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Digital Maps, Political Borders: Reflecting on the Renaming of the Gulf of Mexico

When I first heard that Google Maps had changed the Gulf of Mexico to the “Gulf of America” for US users, I was blown away, not just by the name change itself but by how easily digital platforms can reshape the world. It seemed ridiculous, at first, that a tech company could override centuries of geographic convention with a few lines of code. But the more thought I put in it, I realized this is exactly what digital coloniality is all about.

This is also about digital inequalities and not just who has access to the internet but who gets to define reality online. According to *Robinson et al*. (2015), digital inequality is the uneven ability to create, control and shape digital content. Google is one of the most powerful information platforms in the world and it has a lot of soft power over how we understand geography, politics and identity. When these decisions go unchallenged, they become digital empire-building, what some have called “soft annexation.”

Greenstein, Forman, and Goldfarb (2018) looked into the geographic disparities of digital influence and how geography shapes the internet and vice versa. They state that the internet’s impact is uneven and often highlights existing spatial inequalities. In this case, the name changes controversy shows how U.S. based platforms aren't just reflecting geography, they are changing it. Digital borders are being drawn by corporate interests, not by international consensus or local communities. Another thing I want to speak on is the role of AI and algorithmic governance in this. Though a political decision started the name change, algorithms enforced and normalized it. As Lutz (2019) says, big data and AI systems usually encode the biases and priorities of those who build them. If the default logic of Google’s systems is to reflect U.S. policy preferences first, maybe because of its corporate location, market priorities or legal constraints, then its algorithms are complicit in shaping geopolitical discourse. That means Mexican users and international observers will see one version of the world, while Americans will see another, fragmenting our shared reality into politically convenient truths.

So in reflecting this controversy I’m troubled by a few questions like, who gets to decide what’s on a digital map? When those decisions impact not only perception but policy, identity and international relations? The *UN* and *the International Hydrographic Organization* technically govern geographic naming conventions but in the digital age their authority is being overruled by a few private companies. However, I’m also heartened by signs of resistance. Mexico’s lawsuit is ongoing but it’s an attempt to reassert digital sovereignty. Around the world countries are pushing back against *Big Tech’s* unchecked power, building alternative digital infrastructures, regulating content localization and developing mapping platforms that reflect their own histories and values. As *Magenya (2020)* says, we need to centre the voices and perspectives of those who have been historically marginalized by technological development. That includes

Global South countries like *Mexico* whose digital identities should be self-determined not dictated from *Silicon Valley*.

What really gets me is how these digital acts can quietly erode collective memory. Naming is not a neutral act, it contains history, identity, power. When Google changed *"Gulf of Mexico"* to *"Gulf of America"* it wasn't just renaming a body of water, it was trying to overwrite a cultural memory. As *Graham (2014)* says, digital platforms are now the repositories of knowledge that shape how history is remembered and repeated. If future generations grow up seeing altered names they may never question the changes. In this way digital platforms can be agents of historical revisionism not through force but through quiet erasure. What seems like a minor technical update is actually a political act of storytelling, one that favours certain narratives and silences others. As we give tech companies more of our informational landscapes we must be mindful of how these platforms shape not just our present but our past.

I am a firm believer in the internet's potential to bring people together, facilitate discussion and democratize access to information and therefore it's deeply disconcerting to see how easily it can be used to consolidate power, entrench existing narratives and reshape reality for political or corporate interests. But, it's a call to action. We need stronger global frameworks to protect digital sovereignty, especially for marginalized groups and small states. We need more accountability from the technology companies who are knowledge gatekeepers. And we need a broader cultural shift towards digital justice where inclusivity as well as transparency and historical integrity come before profit and power. If we don't act the internet will not be a global commons but a new kind of empire.

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