

## **Politics and Maps: A Critical Review of German News Maps on the War Against Terrorism in Afghanistan**

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Not just since the critical social theory discovered the hidden political agendas within cartography and maps, the nexus between “Maps, Knowledge and Power” (HARLEY 1988) has provided an entry point for the analysis of meanings of and in maps (MAC EACHRAN 1995). Critiques of either colonial attitudes and Euro-centric approaches of global map-representations as well as those of the maps’ presumed “objectivity” or “neutrality” had been taken up before (c.f. WRIGHT 1942 cited in MAC EACHRAN 1995, p. 339). Even medieval “Psalter Maps” are more a representation of religious symbolism rather than scientific geographical knowledge (c.f. HARRIS 2002). Jerusalem is shown “at the centre of the world” and the map itself is “oriented” towards the east.

The latest approaches of post-modern social scientists strongly argue that there can be no real objective and neutral representation since also maps are nothing else than socially or politically constructed artefacts of scientific and day-to-day cultures (c.f. MAC EACHRAN 1995; COSGROVE 1999; CRAMPTON 2001). Thus, the critical analysis should not look for functional or even “better” maps. The new task is to explore the political interests and power relations underlying the production of maps, thus to explore the “second text within the map” (c.f. HARLEY 1989, p. 9) or to deconstruct the map. For the present study, the discussion on the different levels of meanings, either of and within maps is of special interest (c.f. HARLEY 1988; MAC EACHRAN 1995; MONMONIER 1996; COSGROVE 1999; CRAMPTON 2001). Particularly the spheres of explicit and implicit connotations of map meanings (c.f. MAC EACHRAN 1995, p. 337) are important aspects for the present analysis.

Interestingly, recent discourses include more cartographic terms, such as the “Roadmap”-metaphor, suggesting carefully planned and target-oriented projects for the reconstruction of Afghanistan or Iraq. The question arises, whether such political constructs are really appropriate metaphors, since the press is full of failed approaches.

### **The Present Study**

The protagonists of the “Clash of Civilisations” argued that wars as part of the new struggle among nations will occur especially along the rims borders between different cultures. One of the key statements is that wars will also lead to new “white spots” or even new “terrae incognitae” on the global map, since distinct regions might remain inaccessible for journalists and scientists for a long

time. Jean-Claude Rufin (1993), for example, compares the "new white spots" on African maps with pre-colonial ones.

Contrary to such simplifying approaches, this paper argues that wars and their media coverage actually lead to an intensified information. News maps on the "War against Terror" in Afghanistan are analysed and it is obvious that, in spite of several spheres of shortcomings, this media coverage actually erased "white spots". This, however, is not related to the war itself, but especially to the direct involvement of "western" interests.

Print media and television news generally provide the major source of political information. Thus particular regions remain white spots on the average people's mental maps until these appear in the news. Maps – including also news maps – are generally regarded as a true representation of reality by common people as well as by a more traditional perspective of cartography (c.f. MONMONIER 1996, HARLEY 1988, 1989, MACEACHRAN 1995). The maps have a special role in public communication processes and thus, a critical review of news maps on the war in Afghanistan is undertaken. The sample period (Sept. 11<sup>th</sup> to Nov. 30<sup>th</sup> 2001) covers the main period of fighting. The selection of 13 German daily and weekly newspapers and newsmagazines includes important nationwide papers, and two widely circulated yellow/tabloid press papers as well as local and regional dailies.

This analysis provides a brief but critical review of these maps and focuses especially on aspects of the different spheres of map meaning (c.f. MAC EACHRAN 1995), including intentional or unintentional misinformation or even biased information, and on selected formal cartographical aspects.

### **Subject of Research**

The survey at hand started on September 14<sup>th</sup>, as soon as press news focused on Osama bin Laden and the Al-Qaida-network with published sketch maps of Afghanistan. Remembering the media control during the second Gulf War in 1990/91, the question arose:

- Do news maps contribute to an unbiased information about regions at war?  
The "War against Terror" in Afghanistan is often also correlated with Huntington's model of the "clash of civilizations", and his argument for "simplified paradigms and maps as prerequisites for man's thinking and acting" (HUNTINGTON 1996) serves as another entry point:
- How do simplified and generalized news maps represent complex realities?  
This survey includes a total of 255 maps and map-related graphics. The analysis is supplemented by a questionnaire survey of the papers' editorial offices to assess their editing policies with regard to news maps.

### **Frequencies of News Maps**

The chronology of events in Afghanistan and of the publication of news maps in German papers clearly shows that news maps are still far from being a regular means of information. A statistical

break-up shows that nationwide newspapers and weekly news magazines, as well as the yellow press/tabloid papers publish the majority of these maps, regional and local dailies only occasionally publish news maps.

Satellite and aerial imagery are quite common (18 cases), and occasionally show pre- and post-strike comparisons. These images rely on military sources, and the intentional alteration of contents ("censorship") has to be considered.

Combined or matched presentations, ranging from simple combinations of maps of different scales to complex compilations of maps, photos, other graphics or headline-style text-elements, show a wide distribution. A subtype uses coloured maps of coarse resolution mainly as background of page-wide headlines

### **Formal Shortcomings in News Maps**

The formal analysis of news maps clearly shows general and particularly technical shortcomings: nearly 60 percent of the maps come without a scale, only around 22 percent show data references, information on map-editors or drafts persons. There are even global maps with area-distorting map projections, showing "The Western World" bigger than tropical areas. These critical issues are commonly introduced in cartography textbooks (cf. MONMONIER 1996) as well as in German textbooks on information graphics (cf. LIEBIG 1999; JANSEN & SCHARFE 1999). According to these authors, newspaper drafts persons' generally lack basic cartographic knowledge. Data references are systematically missing in repeatedly printed sketch maps of recognized nation-wide dailies. In contrast all maps and satellite imagery provided by external agencies are indicated with references.

Additionally, most ethnic and demographic maps on Afghanistan show no data references and do not even mention that the data is based on pre-Soviet invasion estimates! These maps also represent pictures of homogenous ethnic territories with no hint to more complex distribution patterns at regional and local levels.

### **Graphical Representation – the Narrow Edge to Sensational Maps**

There are distinctive differences regarding the modes of graphical representation, such as the utilization of colours, size of maps, formal styles as well as layout issues. In the yellow press and weekly news magazines coloured maps reach up to 100 percent coverage. This does not necessarily lead to a more detailed and differentiated presentation: especially tabloid papers often use coloured maps as full-page eye catchers or as a supplement to headlines. Daily newspapers mainly use small-scale maps as a supplement to the particular topic and other maps are of medium size and frequently located close to the page's main headlines - often in weekly newspapers.

This discussion leads further to the assessment of functional issues and sensational practises of news maps publications. A major indicator for this – mainly subjective – differentiation is the

occurrence of additional graphical elements, which do not provide any spatial or topical information. Examples are photographs or photo-realistic graphics of people, such as Osama bin Laden, of combat units, fighter planes or warships etc. – such maps are generally classified as sensational ones.

According to HARLEY (1988), these “marginalities” are proof of the map editors’ main (political) agenda.

In extreme cases the representation of weapon systems even covers more paper space than territories like Afghanistan. Thus, sensational maps clearly represent the “Western Superiority”, whether intended or not, and offer a biased form of information. The particular statistics show clear clusters of sensational maps in the yellow press and in one weekly news magazine, occasionally also in generally serious dailies.

### **Topographical Relief Presentation**

Since the territory of Afghanistan consists of huge hilly and mountainous areas which are not at all easily accessible, terrain information is supposed to be important for common readers. However, just 25 percent of the maps show any kind of terrain information. Some of the coloured maps present altitudinal zonations similar to those in atlases. There are, however, often huge mistakes, such as a map in one weekly magazine with coloured altitudinal zones and additional climate-graphs, including the stations’ altitude. But the stations’ locations in the map are repeatedly shown in completely wrong altitudinal zones, with differences of more than a thousand metres altitude.

### **Maps or Photographs?**

One general conclusion is, that news maps are not recognized as a distinct category of information representation. The editors’ selection shows many common issues with those for press photographs, which have a longer tradition in the print media. Even authors with a proven topical and regional expertise are not consulted regarding the selection of suitable maps, a procedure which is also confirmed by the additional survey among the editors. MONMONIER (1999) even states that news maps are often just supplements for the non-availability of press photographs.

### **Map Titles**

Textbooks on topical cartography as well as those for information graphics generally argue in favour of informative titles to give a direct introduction into the map’s topic. Although this process is common for all written articles in the print media, and mostly for photographs as well, less than one third of the maps, except those issued by news agencies, show a title or heading. Topographical sketch maps generally do not have titles. A brief survey of map titles does not show clear differences between the papers under survey; short and generalized titles are common and a topical differentiation is hardly possible. On the other extreme, however, map titles may simultaneously serve as page-wide

headlines. In some papers, the map titles are substituted by short comments, similar to those for photographs.

Map titles also hint to the papers' editing intentions; next to the selection of articles also the one of maps is primarily based on domestic interests. In one local daily there were very few maps on Afghanistan at all. However, as soon as the German Minister for Foreign Affairs visited the Middle East and South Asia, a map with all his destinations was printed. The same happened as soon as the German Air force started cargo flights to Turkey.

### **The Editing Procedures and Policies for News Maps**

A brief comparison shows that there is often no direct topical link between news maps and related articles. In one nationwide daily, a map on the global distribution of the Muslim population is added to an article on the controversial discussions on German immigration laws. Contrary to this article's message, the map's choice might lead to the readers' imagination of a "Muslim immigration threat".

It should be recognized that mistakes or technical inaccuracies may easily occur, given the daily time constraints newspapers editors have to face (c.f. MONMONIER 1996). However, the present analysis leads to the question, whether the editing procedures for news maps are appropriate and result in informative news maps.

One of the most obvious aspects lies in the transcription of Asian toponymes into German. There are differing modes: identical locations are spelled differently in different issues of the same paper, on different pages of the same issue, or even within matched maps. Several cases can be traced back to particular news agencies, which obviously follow their own principles, differing from official transcription rules, and also from those commonly used in encyclopaedias. However, the issue of transcribing Asiatic toponymes cannot be easily solved and scientific standards may either be unknown or inappropriate to editors.

Additionally, all editorial offices of this sample's papers (totally 13) had been contacted with a written questionnaire and eight actually replied. Their brief analysis provides interesting insights regarding the current practises of publishing news maps. Maps are generally published as "supplements" or "topographical overview" to particular articles; other reasons are the "current relevance" of regions or topics. The importance of maps as eye-catchers and part of headlines had been identified only twice as a "frequent" reason.

The editors generally perceive the frequency of news maps in their papers as "sufficient". Only one nation-wide daily regrets their own limited drafting capacities. According to the editors' responses, there are no major constraints with regard to the availability of basic sources and maps, "generally problematic" has been identified only once regarding the non-availability of suitable maps for tabloid papers.

Of particular interest are the criteria for selecting news maps: “reliable sources”, “timely availability” and a “focus on relevant contents” are generally identified as “very important” or “important”. “Coloured maps” are “important” or even “very important” only for tabloid dailies as well as for weekly papers; the utilization of “additional illustrations” is “important” for two weeklies and even “very important” for one of the yellow press dailies.

News maps are mostly selected by the responsible editors, in this sample generally those for politics and international affairs, sometimes in co-operation with the photography or graphics departments. One daily even has a department for cartography. In general, these bodies are also responsible for proof-reading of maps. The articles’ authors are not mentioned at all for this process, in contrast to scientific publications. This analysis, however, identifies frequent and significant shortcomings in news maps, which can directly be related to the papers’ deficiencies in the selection, drafting and proof-reading processes.

### **Mislocations**

One of the most obvious issues in maps is the right location of places, topographical details and even of countries. Several cases of wrong locations might be traced back to sudden breaking news with insufficient time for detailed research or for proof-reading.

In spite of the different steps of map editing, mentioned by the editors, quite often identical mistakes remain in subsequent maps (see figure x a & b). In some cases, even a previously correct solution had been exchanged for wrong ones.

This analysis does not aim at checking all locations according to their coordinates. However, outstanding examples of wrong locations are identified which could easily be recognized even by common map readers. Small-scale maps often locate settlements in a manner that clearly exceeds the principles of cartographic generalization. For example, Kabul, Jalalabad and Kandahar are repeatedly shown either too close to the borderline, or towards wrong directions.

Since it is obvious that publishers and news agencies maintain their own data bases and maps, a critical proof-reading of these base maps should be in their own interest. At least the observation of competing papers might provide first hints. Eventually, the occasional consultation of external expertise would help to up-date such data bases. However, MONMONIER (1996) and LIEBIG (1999) state that modern computer systems and especially available graphics software allow even non-professionals to draw new or to change existing maps without knowing the basic principles of cartography.

### **A Critical Review of Map Contents and the Spheres of Map Meaning**

A weekly news magazine’s coloured map on the global distribution of Muslims represents a striking example of inappropriate handling of statistics. This map shows a detailed classification with one

class of one to nine percent for the percentage share of Muslims in particular countries. Several countries, however, such as Sri Lanka, are shown as having no relevant Muslim population at all. Additionally, also the representation of core areas of particular Muslim sects, like the Shia community, is wrong. This map also gives no reference regarding data sources. The same map, however, can be found in a recent German atlas on Islam (KETTERMANN 2001), and the magazine's copy, without any hint to the authorization, includes the original map's basic mistakes and also new ones, such as the statistical representation of Indian Muslims.

Other examples mostly show over-generalizations of particular topics which eventually lead to misleading or false information for interested map readers. There are, for example, routes of drug trafficking out of Afghanistan, focussed only on the one through Iran and Turkey. Actual routes are more diverse and include Pakistan, the Central-Asian republics and Russia. Similar cases can be found for pipeline projects for natural gas through Afghanistan. None of this sample's pipeline maps can really compete with the very accurate the map in Ahmed Rashid's book on Afghanistan (2001), which had been widely reviewed in the German press.

There are also positive examples, such as a series of maps in a regional daily, which did not publish many maps at all, showing the changes of territorial coverage and control of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan for four dates during November 2001. No other graphical solution - and no other paper - offers such a comprehensive overview of territorial dynamics. However, the status quo represented in this map only shows the Tajik faction's core area in the northeast, without showing other areas under control of the opposition. Those are occasionally shown in other maps.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

MAC EACHRAN (1995) summarizes his discussion of different approaches of cartography – the idea of functional maps versus the one of deconstructing the presumed neutrality and the focus on (hidden) political agendas – with the conclusion, that these approaches may not be exclusive ones. Maps also have to be functional in order to inform map readers. However, this is only possible as long as the circumstances of map meaning are transparent.

With regard to the usefulness of the presented sample of news maps from a wide range of German papers and news agencies it can be concluded that these do not intentionally provide misinformation on Afghanistan, its neighbouring regions and related topics after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. There is, however, a narrow edge to hidden bias or paradigms of “Western superiority” versus Islamic countries which are shown even in serious nation-wide dailies. The potential censorship by intelligence services is beyond the scope of this study, but scepticism remains regarding aerial and satellite imagery.

The occurrence and frequency of news maps is – not surprisingly – directly related to the perceived political importance and relevance of particular topics, events and regions, seen primarily from a Western and German perspective. Only from this perspective and in the context of the “International

War on Terror”, news maps contribute significantly to the coverage of previous “white spots” of common regional knowledge. This finding contradicts wide spread assumptions that wars actually generate new “white spots”. However, several types of shortcomings and mistakes in the process of selecting, drafting, editing and eventually publishing news maps hint at deficiencies within the editorial set up and also limit the maps’ information content and validity for interested map readers.

The editing process of news maps obviously needs other mechanisms and criteria, as compared to the established ones for written articles or photographs. So far, the majority of editors obviously do not fully recognize maps as a distinct category for presenting spatial and topical information. The editors also might not be fully aware of the huge potentials of maps as well as of the graphical and topical limits of cartography. The potential advantages of maps, such as the presentation of absolute and relative location or distribution of issues, can only be fully utilized as long as geographical data bases are up-to-date and as long as experienced cartographers and experts are consulted to minimize – unintentional – misinformation by news maps.

With regard to Afghanistan there might have been no period before with such an intensive coverage of “geographical” information. However, readers with more detailed interests are often lost by either incomplete or wrong representations or conflicting ones between different sources. From a scientific perspective there is a strong argument to consult regional and topical specialists – not only for Afghanistan – more frequently and get them also involved in the selection of appropriate graphics and maps, especially for background information, even in periods of lower political interests than the one under review.

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