

Throughout history, mapmakers have been much sought after. They created representations of landscapes that could be used for exploration, military or trade purposes. The maps they drew, however, often only represented the ideas and perspectives of the people who paid for the maps: kings, armies and business leaders. In other words, people who already wielded substantial power.

But in the last 15 to 20 years, mapping applications and technology has developed so rapidly that mapmaking has moved away from the realm of experts. Now, anyone with access to the internet can add locational information to web pages, photos and videos and share them to what is increasingly known as the 'Geoweb'. With little specialized knowledge, people can now make maps using Geoweb (Web 2.0) applications such as [Google Maps](#) , [OpenStreetMap](#) and [Bing Maps](#)

The change began in part in the mid-1980s when the geographer, Brian Harley, started to talk about the subtexts in maps and thus their social implications. He encouraged mapmakers and ordinary people to use maps to achieve a greater sense of empowerment for the powerless members of society.

Harley's call for action fitted well with other work being done at the same time using participatory learning and action (PLA), and participatory rural appraisal (PRA) techniques. Mapping was already being used with and by small communities, to let them determine their development needs and let the people decide where any new resources or infrastructure should be located. Using participatory methods that involved everyone within a community – and not only the most powerful – communities were creating their own maps for a variety of purposes, including as a way of recording the boundaries and the areas of land they used.

Since those early days, the range of uses for community mapping has grown exponentially, from heavily politicised land-use issues through to inner-city children plotting out areas where they feel safe at night. Maps have been used by the San communities in the Kalahari to outline their traditional hunting grounds. In Indonesia, after logging companies encroached on forest areas, the communities developed maps to show that the trees were not simply open access resources for anyone to cut down, but that they were intrinsic to the lifestyles of the people who had been living in that forest for generations.

Communication is very important too. Previously, even though the whole community could be involved in producing the map, very few people outside of the community would ever see it. But now, since it is so much easier to produce a map online, the potential audience is global in scope. People can access maps on their mobile phone. Maps are used daily on the internet,

and are embedded in almost every website you see these days.

We have to ensure, however, that the process continues to involve everyone in the community, especially older people who may be reluctant to use computers. People with lower literacy levels might feel excluded too as it still takes a certain level of education to read and interpret a map.

## Prospects

Perhaps the greatest value of community mapping comes from the actual process of creating the map. My current work is with an indigenous community from the north of Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada. The government cut back on health and education services in the community's territory in the 1960s, and as a result the population dispersed, with many people leaving for the main urban centres. We are now using internet-based mapping as a way for dispersed community members to share their stories online.

Young people and elders contribute information to build up a better understanding of the land, resources and views that exist around Vancouver Island. The hope is that the younger people living there will get a much stronger sense of identity. But we are less concerned about whether the information provided on the map is 100% accurate because this particular project is more about building and restoring community members' understanding of traditions and lifestyles related to their particular territory.

Maps therefore have a wide variety of uses, and technology has made it possible to include other related data and information, with graphics, photos and videos. Such maps can provide a completely different view of the land, more than just buildings, roads and coastlines. They show that the landscape is far more socialized, and reflect the rich knowledge of the people who live there.

I believe the Geoweb will have great implications for the future, as maps become a bigger part of our lives. Creating, adding information and using a map is now very straightforward for many young people. Furthermore, opening mapping up to the wider population could help to realign the dynamics of power in society. People who were previously powerless, excluded from the decision-making process, might finally have a stronger voice that will be heard far away.

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