Field Notes from the Armchair Geographer

"Mapping Ethics: Who's Line Is It?"

This week was not a whole lot of fun for me at work. The County Roads map, of which I am the creator, editor, and general responsible party, was found by the County Engineer to have a few miles of road coded incorrectly. It was pointed out, meetings were held; but fortunately for me, heads did not roll.

Was this my mistake? Who is responsible for the data YOU show on YOUR maps. It has given me a bit of pause to think about. The County Roads map has been created and maintained in our GIS since the early 2000's. Previously, it had been laboriously hand drawn and updated only when printed copies had run low, perhaps every 3 or 4 years. Now, with the GIS, we can print poster quality maps at request on some very nice gloss paper. Suddenly, those changes that might occur on occasion or on a seasonal basis are very important in terms of accurate portrayal.

There are several layers of engineers, technicians, and district roads people who had originally assisted me with the map and quality control of the information I had shown. As most of us are fully aware, the dynamic nature of geography does not necessarily correspond with the static nature of the paper map. After the original map was done, they all picked up and left me for their normal routine work tasks. Yet, who is the responsible party after the fact?

We had previously published a version of the original map, and when this publication came out, we were all quite proud of ourselves with the usual back slapping. Since I was taking credit for the product, I thought it was only right that I also take blame for any errors produced. To me, this was a question of ethics and owning up to responsibility. However, there really was no way for me to know when roads were paved or rock and gravel placed on dirt roads, since I do not drive these roads. A dilemma. I am very fortunate that my supervisors were looking NOT to place blame, but rather to set in motion a better way to notify the cartographer (me) when changes take place and to establish a regular map updating procedure or work flow.

So a lot of my initial discomfort abated as we examine our routines more carefully. The important lesson I learned was to be a little more aware of that static nature of any map, and to increase **communication** with those who work in the field regularly and have access to the changes that occur in our County geography.

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