Commentary

Paul Martin Lester

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When I give a lecture to my large, visual communication undergraduate class on the power and popularity of informational graphics, I show a lot of maps. That's because the translation of actual landmasses and abstract concepts into two-dimensional visual messages has almost always been inspirational, educational, and controversial. From maps carved in soft clay by Sumerian geographers more than 5,000 years ago to today's satellite-and-computer-aided cartographers, map-making has a rich history.

There are historical examples you should know: Charles Minard's "l'Armée Française dans la campaign de Russia 1812-1813," Dr. John Snow's London cholera victims, and the aesthetically pleasing hand-drawn maps printed during America's Civil War and World War I. There are also concept combinations that are often conceived by artists and statisticians, made visual by graphic designers, explained by researchers and writers, and rendered interactive by computer code writers. These examples can be appreciated through the work of artist Chris Jordan whose "Running the Numbers" website turns trash into treasure; Edward Tufte and David McCandless whose books, lectures, and workshops have defined the field; and collections such as Rachel Maddow's "Week in Geek," the "Infographic Journal," and Brian Lucid's "The Interactive News Graphics Collection" that specializes in work from *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*.

I have at least two important connections with maps. When my family lived in Laredo, Texas, my father was a salesman with the Texas Harvest Hat Company. Its slogan was printed on kitchen sponges and read, "Texas Hats Shade the Nation." On the weekends, he also worked for the local television station. For a Bingo-type game, he read the numbers in English and Spanish. Seeing potential, the news editor promoted him to an even more prestigious job—he announced the weather. I remember cringing a bit when I saw him on our small screen trying his best to be cheery after a colorful sun, cloud, or number fell off the map because its Velcro was too worn.

My other connection to maps is one common to most of you, I suspect, and that is the wondrous awe of studying a printed map while on a road trip. As a kid, these overly creased paper guides collected free from gasoline stations and stuffed haphazardly into the crammed glove box of our '56 Chevy were a hint of the world beyond the route we were currently riding. They were also, as I came to learn, a lesson in abstract thinking as I grew to understand the printed symbols and how they stood for actual objects. However, with GPS smartphone voices (mine is named Vivian) telling us to go left, right, or "Make a U-Turn if possible," do we lose mental acuteness when the answer is simply handed to us by a machine instead of figuring out directions from a printed map? (An analog/digital tangent: An "A" student this semester emailed me. She wanted to use a printed book as a reference but couldn't find the date of publication for

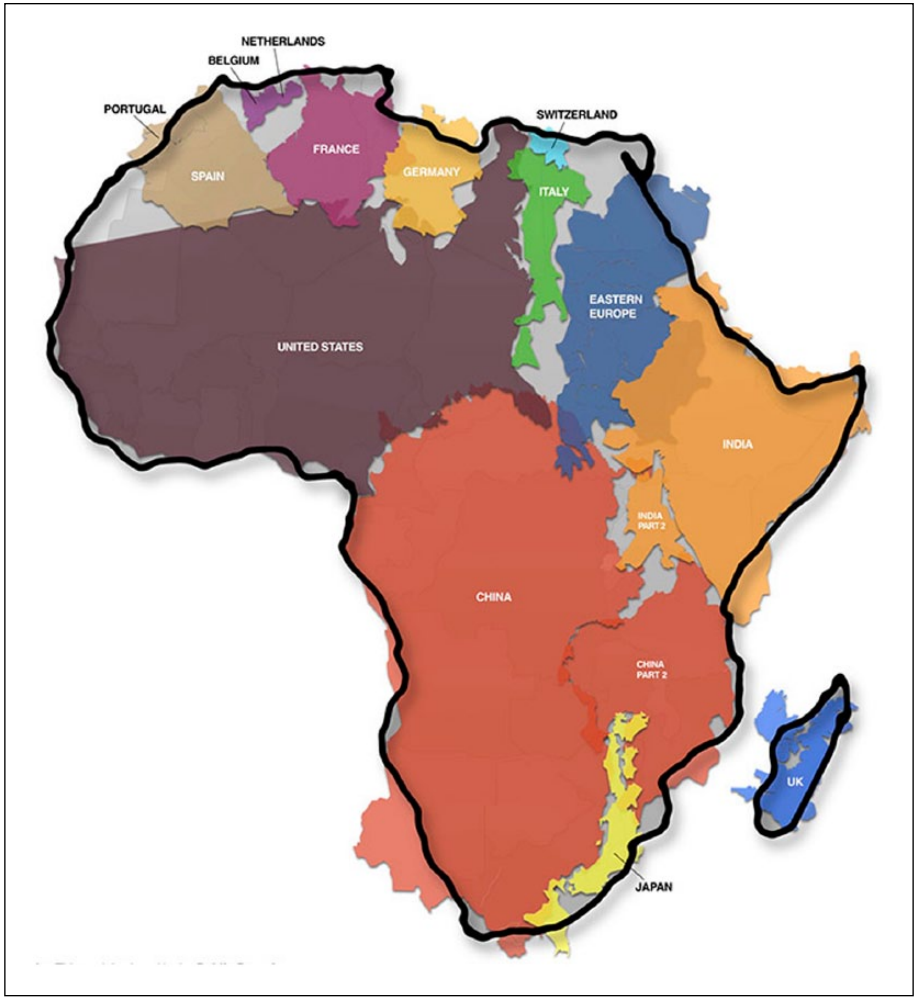

Figure 1. Based on their areas, 14 countries can fit roughly within the border of Africa.
Courtesy of Kai Krause at http://edge.org/documents/Edge-Serpentine-MapsGallery/high-res/Krause.pdf

the citation. I told her it's usually listed on the second page. The next day in class, I asked her why she had so much trouble. She explained that she had never had to find a date from a printed book. *She only used online sources.*)

The years 1569 and 1974 were not only known respectfully for the first lottery in London at St. Paul's Cathedral and the resignation of President Richard Nixon but also for the introduction of two maps that changed the face of our world. Projecting a globe's worth of land on a flat surface is a tricky visual challenge. A Flemish mathematician and cartographer, Gerhard Kremer, in 1569 was one of the first to try it when

he created the Mercator projection map. Kremer lived with his wealthy uncle, Gisbert Mercator, and took his surname no doubt to continue his free room and board. However, with the map, the farther a country is from the equator the larger it appears. Consequently, the shapes of the landmasses are accurate, but the sizes are not. For example, the countries of Europe are much larger than in reality making the continent seem more important than the others. That illusion pleased Western politicians, military leaders, and business leaders of the day—a fact once lamented on an episode of the dramatic series "The West Wing." To correct this inaccuracy, German historian and journalist Arno Peters in 1974 introduced his "equal area" projection map that showed the truthful sizes, but the shapes were distorted. Unfortunately, not many were happy with this view of the world either.

Does size matter? With a Mercator projection, Greenland looks to be the size of Africa when in fact the continent is 14 times larger than the country. Much more recently, German graphic designer Kai Krause created a map of Africa in which one understands the scope of the continent's size. Most of Eastern and Western Europe, China, India, and the United States fit snugly within Africa's border (Figure 1). When I show my students this map they are almost always uniformly surprised. With Africa shown more accurately, it can be seen as a vast and diverse continent unworthy of stereotypes and much more worthy of respect and research.

Luckily, we have in this issue of *Monographs*, Minabere Ibelema's well-documented account of the mostly short-sided reports filed by journalists for *The New York Times* and the Associated Press concerned with conflicts within the three African countries of Kenya, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo—which total 1,324,509 square miles or 11% of the area of Africa. His work will no doubt illuminate for you the complexity of the continent and the size of its challenges for journalists working under the assumptions fostered by Mercator and his followers.

In the words of Vivian, it's time to "Make a U-Turn if possible."

Paul Martin Lester
Editor-in-Chief