

The Power of Maps and the War against Terrorism in Afghanistan

A Critical Review of German News Maps

JÜRGEN CLEMENS / ANDREAS DITTMANN

Not just since critical social theory discovered the hidden political agendas within cartography and maps, the nexus between “Maps, Knowledge and Power” (Harley 1988) has provided an entry point for the analysis of meanings of and in maps (Mac Eachran 1995). Critiques of colonial attitudes and Euro-centric approaches to global cartographic representation as well as of the maps’ presumed “objectivity” or “neutrality” had been taken up before (cf. Wright 1942 cited in Mac Eachran 1995, p. 339). Even medieval “Psalter Maps” are more a representation of religious symbolism than scientific geographical knowledge (cf. Harris 2002). Jerusalem is shown “at the centre of the world” and the map itself is “oriented” towards the east.

The latest approaches of post-modern social scientists strongly argue that there can be no real objective and neutral representation since maps too are merely socially or politically constructed artefacts of scientific and day-to-day cultures (cf. Mac Eachran 1995; Cosgrove 1999; Crampton 2001). Thus, critical analysis should not look for functional or even “better” maps. The new task is to explore the political interests and power relations underlying the production of maps, to explore the “second text within the map” (cf. Harley 1989, p. 9) or to deconstruct the map. For the present study, the discussion on the different levels of meanings, either of and within maps is of special interest (cf. Harley 1988; Mac Eachran 1995; Monmonier 1996; Cosgrove 1999; Crampton 2001). Particularly the spheres of explicit and implicit connotations of map meanings (cf. Mac Eachran 1995, p. 337) are important aspects for the present analysis.

Interestingly, recent discourses include more cartographic terms, such as the “roadmap”-metaphor, suggesting carefully planned and target-oriented projects for the reconstruction of Palestine, Afghanistan or Iraq. The question arises whether such political constructs are really appropriate metaphors, since the press is full of failed approaches.

The present study

The protagonists of the “clash of civilizations” argued that as part of the new struggle among nations, wars will occur especially along the divisions between different cultures. One of the key statements is that wars will also lead to new “white spots” or even new “terrae incognitae” on the global map, since distinct regions may remain inaccessible for journalists and scientists for a long time. Jean-Claude Rufin (1993), for example, compares the “new white spots” on African maps with pre-colonial ones.

Contrary to such simplistic approaches, this paper argues that wars and their media coverage actually lead to intensified information. News maps on the “War against Terrorism” in Afghanistan are analysed and it is obvious that, in spite of shortcomings, this media coverage actually erased “white spots”. This, however, is not related to the war itself, but to the direct involvement of “Western” interests.

Print media and television news generally provide the major source of political information. Thus particular regions remain white spots on the average person's mental maps until these appear in the news. Maps – including news maps – are generally regarded as a true representation of reality by common people and also from a more traditional perspective of cartography (cf. Monmonier 1996, Harley 1988, 1989, MacEachran 1995). Maps have a special role in public communication processes, thus a critical review of news maps on the war in Afghanistan is undertaken. The sample period (Sept. 11th to Nov. 30th 2001) covers the main period of fighting. The selection of 13 German daily and weekly newspapers and news magazines includes important nationwide papers, and two widely circulated tabloids as well as local and regional dailies.

This analysis provides a brief but critical review of these maps and focuses especially on aspects of the different spheres of map meaning (cf. Mac Eachran 1995), including intentional or unintentional misinformation or even biased information, and on selected formal cartographical aspects.

Subject of research

The survey at hand started on 14 September 2001, as soon as the press focused on Osama bin Laden and the Al-Qaida-network, and sketch maps of Afghanistan were published. In view of the media control during the second Gulf War in 1990/91, the question arose: Do news maps contribute to an unbiased information about regions at war?

The "War against Terrorism" in Afghanistan is often also correlated with Huntington's model of the "clash of civilizations", and his argument in favour of "simplified paradigms and maps as prerequisites for man's thinking and acting" (Huntington 1996) serves as another entry point: How do simplified and generalized news maps represent complex realities?

This survey includes a total of 255 maps and map-related graphics. The analysis is supplemented by a questionnaire survey of the papers' editorial offices to assess their editing policies with regard to news maps.

Frequencies of news maps

The chronology of events in Afghanistan and of the publication of news maps in German papers clearly shows that such maps are still far from being a regular means of information. A statistical break-down shows that nationwide newspapers and weekly news magazines, as well as the yellow press/tabloid papers publish the majority of these maps, regional and local dailies only occasionally publish news maps.

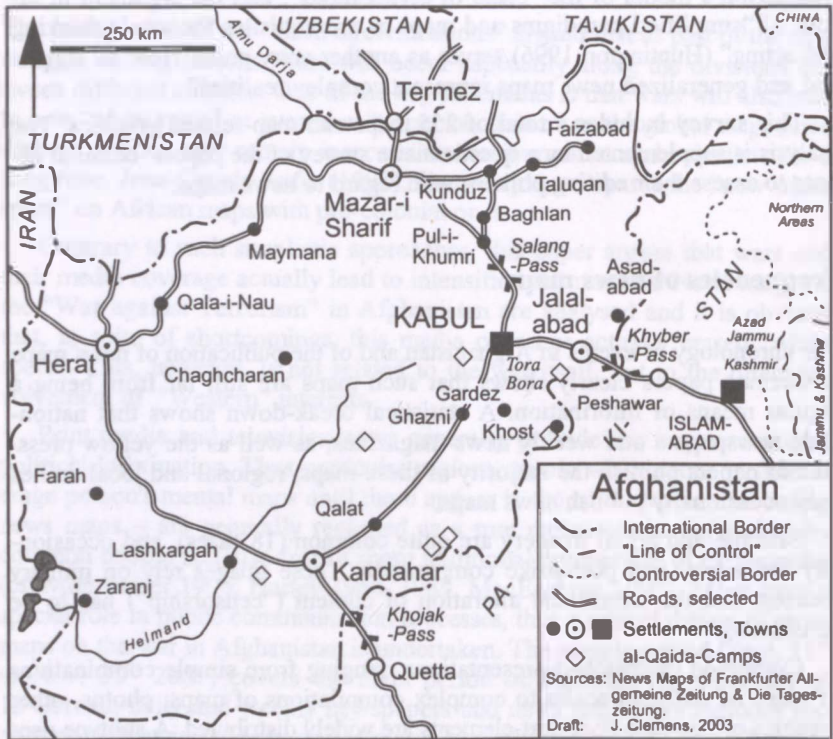
Satellite and aerial imagery are quite common (18 cases), and occasionally show pre- and post-strike comparisons. These images rely on military sources, and the intentional alteration of content ("censorship") has to be considered.

Combined or matched presentations, ranging from simple combinations of maps of different scales to complex compilations of maps, photos, other graphics or headline-style text-elements are widely distributed. A subtype uses coloured maps of coarse resolution mainly as background to page-wide headlines.

Formal shortcomings in news maps

The formal analysis of news maps clearly shows general and particularly technical shortcomings: nearly 60 percent of the maps are without a scale, only around 22 percent show data references, information on map-editors or the map drawers. There are even global maps with area-distorting map projections, showing "The Western World" bigger than tropical areas. These critical issues are commonly addressed in cartography textbooks (cf. Monmonier 1996) as well as in German textbooks on information graphics (cf.

Figure 1: Afghanistan – Sketch Map (Draft: J. Clemens)



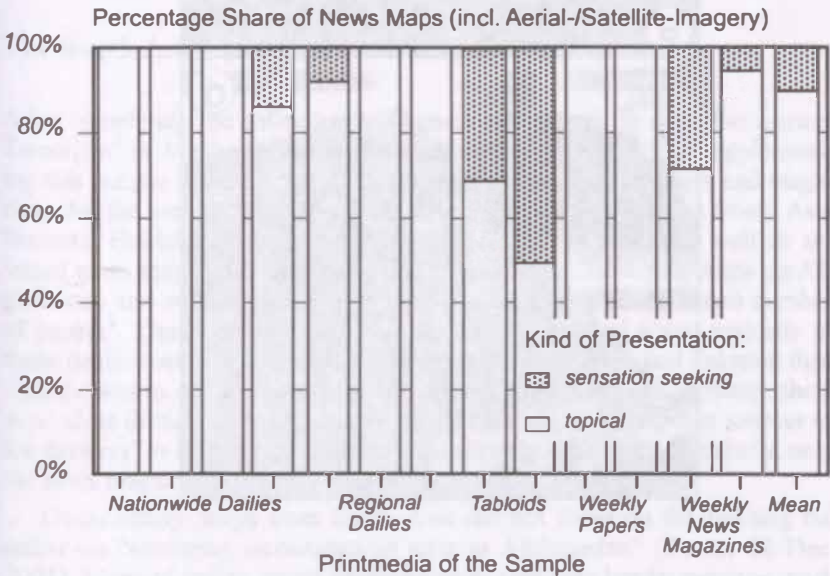
Liebig 1999; Jansen & Scharfe 1999). According to these authors, newspaper draftspersons generally lack basic cartographic knowledge. Data references are systematically missing in repeatedly printed sketch maps of recognized nation-wide dailies. In contrast, all maps and satellite imagery provided by external agencies are indicated with references.

Additionally, most ethnic and demographic maps on Afghanistan show no data references and do not even mention that the data is based on pre-Soviet invasion estimates! These maps also represent pictures of homogeneous ethnic territories with no reference to more complex distribution patterns at regional and local levels.

Graphical representation – the narrow edge to sensation-seeking maps

There are distinctive differences regarding the modes of graphical representation, such as the utilization of colour, size of maps', formal styles as well as layout issues. In tabloids and weekly news magazines almost all maps are coloured. This does not necessarily lead to a more detailed and differentiated presentation: especially tabloid papers often use coloured maps as full-page eye catchers or as a supplement to headlines. Daily newspapers mainly use small-scale maps as a supplement to the particular topic and other maps are of medium size and frequently located close to the page's main headlines – often the case with weekly newspapers.

Figure 2: Afghanistan – German News Maps and their Graphical Representation.



Draft: J. Clemens. N = 255, matched graphics are classified as one case.

Figure 3: Documentation of Common German News Maps – Match of Paper Clippings



a: Süddeutsche Zeitung, 17.9.2001, p. 6. Wrong location of Russia (Russland) on the territory of Kazakhstan. b: Süddeutsche Zeitung, 17.9.2001, p. 6 and 8.10.2001, p. 8. Reprint with identical location mistakes for Kabul, Jalalabad and Peshawar. c: Die Tageszeitung, 16.10.2002, p. 10. Incomplete presentation as well as wrong and over-generalized alignment of the “Trans-Afghanistan-Gaspipeline”. d: Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger, 9.10.2001, p. 63. A “sensation-seeking” presentation with photorealistic picture of U.S. fighter aircraft; Afghanistan printed on Pakistani and Pakistan on Indian territory. (Compilation: J. Clemens, scanned from the news maps.)

This discussion leads to the assessment of functional issues and sensation seeking practices of news maps' publications. A major indicator for this – mainly subjective – differentiation is the occurrence of additional graphical elements, which do not provide any spatial or topical information. Examples are photographs or photo-realistic graphics of people, such as Osama bin Laden, of combat units, fighter planes or warships etc. – in this survey, such maps are generally classified as sensation-seeking ones (cf. fig. 2 & 3d).

According to Harley (1988), these “marginalities” are proof of the map editors' main (political) agenda. In extreme cases the representation of weapon systems even covers more paper space than territories like Afghanistan. Thus, sensation-seeking maps clearly represent “Western superiority”, whether intended or not, and offer a biased form of information. The particular statistics show clear clusters of sensation-seeking maps in the yellow press and in one weekly news magazine, occasionally also in generally serious dailies.

The South Asian perspective in maps

After completing the collection of German news maps on the “War against Terrorism” in Afghanistan, one of the authors had the chance of supplementing this sample with relevant maps from South Asian newspapers and magazines for the same period. From the newspapers available at the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg, leading newspapers for each country as well as selected news magazines were chosen for the analysis. However, maps on Afghanistan and related topics were available only from a very small number of papers¹. Thus, only 20 maps in total were found and a vast majority of these deals more with the bilateral tensions between India and Pakistan than with the war in Afghanistan. With regard to formal cartographic issues, there is no clear distinction compared to the German maps; scales, data sources or the drawers' or institutions' indications are rarely mentioned. Similarly, only the news magazines printed coloured news maps.

Occasionally, maps from South Asia did not focus on the fighting but rather on “emerging reconstruction sites in Afghanistan” (*Dawn*, 22 Dec. 2001). Maps of Indian origin predominantly cover the border tensions, such

¹ Daily papers: *Dawn* (Pakistan), *Times of India* (India); magazines: *Herald* (Pakistan), *Frontline* (India) and *Himal* (Nepal). Also, *Rising Nepal*, *Nepali Times* (both Nepal) and *The Island* (Sri Lanka) were included in this survey but without printed maps for this period, from September until the end of December 2002.

as fencing the border in Rajasthan, Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir (*Frontline*, 29 Sept. 2001), or the locations of supposed "training camps for terrorists" in different parts of Pakistan, Azad Kashmir, and in Afghanistan (*Frontline*, 26 Oct. 2001).

No clear indications with regard to the sensation-seeking maps can be found in this South Asian sample. Even composites of cartographic and other items, i.e. photography or text-tables, are mostly separated from the map itself or are comparatively small and kept to the map's margins. However, Indian maps include some that clearly carry a political meaning, such as pictures of fighter jets passing over Pakistani territory on their way from India towards targets in Afghanistan (*Times of India*, 19 Sept. 2001). After the Petersberg Agreement and the end of fighting in Afghanistan, Indian maps continued to print war maps, especially after the attacks against the parliament in Delhi ("Lok Sabha") on 13 December 2001. A new Indo-Pakistani war-in-sight perspective is shown by attack scenarios drawn on a map covering both sides of the Punjab and most of the contested Kashmiri territories (*Times of India*, 23 Dec. 2001).

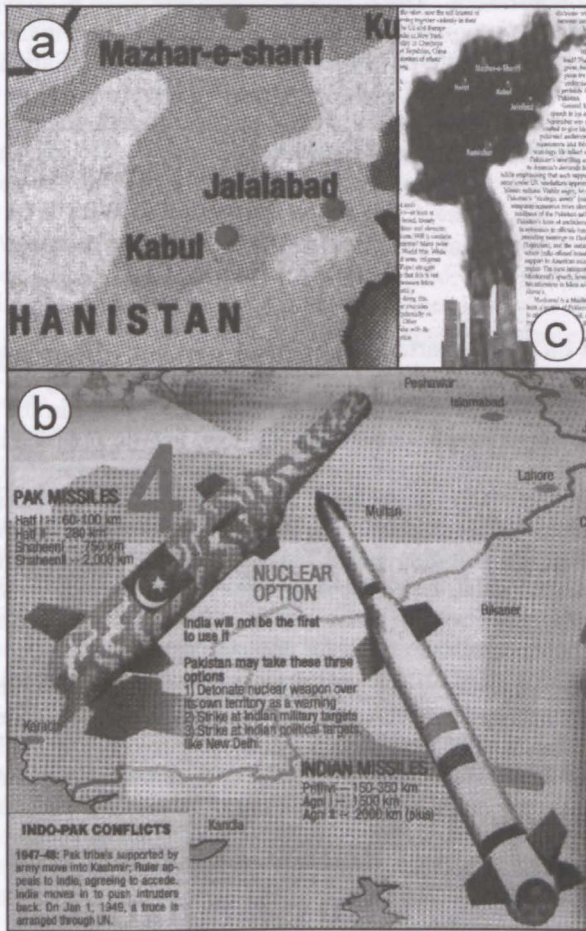
In conclusion the English speaking press in South Asia shows no clear bias regarding the war in Afghanistan². Political issues and critique, however, can be found in the comparatively huge percentage of political cartoons on the war in Afghanistan. In the whole sample from South Asian papers and magazines there are 12 cartoons as compared to 20 maps in the same period.

Topographical relief presentation

Since the territory of Afghanistan consists of huge hilly and mountainous areas which are not at all easily accessible, terrain information is supposed to be important for the common reader. However, just 25 percent of the maps from the German sample show any kind of terrain information. Some of the coloured maps present altitudinal zones similar to those in atlases. There are, however, often serious errors, such as a map in one weekly magazine with coloured altitudinal zones and additional climate graphs, including the stations' altitude. But the stations' locations in the map are repeatedly shown in completely wrong altitudinal zones, with differences of more than a thousand metres altitude.

² However, the even more important non-English press has not been covered by this study.

Figure 4: Documentation of Common South Asian News Maps – Match of Paper Clippings



a: Times of India, 18.11.2001. A coloured map with “homogeneous” ethnic settlement patterns, and with wrong location of Kabul. b: Times of India, 23.12.2001. War scenarios drawn upon a map of both parts of the Punjab. c: Himal, October 2001. “Map-cartoon” with the Afghan territory rising out of the smoke from the World Trade Centre. (Compilation: J. Clemens, scanned from the news maps).

Maps or photographs?

One general conclusion is that news maps are not recognized as a distinct category of information. The editors' selection has much in common with the issues for press photographs, which have a longer tradition in the print media. Even authors with a proven topical and regional expertise are not consulted regarding the selection of suitable maps, a procedure which is also confirmed by the additional survey among the editors. Monmonier (1999) even states that news maps are often just supplements for the non-availability of press photographs.

Map titles

Textbooks on topical cartography respectively information graphics generally argue in favour of informative titles directly introducing the map's topic. Although this process is common for all written articles in the print media, and mostly for photographs as well, less than one third of the maps, except those issued by news agencies, show a title or heading. Topographical sketch maps generally do not have titles. A brief survey of map titles does not show clear differences between the papers under survey; short and generalized titles are common and a topical differentiation is hardly possible. On the other extreme, however, map titles sometimes serve simultaneously as page-wide headlines. In some papers, the map titles are substituted by short comments, similar to those for photographs.

Map titles also hint at the papers' editing intentions; like the selection of articles, that of maps as well is primarily based on domestic interests. In one local daily there were very few maps on Afghanistan at all. However, as soon as the German Minister for Foreign Affairs visited the Middle East and South Asia, a map with all his destinations was printed. The same happened as soon as the German Air force started cargo flights to Turkey.

The editing procedures and policies for news maps

A brief comparison shows that there is often no direct topical link between news maps and related articles. In one nationwide daily, a map on the global distribution of the Muslim population is affixed to an article on the controversial discussions on German immigration laws. Contrary to this article's

message, the choice of map might lead readers to image a "Muslim immigration threat".

It should be recognized that mistakes or technical inaccuracies may easily occur, given the daily time constraints newspaper editors have to face (cf. Monmonier 1996). However, the present analysis leads to the question whether the editing procedures for news maps are appropriate and genuinely informative.

One of the most obvious problems lies in the transcription of Asian toponyms into German. There are differing modes: identical locations are spelled differently in different issues of the same paper, on different pages of the same issue, or even within matched maps. Several cases can be traced back to particular news agencies, which obviously follow their own principles, differing from official transcription rules, and also from those commonly used in encyclopaedias. However, the issue of transcribing Asiatic toponyms cannot be easily solved and scientific standards may either be unknown or inapplicable for editors.

Additionally, all editorial offices of this sample's papers (a total of 13) had been contacted with a written questionnaire and eight actually replied. Their brief analysis provides interesting insights regarding the current practices of publishing news maps. Maps are generally published as "supplements" or as a "topographical overview" to particular articles; other reasons are the "current relevance" of regions or topics. The importance of maps as eye-catchers and as a part of headlines was identified only twice as a "frequent" reason.

The editors generally perceive the frequency of news maps in their papers as "sufficient". Only one nation-wide daily regrets their own limited drafting capacities. According to the editors' responses, there are no major constraints with regard to the availability of basic sources and maps; "generally problematic" was identified only once regarding the non-availability of suitable maps for tabloid papers.

Of particular interest are the criteria for selecting news maps: "reliable sources", "timely availability" and a "focus on relevant contents" are generally identified as "very important" or "important". "Coloured maps" are "important" or even "very important" only for tabloid dailies as well as for weekly papers; the utilization of "additional illustrations" is "important" for two weeklies and even "very important" for one of the yellow press dailies.

News maps are selected mostly by the responsible editors; in this sample generally those for politics and international affairs, sometimes in cooperation with the photography or graphics departments. One daily even has a department for cartography. In general, these bodies are also responsible for proof-reading of maps. The articles' authors are not mentioned at all for

this selection process, in contrast to scientific publications. This analysis, however, identifies frequent and significant shortcomings in news maps, which can be directly related to the papers' deficiencies in the selection, drafting and proof-reading processes.

Mislocations

One of the most obvious issues in maps is the right location of places, topographical details and even of countries. Several cases of wrong locations might be traced back to sudden news with the consequent lack of sufficient time for detailed research or proof-reading.

In spite of the different steps of map editing, mentioned by the editors, quite often identical mistakes remain in subsequent maps (cf. fig. 3 a & b). In some cases, even a previously correct location had been exchanged for a wrong one.

This analysis does not aim at checking all locations according to their coordinates. However, outstanding examples of wrong locations are identified which could easily be recognized even by common map readers. Small-scale maps often locate settlements in a manner that clearly conflicts with the principles of cartographic generalization. For example, Kabul, Jalalabad and Kandahar are repeatedly shown either too close to the borderline, or in wrong directions.

Since it is obvious that publishers and news agencies maintain their own data bases and maps, a critical proof-reading of these base maps should be in their own interest. At least the analysis of competing papers might provide first hints and occasional consultation of external expertise would also help to up-date such data bases. However, Monmonier (1996) and Liebig (1999) state that modern computer systems and especially available graphic software allow even non-professionals to draw new or to change existing maps without knowing the basic principles of cartography.

A critical review of map contents and the spheres of map meaning

A weekly news magazine's coloured map on the global distribution of Muslims represents a striking example of inappropriate handling of statistics. This map shows a detailed classification with one statistical category ranging from one to nine percent for the percentage share of Muslims in particular countries. Several countries, however, such as Sri Lanka, are shown as

having no relevant Muslim population at all. Additionally, the representation of core areas of particular Muslim sects, like the Shia community, is wrong. Nor does the map give any reference to data sources. The same map, however, can be found in a recent German atlas on Islam (Kettermann 2001), and the magazine, without any reference to its sources, includes the original map's basic mistakes and also new ones, such as the statistical representation of Indian Muslims.

Other examples mostly show over-generalizations of particular topics which eventually lead to misleading or false information for interested map readers, for example, routes of drug trafficking out of Afghanistan, which focus only on the one through Iran and Turkey. Actual routes are more diverse and include Pakistan, the Central Asian republics and Russia. The case is similar with pipeline projects for natural gas through Afghanistan (cf. fig. 3c). None of this sample's pipeline maps can really compete with the very accurate map in Ahmed Rashid's book on Afghanistan (2001), which had been widely reviewed in the German press.

There are also positive examples, such as a series of maps in a regional daily, which did not publish many maps at all, showing the changes of territorial coverage and control of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan for four dates during November 2001. No other graphical solution – and no other paper – offers such a comprehensive overview of territorial dynamics. However, the status quo represented in this map only shows the Tajik faction's core area in the northeast, without showing other areas under control of the opposition. These are occasionally shown in other maps.

Conclusion and recommendations

Mac Eachran (1995) summarizes his discussion of different cartographic approaches – the idea of functional maps versus that of deconstructing the presumed neutrality and the focus on (hidden) political agendas – with the conclusion that these may not be exclusive ones. Maps also have to be functional in order to inform map readers, which, however, requires a transparent approach of cartographic representation, without hidden forms of map meanings.

As regards the usefulness of the sample of news maps presented from a wide range of German papers and news agencies it can be concluded that these do not intentionally provide misinformation on Afghanistan, its neighbouring regions and related topics after 11 September 2001. There is, however, a narrow edge to hidden bias or paradigms of "Western superiority" versus Islamic countries which are shown even in serious nation-wide

dailies. The potential censorship by intelligence services is beyond the scope of this study, but scepticism remains regarding aerial and satellite imagery.

The occurrence and frequency of news maps is – not surprisingly – directly related to the perceived political importance and relevance of particular topics, events and regions, seen primarily from a Western and German perspective. Only from this perspective and in the context of the “International War on Terror”, do news maps contribute significantly to the coverage of previous “white spots” of common regional knowledge. This finding contradicts wide spread assumptions that wars actually generate new “white spots”. However, several types of shortcomings and mistakes in the process of selecting, drafting, editing and eventually publishing news maps hint at deficiencies within the editorial set-up and also limit the maps’ information content and validity for interested map readers.

The editing process of news maps obviously needs other mechanisms and criteria, compared to the established ones for written articles or photographs. So far, the majority of editors obviously do not fully recognize maps as a distinct category for presenting spatial and topical information. Probably they are neither not fully aware of the huge potentials of maps nor of the graphical and topical limits of cartography. The potential advantages of maps, such as the presentation of absolute and relative location or distribution of issues, can only be fully utilized as long as geographical data bases are up-to-date and experienced cartographers and experts are consulted to minimize – unintentional – misinformation by news maps.

With regard to Afghanistan there may never have been a period with such an intensive coverage of “geographical” information. However, readers with more detailed interests are often lost by either incomplete or wrong representations or conflicting ones from different sources. From a scientific perspective there is a strong argument for consulting regional and topical specialists – not only for Afghanistan – more frequently and also involving them in the selection of appropriate graphics and maps, especially for background information, even in periods of lower political interest than the one under review.

References:

- Cosgrove, D. 1999: Mapping Meaning. In: Cosgrove, D. (ed.): *Mappings*. London, pp. 1–23
- Crampton, J.W. 2001: Maps as Social Constructions: Power, Communication and Visualization. In: *Progress in Human Geography*, 25, 2, pp. 235–252

- Harley, J.B. 1988: Maps, Knowledge, and Power. In: Cosgrove, D. & S. Daniels (eds.): *The Iconography of Landscape*. Cambridge, pp. 277–312. (= Cambridge Studies in Historical Geography, 9)
- Harley, J.B. 1989: Deconstructing the Map. In: *Cartographica*, 26, 2, pp. 1–20
- Harley, J.B. 1992: Deconstructing the Map. In: Barnes, T.J. & J.S. Duncan (eds.): *Writing Worlds: Discourse, Text and Metaphor in the Representation of Landscape*. London, pp. 231–247
- Harris, N. 2002: *Mapping the World. Maps and their History*. London.
- Huntington, S.P. 1996: *The Clash of Civilisations*. New York
- Jansen, A. & W. Scharfe 1999: *Handbuch der Infografik. Visuelle Information in Publizistik, Werbung und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit*. Berlin
- Kettermann, G. 2001: *Atlas zur Geschichte des Islam*. Darmstadt
- Liebig, M. 1999: *Die Infografik*. Konstanz
- Mac Eachran, A.M. 1995: *How Maps Work. Representation, Visualization and Design*. New York, London
- Monmonier, M. 1996²: *How to lie with Maps*. Chicago
- Monmonier, M. 1999²: *Maps with the News. The Development of American Journalistic Cartography*. Chicago
- Rashid, A. 2001 *Taliban. Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*. London
- Rufin, J.-C. 1993: *Das Reich und die neuen Barbaren*. Berlin. (Orig.: *L'empire et les nouveaux barbars*. Paris, 1991)
- Maps used:*
- Iran und Afghanistan. Relief, Gewässer und Siedlungen. Scale 1: 4 Mio., edited by "Sonderforschungsbereich 19, Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orient" (TAVO), Sheet A I 3. Wiesbaden, 1991
- Physical and Political Map of Afghanistan. Scale 1: 1.5 Mio., edited by "Afghan Cartographic Institute". No place (Kabul), 1968
- Political Map of Afghanistan. Scale 1: 2 Mio., edited by "Afghan Cartographic & Cadastral Survey Institute". Kabul, 1976