

Maps: a trustworthy source of information or a platform for propaganda?

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Prof Peter Vujakovic with the Times Atlas

Many people would believe that a map is predominantly to determine a location or to assist with directions. But would you look at a map and notice how the colour, layout and decoration can, in some cases, be chosen, to 'subvert and propagate alternative world-views'?

Peter Vujakovic, Professor of Geography in the School of Human and Life Sciences at Canterbury Christ Church University, has recently been commissioned to write a new section of *The Times Comprehensive Atlas of the World* that analyses the hidden messages in a variety of maps that have been published throughout history.

The section, titled The Power of Maps, explores how maps can be a

powerful form of representation, defining territory and portraying certain political views. Examples of maps discussed date back to the 16th Century and reveal how propaganda was used within mapping. One [map](#), Leo Belgicus 1586, shows the Belgium in the form of a Lion to portray power.

Another theme within The Power of Maps examines how 'silences' in maps work, for example the exclusion of sensitive military information.

Professor Vujakovic said: "It was a great honour to be asked to contribute a totally new specialist section for this edition of the Times Atlas. My main concern in the contribution was to overturn the popular belief that maps are simply objective representations of the world around us, windows on the world. This is far from true.

"Most maps contain a message, often political, whether of the overt type, such as maps celebrating the British Empire in red or pink, or more subtle messages, such as local authority or tourism maps that erase the less pleasant aspects of the environment.

"Some map agencies even remove information, 'cartographic silences' that hide anything from military establishments to unofficial settlements. Some maps are clearly designed as propaganda, but even day-to-day maps such as the UK's Ordnance Survey maps create a particular image of place through what is mapped and what is omitted.

"This is probably the world's most famous atlas series and will be found in major libraries and institutions across the globe, so it is an exciting vehicle through which to educate people about the powerful messages embedded in maps ."

The *Times* atlas is world renowned as a trusted and authoritative source for geographical information, "... by far and away the greatest book on

earth" according to Sir Ranulph Fiennes, and lauded by famous map lovers from Michael Palin and Jon Snow to Bear Grylls. The 14th Edition of the Times Comprehensive Atlas of the World is published this month.

Other cartography publication successes for the School of Human and Life Sciences have been two major collections of research papers co-edited by Dr Alex Kent, who also works within the School. The books, *Landmarks in mapping* and *Cartography: a reader*, celebrate the 50th anniversaries of the *Cartographic Journal* and the Society of Cartographers respectively.

Provided by Canterbury Christ Church University

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