

The Reflexivity of Geospatial Technology: Exploring the Geographies of Hope and Fear

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Abstract

Only by fully considering the reflexive nature of the relationship between geography and technology, and exploring how GSTs and their products are employed today and could be employed in the future, will we be able to ensure that future landscapes are ones that we, as Geographers, can be proud of.

Background and Relevance

Geospatial technology is both a product of geography and a means of redefining geography, a relationship of reflexivity that underscores the circular nature of geographical evolution. As digital geographic data is still reflective of the past “unevenness” in the experienced economic and social (and gender, ethnic, race, age) geographies of the world (Zook et al. 2004), so too are geospatial technologies (GSTs) reflective of their origins (e.g., Goodchild 1988; Rhind 1988). We must consider how that past influences the landscapes of hope and fear generated by GSTs (Klinkenberg, 2007). We can work to reconfigure how those landscapes are formed, and many people are actively doing so. The geospatial technologies of the future should be very different from those in the fore today—the ‘social’ will be embedded in the technology, and spatial technologies will be one of many complementary methods used in an analysis (Wyly 2004). How technological and social concerns inform geospatial technologies will be the subject of my talk.

Discussion

Blind use of technology is driving us to a society where there is no anonymity, where fear drives the watchers, and everyone becomes a subject. Is a geography of hope possible in an ever-vigilant society? In light of these issues, concerns related to the ‘grain’ at which our life’s history is being recorded (our digital spatial shadows) have been raised and, as Geographers, we need to explicitly address such concerns. As finer grained geospatial data are collected, stored, and analyzed, personal privacy issues come to the fore, and the increasing lack of spatial anonymity becomes an issue that must be addressed. Should the right to locational privacy become a basic human right (Monmonier 2002; Taipale 2004; CSIS 2005), and how would one ensure that such a right is even possible? How can we ensure that the landscapes formed through the use of geospatial technologies are those reflective of geographies of hope, and do not become the domains of those who fear.

Conclusions

As with any journey over an unknown landscape, we must carefully prepare for that journey by planning for the worst while hoping for the best. Only by fully considering the reflexive nature of the relationship between geography and technology, and exploring how GSTs and their

products are employed today and could be employed in the future, will we be able to ensure that future landscapes are ones that we, as Geographers, can be proud of.

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