

Do road maps have ethics?

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Abstract:

Alongside school atlases, road maps are among the most common form of map encountered by the general public, with production at their peak running to hundreds of millions of copies annually in the USA alone (Ristow and Bahn 1964) and many millions more in other, mainly Western, countries. Although much reduced in numbers, printed road maps continue to be produced and sold (or distributed freely by governments or tourism boards) despite the rise of web-based mapping and in-car satellite navigation. As part of PhD research into the subset of roadmaps issued by petrol and oil companies or gas stations, the question arose about the degree to which road maps can be said to have ethics, and whether these influence users – primarily, but not exclusively, motorists.

Before investigating the ethical basis for road maps, it is necessary to explain the elements of a typical (printed) road map. This is not restricted to the cartographic map plane, but may include additional elements as part of the physical embodiment of the map – covers, explanatory material, place name indexes, photographs, advertising, tourist information – which can collectively be considered as a “perimap” (Wood and Fels, 2010). Extensions beyond the map (sometimes known as the “epimap”), including the point of sale, materials promoting the map, and user annotations, will not be considered as part of the road map as they are not fixed properties.

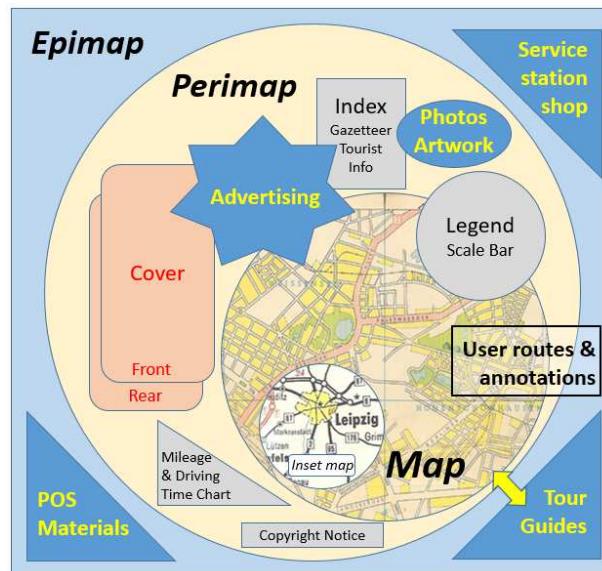


Figure 1. Relationship between Map, Perimap and Epimap.

Analysis of content of road maps has followed the broad approach of Wood and Fels (1986) in their deconstruction of the North Carolina State Highway Map. However it has also considered more specifically ethical considerations, noting that there can be significant overlap between some of the topics identified. Example of potential ethical issues include:

- promotion of tourism (and national stereotypes)
- encouragement of travel by car compared to more sustainable modes of transport
- disregard of negative externalities, such as air pollution, noise and (for more recent maps) climate change

- reinforcement of national boundaries and territorial claims
- conventional treatment of disadvantaged groups – minorities, women
- omission of informal settlements, while including ‘reservations’ and ‘homelands’

However, there is an additional question as to whether road maps simply reinforce existing norms, and can possibly be seen as reflective of a car-owning culture in the global West, or whether they create additional demand for discretionary or unnecessary travel.

References

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