# Mapping the News

*W*hat the world needs now is understanding. This was the overarching theme that I challenged geographers and the media to consider as we began the Mapping the News conference last month at the National Press Club in Washington, DC. The meeting, which was conceived and organized by the AAG with support from co-sponsors such as the National Geographic Society and ESRI, explored the growing interaction of geography and maps in the reporting of the news.

My goal in organizing the Mapping the News conference was to bring geographers together with leading journalists and senior editors from major media organizations to discuss how maps and an understanding of geographical context are integral to effective media coverage of news events, and how geography can help the media to tell the story and the public to better understand the news. The conference succeeded beyond my expectations, as the media presence and interest was very strong, the presentations were substantive and on target, and keynote speaker Bob Kerrey provided an eloquent and compelling call for the need for geography in understanding events in our world today.

Panels of geographers and journalists covered Mapping the News topics ranging from elections mapping, health issues, and crime reporting to geography and government news, investigative reporting and GIS, imagery and TV, and social responsibility and the public's right to know. AAG president Alec Murphy was among the many geographers who ably represented the discipline in these discussions.

Senior reporters and editors from many of the world's major media organizations, including *CBS News, US News and World Report, The New York Times, the Associated Press, The Chicago Tribune, TIME Magazine*, Reuters, the *Los Angeles Times*, the Columbia School of Journalism, *USA Today*, and the *Washington Post*, as well as numerous regional newspapers and Internet news outlets, engaged geographers and senior governmental press officials in wide ranging discussions of the expanding role and sophistication of maps in the media, and their evolving role not simply as a locational addendum to the news story, but as integral narrative means to help convey the essential context and meaning of news events.
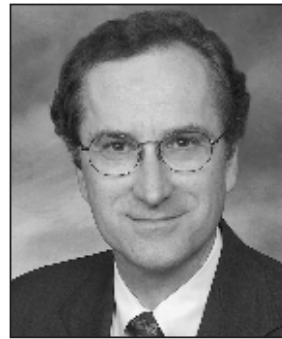
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This trend in the use of maps as core narrative devices in telling the news story is evident in the greatly enhanced sophistication and presence of maps now being used in publications such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and many of the national news weeklies over the past five years. Other publications are sure to follow in the years ahead, and we are already seeing more pervasive use of maps in the electronic media, including animated and dynamic maps on the television and the Internet news outlets. This trend in the mass media, particularly on television, seems to me to offer far-reaching new possibilities for improving map literacy and stimulating geographic education in the general public and among young people in the U.S. and around the world.

It is also certain that geographers will have plenty to say and hopefully plenty to do to help improve the quality, context, and integrity of these maps as they proliferate in the media. There will also be an important role for geographers in examining the meanings conveyed by maps increasingly used in the media, including the distortions or inaccuracies that can

result from inadequate or manipulative map design, areas in which geographers have conducted substantial research and can offer special insight.

The Mapping the News conference was one of those rare events which resonated with the feel of history being made. As keynote speaker Bob Kerrey, a former U.S. Senator and current president of the New School University in New York said, "Geography and mapping applications are taking place in the context of a highly net-worked world. This is a crucial point because it signals that what is powering this renewal are the choices being made by tens of millions of individuals who are using geography to answer some of life's most important questions….Among the most important needs is to begin collecting regional and global data so that we can ori-ent to an expanded set of facts as we try to measure our status and our progress. We need to visualize that data, bring it alive with skilled storytelling…and use it for reasoned and global public debate about the great overarching challenges we face; how to sus-tain our existence on this planet, how to con-tinue the expansion of democracy, how to produce a world that is more fair and just, and how to respond to mind-numbing demo-graphic, environmental and health catastro-phes. Mapping the News is a very big idea. It just might be the way for us to realize our highest and most virtuous aspirations."

It is clear that what the world needs now is understanding. Not only understanding *of* the world, but understanding *in* the world. Geography can play a key role in achieving both of these kinds of understanding.

But we will need to speak to others than ourselves if we are to contribute to this understanding to our full potential. Building real bridges to the media will strengthen both our discipline and our ability to bring geographical knowledge, research, and insight to bear on the needs of a very needy world.

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