

maps as power

lecture 2

facebook

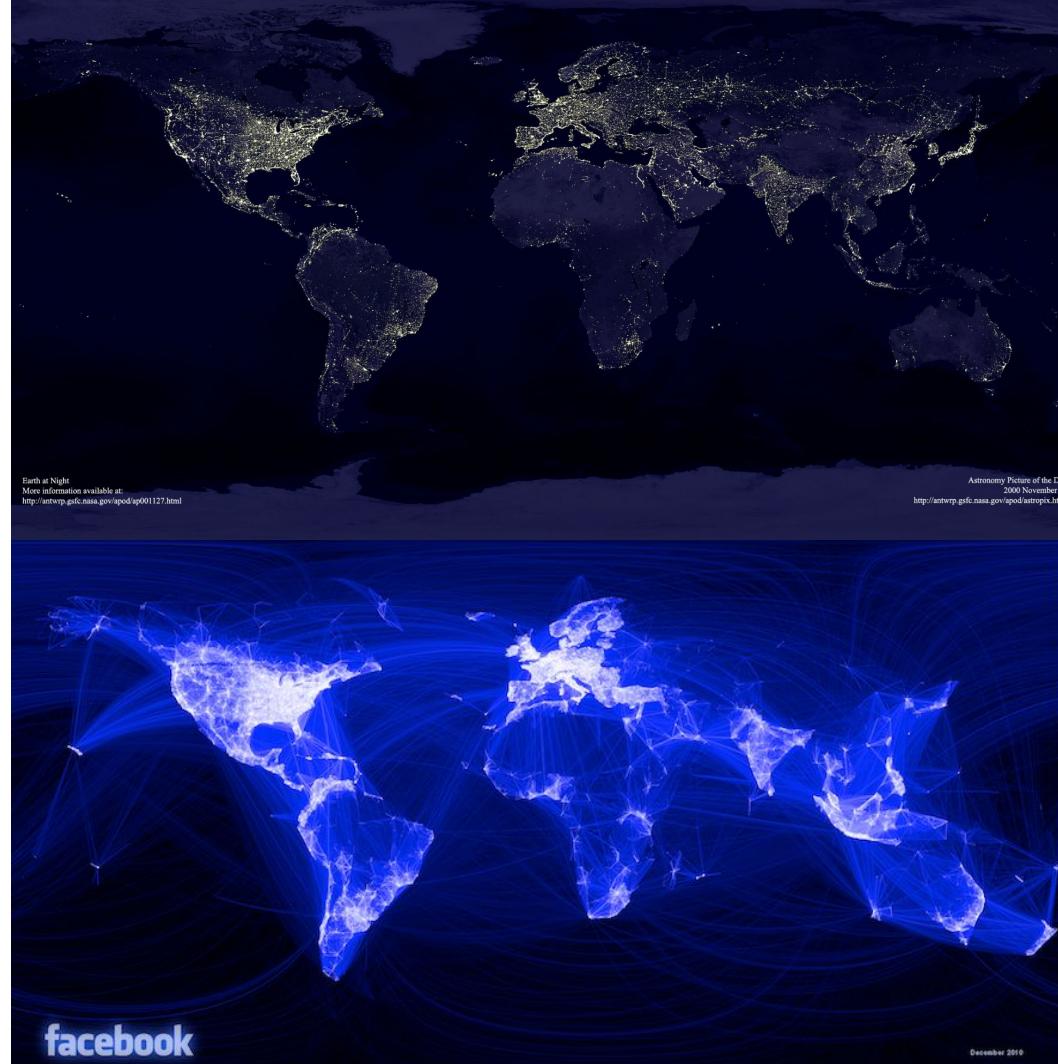
December 2010

overview

how have maps historically embodied power? how are they used today?

1. **Harley's observations**
2. **gerrymandering / election**
3. **This Is Not an Atlas**

A [Huffington Post](#) article observed that the 2010 Facebook connections map resembled a 2010 [NASA photo](#) of the world at night (top image). The notable exceptions, as the article points out, are Russia and China. They have electricity, but somehow neglect Facebook friendships.



"although maps have long been central to the discourse of geography they are seldom read...as a socially constructed form of knowledge"

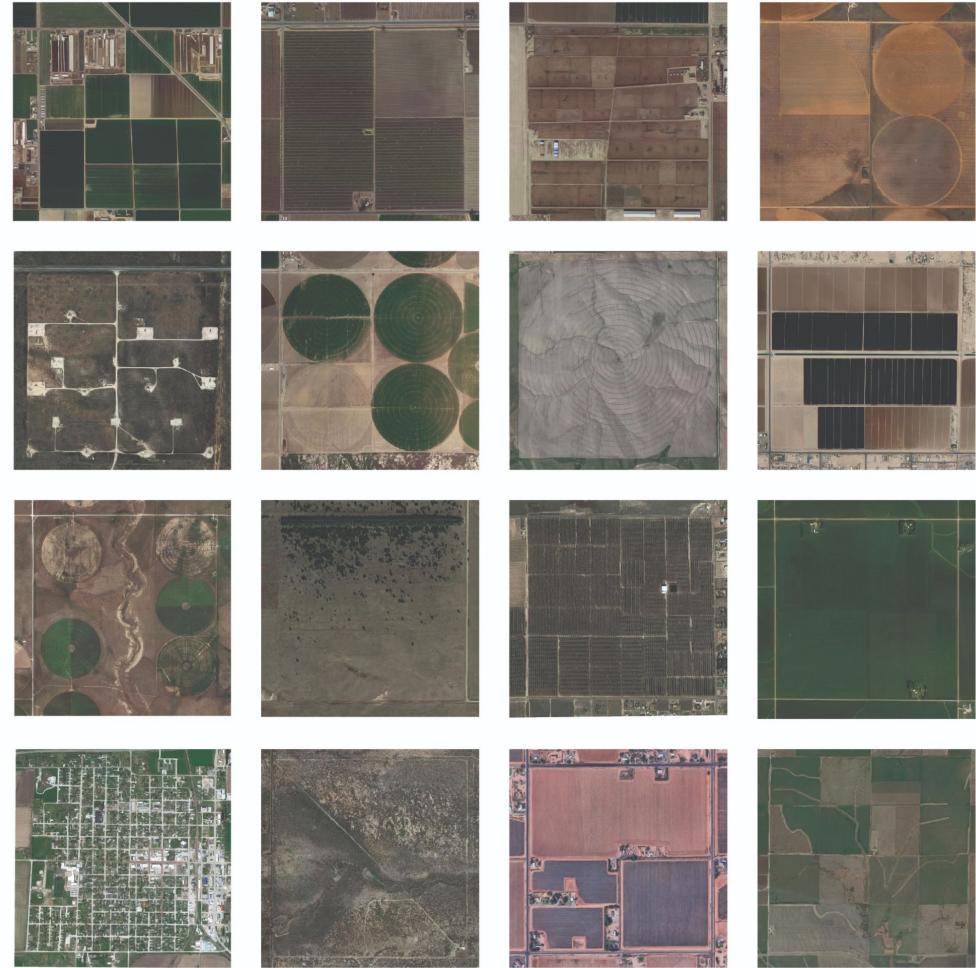
- J. Brian Harley "Maps, Knowledge, and Power" from *Exploring Human Geography* (1988)

"Insofar as maps were used in colonial promotion, and lands claimed on paper before they were effectively occupied, maps anticipated empire....dimensions of polity and territory were fused in images which – just as surely as legal charters and patents – were part of the intellectual apparatus of power." – Harley (ibid, 57)

"Imperial Federation – Map of the World Showing the Extent of the British Empire in 1886"; map referenced by Harley. From the [Norman B. Leventhal Map Center Collection](#).



"The grids laid out by the Roman *agrimensores*, made functional in centuriation, were an expression of power 'rolled out relentlessly in all directions...homogenizing everything in its path.'...The world could be carved up on paper." (ibid, 58)



Right: examples of the Jeffersonian Grid that divides much of the USA into six-mile squares, each composed of 36 one-mile squares. You'll notice the pattern flying over the West especially.

Composite image from: ["The Grid"](#), Nicole Sylvia

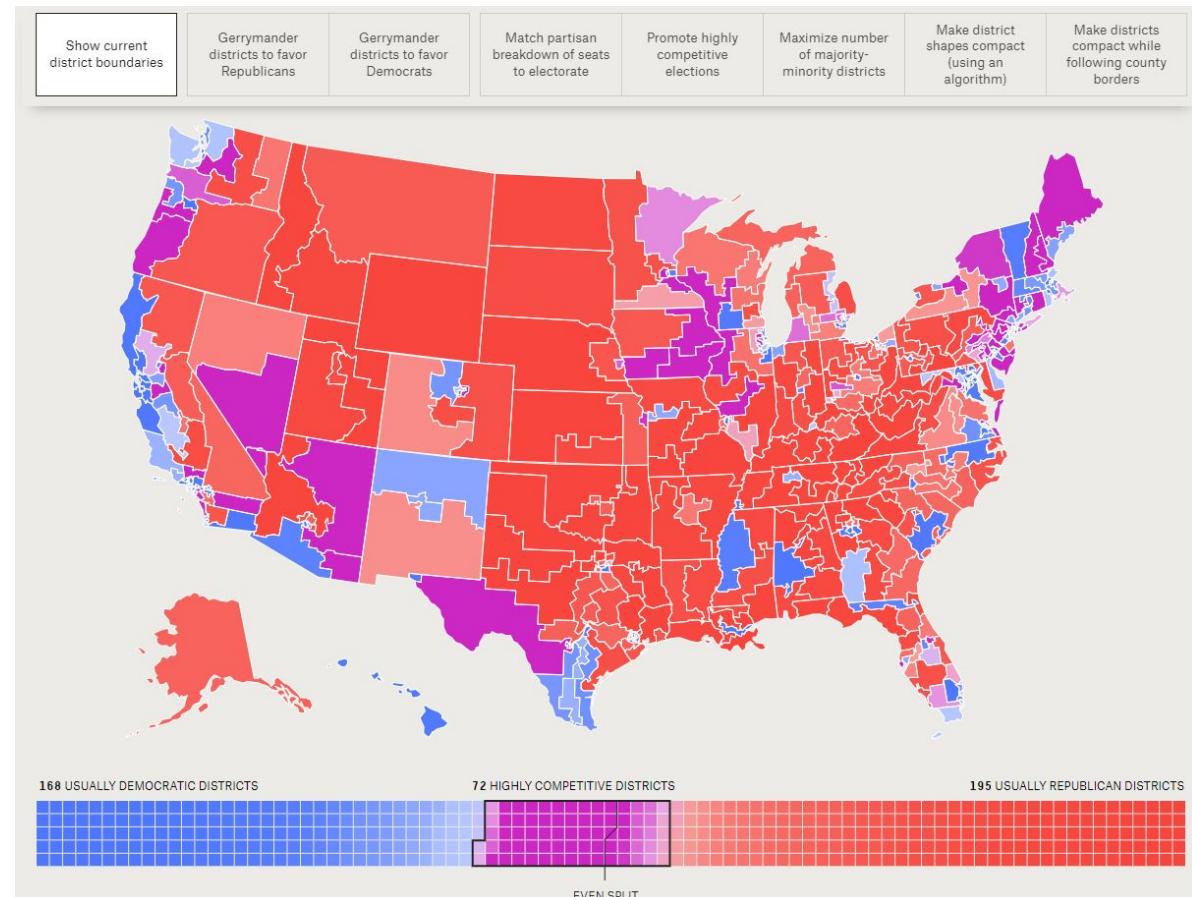
Gerrymandering

Speaking of drawing map lines as an act of power, gerrymandering has been in the news a lot recently. Gerrymandering is the practice of redrawing Congressional district boundaries to include or exclude neighborhoods with specific political characteristics, to give your party an edge in elections.

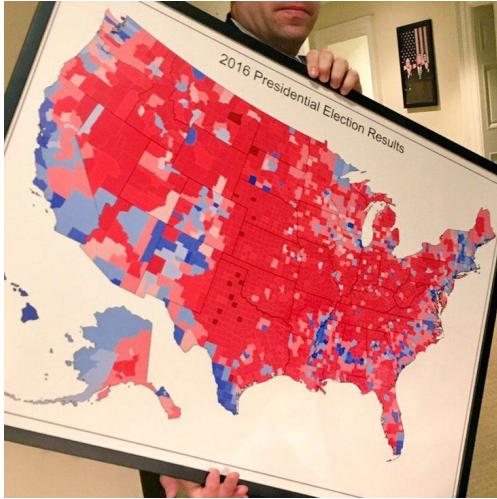
The political analysts at FiveThirtyEight made an interactive map that shows potential redistricting models:

<https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/redistricting-maps/>

Right: current districts and breakdown of typical voter outcome. From FiveThirtyEight “The Atlas of Redistricting”.



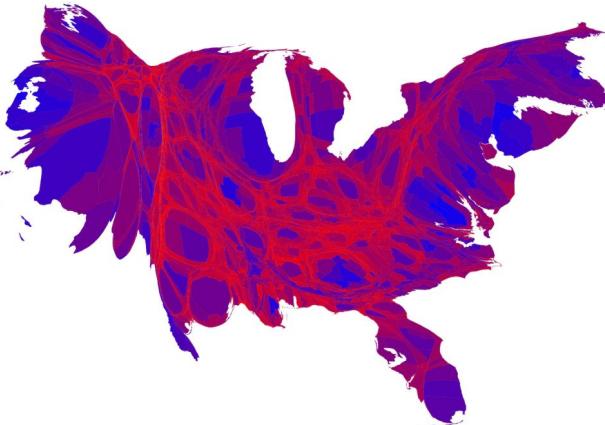
Election Results maps



Top left: 2016 Presidential Election results map, colored by county (choropleth diverging hue map). Top middle: counties colored by result and scaled by population (cartogram)

Source:

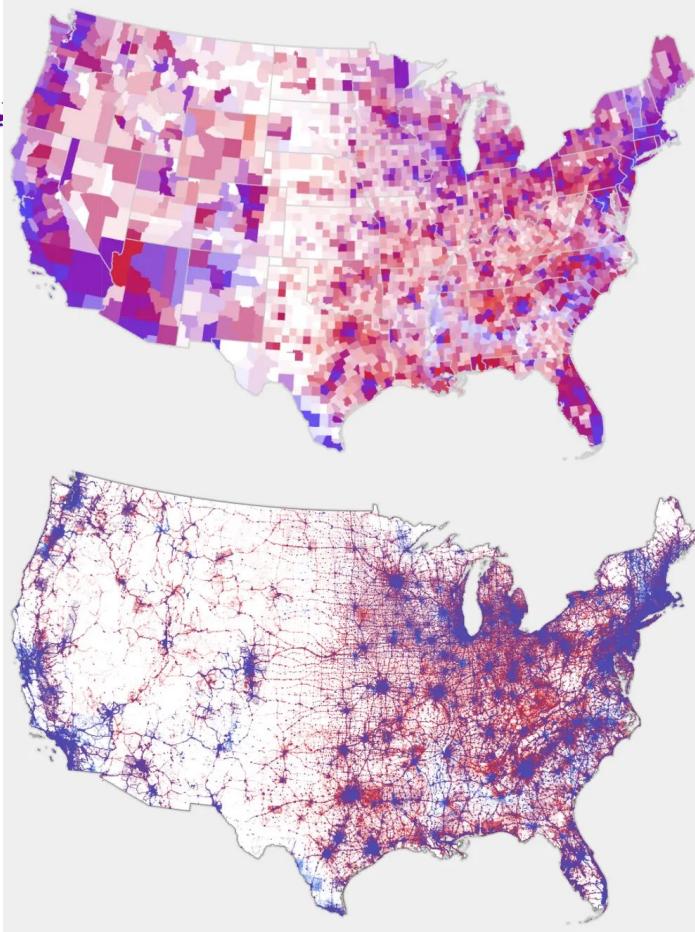
<https://time.com/4780991/donald-trump-election-map-white-house/>



Top right: value-by-alpha (color by vote share)
Bottom right: dasymetric dot density map (pointillism; dots by population)

Source:

<https://www.wired.com/story/is-us-leaning-red-or-blue-election-maps/>



Wikipedia and knowledge “production”

As lightweight, open-source, free tools become more sophisticated, and the online community sharing tutorials and custom scripts grows, more and more people can map their worlds.

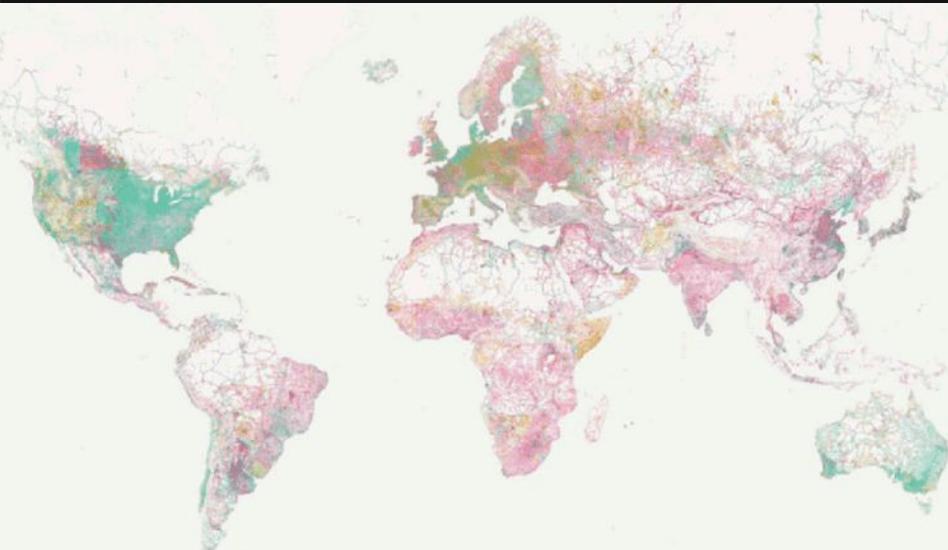
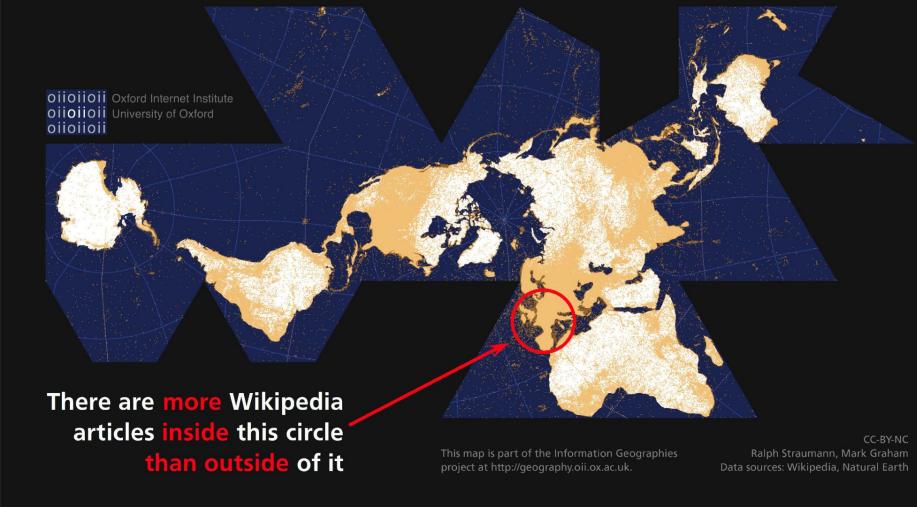
However, as with Wikipedia, we see an uneven distribution of information quality, quantity, and access with mapping resources like OpenStreetMaps, population information, and satellite imagery.

Top: map of Wikipedia writers, with a high concentration in Europe, the USA, and China (but the vast majority in Western Europe)

Source: This Is Not An Atlas - “Uneven Digital Geographies”
<https://notanatlas.org/maps/uneven-digital-geographies-2/>

Bottom: All the roads in OpenStreetMaps (as of 2018), colored cyan if named, and orange or magenta if not.

Source: [“The Crowd is the Territory: Assessing Quality in Peer-produced Spatial Data During Disasters”](#) (2018)



Additional References

“Grid”, Rosalind Krauss (1979):

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/778321>

“The Grid”, Nicole Sylvia,
thesitemagazine:

<https://www.thesitemagazine.com/read/the-grid>

“The Atlas of Redistricting” interactive map from FiveThirtyEight:

<https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/redistricting-maps/>

“This Is Not an Atlas”:

<https://notanatlas.org/#atlas-maps>