](#endnote-7) The dominion of GIS has eroded as users—academic and general—become consumers and producers of data and maps in a “citizen science” bypassing, in the main, the GIS analyst cum technician.[[8]](#endnote-8)

With the maturation of the digital revolution, data remained, in general, a privileged resource, often difficult to access and always hidden from the viewer/reader. Today, however, it has become increasingly public and publicly available. With the democratization of data—its universal availability—the maps that result are, increasingly, not the work of a craftsperson or “GIS Specialist” but automated programs.

The watershed event that made this obvious was, at least to me, was Covid 19. In January 2020, the first **Dashboard** presenting Covid-19 to the world, announced the death of GIS as a specialized craft and the birth of something new. **The magician’s hat** became transparent, its materials seemingly open for general view.

Its digital data was collected by syndromic programs and presented not simply as a spreadsheet but in an epi-text including a breakdown of the data (by region, by outcome), it’s charted summary, and …. A map. All this updated automatically and without individual intervention. The result was dynamic, data and its presentation uploaded continuously and automatically. Sometimes, as this **Washington Post** map shows, the embedded data is called up by the user from a point in a map that stands between the old and new technologies.

This happened **at every scale** from that of the local health department to the national and global perspective. There were still maps being made **by professionals, of course**. But they were the exception. Of the tends of thousands of daily maps presented by publishers and published by newspapers or magazines, carefully constructed, artful maps like this were the rare exception. Here, for example, is a map of **travel routes centred in Bejing**, and another of Covid-19 in US Cities at the beginning of the pandemic.

The Covid dashboard made clear what was happening elsewhere. **US census data at state and local levels** is now free for download for example, And that data can be automatically mapped by the census.gov site program. Is the result equal to that of a skilled cartographer? Maybe not. Here is a map of the same data by **Alexandra Enders**. One may argue its excellence but, for most folk, the differences will seem trivial.

So … data is being democratized, made increasingly available to all. Consumers are becoming data producers in many ways, through Open Mapping and a score of other examples. Mapping is *being* democratized, the tools of its construction embedded in online systems, its data analyzed and mapped automatically in analytic programs like R. Where does that leave the mapmaker-by-trade? Did neogeography kill GIS?[[9]](#endnote-9) Yes. This was a new way of doing the same old thing, but in new ways and opening the mapped media to new uses, interpretations, and perspectives.

**RETHINKING GIS**

First, the name. Geographic Information Systems, or sciences, was always a misnomer.

It was not about geographies as about the spatial relations of things in place and time.

Information is the endpoint while the issue was always the data that, combined in a particular manner, made an argument. And Science? No, that means independent background and argument. Systematic, well, maybe so call it SDS, Spatial data systems, perhaps.

Second, realize that the **heroes of the new**, SDS will be not the programs of the automated programs or the individual mapmaker but, first and foremost, the data librarians who collect and make digital data available to all.

And knowledge of the craft of mapping will be secondary to knowledge of the subject being mapped. The SDS specialist will know something about the varying modes of data production, collection, and presentation beyond the GIS program. The job will be querying and critiquing t he assumptions that define its collection and presentation. A simple example will close my brief talk about the death of GIS.

Consider the map of London’s transit system, arguably among the most famous in the world. Since the 1930s it has been a model for transit maps around the world. And see, here, these nice symbols showing handicapped access points with a wheelchair. Value added and pop-ups for travel planning help planning for mobility limited.

Alas, hidden is the reality of London transit for those who wheel rather than strike, hobble rather than walk. Here is the system of London transit if all you can use are the value-added access points. It’s a desert, a non-system barely connected. And buses, well, they are there, if you can get into one. They take on average twice as long.

People making the London Transit map felt good, I’m sure, about this iteration. But an SDS’er would ask, first “who is left out?” and “how can our mapping systems make this better.?” That means being critical, thoughtful, and knowledgeable about more than colours and design. That means the expertise is not in the mapping, alone, but in knowing the arguments and realities of what the realities to be portrayed.

And why should you care? Because the technology is changing, the opportunities with them, and to be engaged, and employed, this is and will be … the new.

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