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Skewed view, Why it takes more than one map to see the world

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THE world maps posted around Food For Thought Books in Amherst were designed to shake up perceptions about the world, and shake them up they did.

There was the Peters map, which shows South America as much larger than Europe, and has the nations around the equator all looking peculiarly stretched out.

The Hobo-Dyer map places the Southern Hemisphere on top, with Australia front and center and two-thirds of the Earth covered with water.

The Population Map displays the countries with size proportional to population rather than land area, so that China and India are the largest nations.

The maps belonged to Bob Abramms of ODT, Inc., an Amherst-based company which publishes an array of 'alternative' world maps. Abramms' philosophy is that the world can be viewed in a variety of ways, and no flat map can precisely portray the three-dimensional Earth.

His presentation, which included a talk and a DVD called 'Many Ways to See the World,' sparked a lively debate among the 30 or so people gathered in the room.

'The first thing I turned to maps for was to find out where I was in the world,' said one man who admitted being disconcerted by Abramms' maps. 'You're taking that away. It's rather threatening. It's dislocating.'

'It's not taking anything away,' countered a woman. 'It's adding a new dimension to it.'

Another man questioned whether a map with south on top could really be accurate. After all, he said, doesn't the Northern Hemisphere appear on top of the Earth to astronauts?

North only appears up to astronauts, several people shot back forcefully, if they are looking at the world the same way people look at a traditional map. If the shuttle were to fly under the Earth, Antarctica would appear on top.

Abramms stood by quietly, looking on with a satisfied smile as the back and forth continued.

Just one won't do

The clamor the maps provoked is not surprising. Most of us grew up viewing a world map that did not look like any of these. The maps generally used in U.S. classrooms are based on the one created in 1569 by Flemish cartographer Gerardus Mercator. His map of the world, designed for sea navigation, places Europe and North America prominently in the center and depicts them as being larger than the other continents. While the shapes Mercator portrays are generally accepted, his sizes have been disputed.



JERREY ROBERTS

Bob Abramms, founder of the Amherst-based map publishing company ODT, Inc., gives a talk about his work at Food For Thought Books. He is holding the Waterman butterfly map, which can be folded into a globe.

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For example, though Europe appears larger than South America on the map, Europe has 3.8 million square miles of land to South America's 6.9 million. Greenland appears to be the same size as Africa, though Africa is 14 times as large.

Mercator's map became widely popular during the 18th and 19th centuries because its design was practical and useful for sailors, says Abramms. Though it became entrenched in the culture, he adds, it was never intended to be 'the' world map. Mercator included a note on his original specifically identifying it as a 'description of the Earth with corrections for use in navigation,' says Abramms.

Many of ODT's products aim to correct the misleading perceptions created by the Mercator map, he says. Still, Abramms is the first to admit that none of the maps his company publishes is truly accurate either.

'One map simply can't tell us enough. We need many different views,' he said.

All maps lie

Representing the round Earth on a flat surface requires showing some aspect of the world out of proportion, like size or shape. As Abramms puts it, simple geometry dictates that 'every map, in order to show something true, has to lie.'

For example, the Peters map is an 'equal-area' map, which means that all areas on the map are in correct proportion to each other, unlike the Mercator. While the sizes are accurate, the shapes of land masses are off - Africa and South America appear longer and more stretched out than they really are.

So, rather than strive to create a 'perfect' world map, Abramms promotes the point of view that there are many ways to see the world.

In fact, that is the title of a DVD and subtitle of a book that the company recently published.

Abramms wrote the 150-page book, 'Seeing Through Maps,' with Denis Wood and Ward Kaiser to explain the history, advantages and disadvantages of dozens of types of maps. The DVD, 'Many Ways to See the World,' offers an overview of map types.

Springboard for questions

Abramms is not a cartographer, and many of the maps his company sells through map and book stores were designed by other people over the years. More recently, ODT has commissioned its own maps, like the Hobo-Dyer described above, and hired cartographers to design them. ('Hobo-Dyer' combines the first names of Abramms and his co-worker Howard Bronstein and cartographer Mick Dyer.)

Although maps make up most of the company's business, Abramms sees them as a springboard to thinking about other issues.

'We invite people to see the world from an innovative and alternative point of view,' he said. 'The maps we publish lead people to question assumptions, and dig deeper below representations that get 'prepackaged' for us and often influence us subconsciously.'

The 'alternative' maps were mostly conceived to address particular issues. German historian Arno Peters, who designed the Peters map in 1974, sought to provide a view of the world that was, in his words, 'fair to all peoples' by eliminating the misleading sizes found on other maps.

The maps with the Southern Hemisphere on top are designed to dislodge the notion that north is 'up,' since the Earth is a ball and any point could conceivably be on top.

For producing maps that correct mistaken notions like that the northern hemisphere is larger than the southern hemisphere (the northern land mass is actually about half the size as the south) or that Australia is at the 'bottom of the world,' the company gets some passionate feedback.

'We get a lot of letters and emails from people who are so grateful that we share a different view of the world,' Abramms said. Latino and African-American communities in particular, he says, thank the company for showing that they have a place in the world that is much more significant than has been shown.

Mission evolved

For most of its three-decade history, ODT was a management consulting firm specializing in leadership and diversity training. Abramms and his co-workers would often show the Peters map at the start of sessions as a way of illustrating how deeply held impressions can be mistaken.

'Some people had a really hard time with it,' he said. He recalled an instance where someone in a training session approached the speaker after lunch.

'When you put up that bogus map, I knew it couldn't be true,' the man said, according to Abramms. 'You had no credibility with me, and I couldn't hear anything you were saying.'

However, the man then said he had gone to the library at lunch to check it out and was surprised to find that in fact Africa is 14 times larger than Greenland, a fact which the Peters map reflects accurately. The more encounters like that Abramms had, the more fascinated he became with the power of maps.

At the start, ODT sold a few Peters maps here and there, but map sales were 'less than 1 percent' of the firm's revenue. After a while, companies intrigued by the map started ordering hundreds at a time after ODT sessions, and soon Abramms and his firm were selling more Peters maps than the official publisher.

In 2001, ODT secured the exclusive publishing rights to the Peters map, and its cartographic offerings have swelled since then. Map sales now make up over 90 percent of the company's revenue, and ODT has almost completely phased out of the consulting business.

The main page of the company's Web site, www.odt.org, no longer bears any traces of its former incarnation, and features an offer to give away all of its business-related inventory for free to anyone interested.

'One month ago, if you looked at our site, you'd know we were a human resources training company,' Abramms said. 'Now maps are it.'

Controversial business

Dealing as it does with something as fundamental as what the world looks like, the map business involves a lot of political controversy _whether to include the border of Tibet, how to treat U.S. territories like Puerto Rico, and broader questions like which map is 'right.'

Arno Peters, who died in 2002, was adamant that his map was the only accurate, non-racist view of the world. Abramms doesn't agree, given how the Peters alters shapes to preserve sizes. Still, he feels the map is valuable, used in conjunction with other types of maps.

'I think the message to classrooms should be to have more than one map image,' he said. 'We shouldn't give the idea that there's only one right way.'

Abramms says he's often asked if the Mercator map, in which western Europe and North America are dead center and much larger than they are in reality, is 'a white male conspiracy' to assign Europe greater importance than other places.

He says no. 'It was convenient to use and adopt to enhance Europe's sense of self-importance, but it wasn't done with that deliberate purpose in mind.'

'Edgy stuff'

The issue of what maps really represent is the topic of a new chapter in a recently published revision of 'Seeing Through Maps.' The chapter is entitled

'Are Maps TALK Instead of Pictures?' and argues that all maps have an agenda that can be understood by looking at who created the map and why.

No map should have an absolute veneer of authenticity, the authors suggest, since they can always be manipulated. The chapter goes into detailed descriptions of incidents such as a protracted court fight in North Carolina over voting districts, and other incidents involving floodplain maps and school busing routes drawn up by the government that have been bitterly contested by citizens and political groups.

But every map, by virtue of being drawn by a person with a point of view, can be debated and argued over, the book says. As a photo caption in the book puts it: 'Do facts make maps? Or do maps make facts?'

'Most of the time, you look at a map and think, that's the way it is,' Abramms said. 'But really, it's the way I want you to believe things are.'

He admits many people will find the concept that maps are not objective difficult to grasp: 'It was the most intellectually provocative activity I've done in decades,' he said. 'It's very edgy, political stuff.'

Self-contained

ODT's three employees work in tight quarters in a second-floor office above the Loose Goose Cafe on East Pleasant Street. They barely have enough room to move around the space which is filled with maps of all descriptions and shelves packed with boxes and piles of explanatory map literature.

Now that ODT is focusing full time on maps, Abramms has several projects on the drawing board, including an equal-area map of the United States. In that respect, he actually sees his cramped working environment as an advantage.

'Thank goodness. It's a limiting factor,' he said. 'If I had a large warehouse, I'd probably come up with a lot more ideas.'

Although there are an infinite number of possible ways to portray the world, Abramms says he hopes to slow down the creation of new products in the near future and concentrate on training people to use the maps.

'My goal is to keep on track with the message ... which is to really broaden the consciousness of the world,' he said.

Bob Abramms will show the 'Many Ways to See the World' DVD and give a talk on Friday, July 28, at 6 p.m. at the Media Education Foundation on Masonic Street in Northampton, followed by a reception at 7 p.m. at Ten Thousand Villages on Main Street.

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