

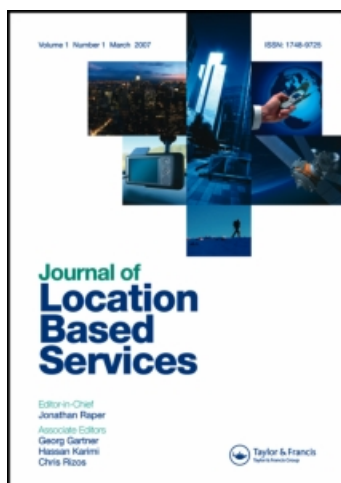
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### NeoGeography: an extension of mainstream geography for everyone made by everyone?

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## EDITORIAL

### **NeoGeography: an extension of mainstream geography for everyone made by everyone?**

#### **1. Introduction**

This issue of the journal aims to bring together proposals, critique and implementations of the recently emerged and actively debated topics of NeoGeography. Despite differing viewpoints on the definition of NeoGeography, most researchers would agree on the common keywords that have come to be associated with the works on NeoGeography. These keywords include Web 2.0, mashups, public participation, social networking, volunteered geographical information, crowd-sourced data, user-generated content, open source maps API and affordable navigational devices, principally GPS data loggers. If one brings together these ideas and tools to represent some geographical information, the outcome falls somewhere in the undefined extent of NeoGeography. However, not all observers of geographical information science and technology are comfortable with such a vague label for this phenomenon. Despite this, NeoGeography tools and techniques have become the most common denominator in many location-based services, hence a special issue on this topic was proposed.

David Haden in his July 2008 blog at [www.d-log.info](http://www.d-log.info)<sup>1</sup> wrote an informative post on the history of the use of the term NeoGeography. He started by presenting some links to a variety of disciplines including geology, biology and soviet science concerning the etymology of NeoGeography. It is immediately obvious that even though Haden writes in a blog style manner, he has made a very methodical attempt to unravel the vagueness in the modern usage of the term and that he wishes to identify some structure in the concept of NeoGeography. It would seem that there are broadly two camps of researchers who are currently working in the fields of NeoGeography, namely the technologists and academics (geographers, urban planners, architects, etc.), and each of them present a different view of the field. Towards the end, Haden presents a categorised list of all current and speculative forms of NeoGeography. Haden's concerns about the impact of NeoGeographical techniques and tools on our privacy and the presence of several hurdles to the exploitation of its full potential (e.g. in community participation) are also noteworthy. A summary of the chronology of the use of the word NeoGeography according to Haden and some more recent events is discussed below.

#### **Prehistory of NeoGeography**

##### **1922**

Yearbook of the Carnegie Institution of Washington contains a comment, 'PalaeoGeography has a far wider field and can only be defined in the terms of NeoGeography'.

**1944**

The 'Encyclopaedia of Bible Life' by Miller and Miller states, 'between the extremes of the geopoliticians and the non-environmentalists, the NeoGeographers have adopted an intermediate position in which the effect of geography can be plainly traced in some instances in human conduct' (Miller and Miller 1944).

**1950–1954**

A paper in 'Chronica Botanica' concludes, 'NeoGeographers seem to avoid consultation with well-informed and easily-available specialists in other fields' (Anonymous).

**1952**

An abstract in Sociological Abstracts includes the phrase, 'the NeoGeography of production and work' (Anonymous).

**1977**

Francois Dagognet (French philosopher) uses the term in the title of his book, 'Une épistémologie de l'espace concret. Néo-géographie' roughly translated as 'An Epistemology of the Concrete Space: NeoGeography' (Dagognet 1977).

**1998**

Baker in his chapter in 'Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture' includes the lines, 'And Mr. Ken Dowlin, the City Librarian, is also an admirer of space, not only physical but what he has called the 'NeoGeography' that is created by virtual communities formed of individuals who are far away from each other physically' (Baker 1998).

**NeoGeography before NeoGeography****March 2005**

Udell in his article for the magazine InfoWorld predicts, 'Clouds of network connectivity are forming over our major cities and will inevitably coalesce. The geo-aware web isn't a product we buy; it's an environment we colonize. [...] Radical openness is the key.' (Udell 2005).

**June 2005**

First 'Where 2.0 Conference' is organised by O'Reilly Publishers.

***March 2006***

The book 'Else/Where: Mapping – New Cartographies of Networks and Territories' by Abrams and Hall (2006) is published. It advocates mapping as integral to new approaches to design practises.

**NeoGeography is officially introduced*****April 2006***

- Randall Szott posts weblogs titled 'PsychoGeography vs. NeoGeography' and 'What is NeoGeography anyway?' at [www.placekraft.blogspot.com](http://www.placekraft.blogspot.com) in which he writes about the origin and definition of NeoGeography.
- Jackson in his article for the National Geographic News reports, 'Platial co-creator Di-Ann Eisnor, who coined the term 'NeoGeography...' (Jackson 2006).

***June 2006***

The popular technology magazine Wired News reports on the Where 2.0 Conference.

***July 2006***

Jeffrey Barke registers the website and discussion forum [www.neogeography.net](http://www.neogeography.net).

***December 2006***

The book 'Introduction to NeoGeography' by Turner is published (Turner 2006).

***December 2007***

- Andrew Turner in his blog post 'NeoGeography – towards a definition' at [highearthorbit.com](http://highearthorbit.com) continues to add a body of thoughts and ideas being discussed on the application of NeoGeography.
- A workshop on 'Volunteered Geographical Information' is organised at the NCGIA, California, USA.

**Signs of identity crisis and doubts*****December 2007***

GeoWorld magazine article on 'Where will the geospatial industry and technology be in 10 years?' includes expert opinions on 'Does NeoGeography help or hurt the geospatial industry?' (Various 2007).

**March 2008**

Sui in the article 'Is NeoGeography hype or hope? (THE 'G' IN GIS)' for the magazine *GeoWorld* analyses the phenomenon of NeoGeography (Sui 2008).

**April 2008**

Walsh in the article 'The beginning and end of NeoGeography' for the *GEO:connexion* magazine raises doubts about the future of NeoGeography (Walsh 2008).

**2. This issue**

The contents of the issue can be broadly divided into two main streams. The paper by Goodchild delves into the history and integrity of the topic. Papers by Foth *et al.* and Hudson-Smith *et al.* present ideas and results of the experiments that add to the research on this topic carried out by academic researchers. It must, however, be noted that recent proponents of NeoGeography are not academics but entrepreneurs and technologists like Dan Eisner, Andy Turner and Jo Walsh, who generally do not seek the approval of peer reviewers, as is the norm in the academic field. Hence, NeoGeography is a multipolar field of debate and development characterised by a range of epistemologies. The reader must bring their own perspectives to bear on writing in this field.

Goodchild's paper starts off with a discussion of the notion that familiarity with a place is what grounds self-evaluation of place knowledge. This easily acquired belief of familiarity is one of the reasons that encourages non-experts to share geographical information collected by them. This observation is particularly interesting since, in general, the wider public is being increasingly encouraged to observe, record and express geographical phenomena by various organisations, e.g. wildlife societies, media<sup>2</sup> and even public sector bodies.<sup>3</sup> There is, however, a distinction between information collected for a specific purpose compared to one for a general purpose (i.e. one useful for a wider range of applications). Goodchild suggests that the latter is what the experts are particularly skilled at, due to their deeper knowledge of the topic. However, often volunteered geographical information is no more than mere data, i.e. a report of an event, e.g. numerous mobile phone video clips of Tsunami in South-east Asia. However, Goodchild also suggests that the labelling of an individual as a professional and an amateur researcher is recent and yet serves as a valuable marker between an incidental observer compared to someone with a considerable understanding of the intricacy of a geographical phenomena. Goodchild then further discusses the unique value of academic geographers owing to their methodological skills and their access to the vast knowledge of geographical information concepts. Goodchild concludes optimistically suggesting that there is a need for a hybrid approach between the so-called citizen sciences due to its mass production characteristics and the professional science for its expertise in the topic.

Foth *et al.* and Hudson-Smith *et al.* present results of experiments that explore the community participation aspect of NeoGeography, particularly on shared 3D visualisation environments. Foth *et al.* employ the Web 2.0-based community participation aspect provided by NeoGeography tools for the purpose of

urban planning. Foth *et al.* suggest that in the currently ever increasing network world, it is vital to have a close look at the impact of NeoGeography techniques to understand the way people interact in local and global communities. They generate an online virtual reality environment computer gaming-type interaction where the activities of the participants are carefully monitored. The NeoGeography tools proposed by Foth *et al.* expose a crucial aspect missing from popular NeoGeography, i.e. what do we do with NeoGeography tools and techniques. Its spirit is very close to the imagination of Szott, who thinks of NeoGeography as a new online geospatial interface or bridge amongst individuals.

In Hudson-Smith *et al.*'s paper we can see that space and location are becoming very important to communication and computer technologies. This new high significance of space for people without previous access to tools to manipulate it before is a prominent phenomena that involves users and the general public as well as developers and GIS experts. For this reason, the series of software tools that the Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis at University College London has developed are very relevant to this issue. Designed by researchers immersed in an academic culture but aware of NeoGeography, they are an attempt to provide the missing link between the two worlds. Every NeoGeographer user, as well as geographic professional, has been confronted at one time or another by the challenges of vast data sets and complex visualisations. Google Map Creator enables the creation of choropleth thematic layers which can be quickly and easily integrated into Google Maps. This is a classical response to an old problem that has reappeared in a new context. In parallel, applications coming from the NeoGeography side have been developed to address the same question. London Profiler is an attempt to build a bridge between the Google MyMaps application and some more classical web-based GIS server technologies, and Map Tube can be seen as an extension of the You Tube idea to cartography by providing some way to share and viewing maps. Beyond these tools the authors discuss the necessity of creating some Second Life sort of social/visual/spatial environment to fully accomplish the potential of the NeoGeography concept.

At a deeper and more subconscious level, we think NeoGeography is yet another outcome of the increasingly close integration of our lives with geocomputational and World Wide Web technology. The field of NeoGeography is now somewhat chaotic and a number of frontlines have come to define its debates. It ranges from pretty much daily announcements of some open source mapping software/hardware with commercial implications, to the more typical academic debates on how to define this rather popular and ever so quickly growing topic. We think that the main reason for this chaotic growth is the presence of the numerous writers, thinkers, researchers and entrepreneurs.

Geography's traditional main mission is not to collect accurate spatial data but to focus analysis of the data. What GIS, geocomputation and Geomatics have brought into the field is the idea that this divide between those who collect and those who use the data was not important in the computer age. What NeoGeography brings into the field is the idea that Geomatics tools and experts cannot be seen as isolated, but are immersed in society. NeoGeography could therefore be named Neo-Geomatics or Geomatics 2.0. At the same time, NeoGeographers have developed new spatial practices, both real and virtual, and academic geographers will have to use both new and old tools in the future.

One of the more curious aspects of NeoGeography is the high dependency of much activity on the unknown business plans of certain commercial bodies providing API's for mapping. Since each one of these bodies would rightly guard their business plans, NeoGeographers must accept that their mashups can stop working if hosting services provided by bodies such as Google, Microsoft and Yahoo are suddenly stopped for commercial reasons.

We think that NeoGeography is akin to organically grown or free-range food products! It flourishes because individuals like to publish and share their own ideas, information and thoughts directly with the rest of the community without any external influence (or additives). Yet, some external influences could be valuable from the point of view of conventional publication approaches and their contribution to the quality of the debate. On the academic side some may consider it as an anarchic and over-democratised movement. It would also seem to be a debate about who has a 'better' perspective on geographical information. One thing that definitely separates conventional geographical research and NeoGeography work is that NeoGeography lives on and spreads via the Internet and thus has a vastly deeper and quicker outreach than any conventional geography medium. Students and researchers can easily access a wide variety of information from both academics and citizens by simply having a web browser and using the appropriate keywords. NeoGeography is dynamic and multimodal: as a 'discipline' its information content and the validity of its information evolves at the speed of the next available social networking mechanism (Twitter is most popular at the moment), and the enthusiasm of individuals. In essence, everyone is a NeoGeographer and NeoGeographical information is for everyone.

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## Notes

1. <http://www.d-log.info/on-neogeography.pdf> (Accessed on 11 June 2009).
2. BBC 2009, Scientists ask us to count snails, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/newsid\\_7990000/newsid\\_7994900/7994987.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/newsid_7990000/newsid_7994900/7994987.stm)
3. CASA, Bloomsbury Improvement Group, Community Alert LLP, Metropolitan Police, Camden City Council, <http://www.communityalert.org.uk/>

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