

Disagreements About Style

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Abstract:

In cartography, *style* is a holistic concept which refers to both individual choices, such as the choice of a typeface, as well as the cumulative effect of these choices, which shapes the overall appearance of a map. Cartography contains many stylistic conventions and traditions, and cartographers hold strong views regarding style. Sometimes, stylistic disagreements seem inconsequential—not much seems to ride on the choice between utilizing an *old style typeface* versus a *modern style typeface* on a map, at least, not in the same way that there is a functional difference between a choropleth map of the contiguous United States that uses an Albers Equal Area Conic projection versus an identical thematic map that uses Lambert Conformal Conic. The visual difference between the two projections may not be readily apparent to a map viewer, but cartographers understand that equal area projections are recommended for thematic maps.

And yet, even a choice between Albers Equal Area Conic and Lambert Conformal Conic has aesthetic implications, for not all aesthetic properties are perceptual. Sometimes these projections appear visually indistinguishable from one another on a map. However, a footnote or metadata explaining which projection was used, and why, can communicate cartographic expertise. Even if the maps look the same, the norms of cartographic practice hold the choropleth map utilizing Albers Equal Area Conic to be the better map, not because it is more functional, but because utilizing Albers Equal Area Conic aligns more closely to the aesthetic profile of professional cartography.

Thus, small and even non-perceptual stylistic differences can have significant aesthetic impacts. Different choices work together in different ways, producing different unified wholes. Conversations about these matters are important discussions towards defining the aesthetic identity of maps and institutions. These conversations can and do intersect functional concerns. Which functions should the institution elevate? What are the institution's values? These are, in part, aesthetic questions related to the image the institution wants to impart.

In this presentation, I provide a brief history of cartographic disagreements regarding style derived from a cartographic textbook corpus of twenty-one works from 1923–2023. I focus on very strong disagreements about style, which I refer to as antagonisms. Antagonisms reveal underlying conflicts within cartography, and within the corpus antagonisms emerged regarding lettering, typography and terrain representation. Ultimately, these antagonisms were resolved by technological change or schisms in cartographic epistemology. Thus, antagonisms are indicators of transformative change occurring within cartographic practice. I conclude with a discussion of emerging antagonism within cartographic epistemology today and implications for the future of style within cartographic discourse.

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