

Sherri Sunstrum

I am Sherri Sunstrum. I am a cartographic specialist in the library at Carleton University. I also oversee subjects related to Earth Sciences and Geomatics.

Martha Attridge Bufton

We're standing in front of a big bulletin board. Tell me what I'm looking at.

Sherri Sunstrum

So you're looking at a display of stereotype and judgmental maps and other information that we have in the library related to stereotypes and judgement and bias is on there. There are a couple of children's maps, so we oversee a children's map collection that is an international competition. And in the last round, it's every two years, in the last round of the children's map collection we noticed some stereotype maps coming out of that. They've always been political in a general sense, peace, love, unity, climate change. But this is the first time I've seen something really political, which is related to Trump. Trump has really brought out those stereotypes in his speech and I think it's affecting people globally.

Ah, the first I've actually noticed anything related directly to a president or a political party and their views on the world because I think up until then, I don't think there was anything like what we're hearing now in the media, how we're taking like a group of people and painting them all with the same brush and, and when kids start noticing, that's how it's coming in. So maps that's causing the most controversy, The World According to the United States, and we've had that map since 2010, we've had up on the wall down on the first floor of the library off and on since then. The first time that we had it up where a major discussion took place was for the EMCP courses.

Martha Attridge Bufton

Is that the Enriched Mini-Course Program?

Sherri Sunstrum

Yes, we had that map up as one of the examples of data visualization. We had some propaganda maps up as well, the Cold War. That was the first time when we've actually had discussion with those students from Grade 8, 9, about it. They were a diverse crowd. That map, that was the map they were focused on. Everything else was fine but this map really resonated with them. And most of them were born in Canada and they were really offended because of course Canada is featured on that map as vegetarian, that's how the United States looks at Canada in this sense. I'm kind of laughing because usually it's maple syrup and polar bears but this, this is the take on this particular map. And the students said, "But I like meat." And I said, "I know, me too."

But then, but we never really got into the more offensive stuff, they were really focused on Canada. Some of them were like looking at China and China has been seen as supermarkets. There's a variety of a little more offensive information on it. So that was the first time when we thought, we really need that map up a lot because it really generates a very interesting discussion. Last year we put up a bunch of the maps we like and then that map, The World According to the United States. I noticed that that map was on the floor. So I went in and I just put it back up thinking, "Pins must have let go, it's a heavy map." So two weeks later, I looked in the room and I'm like, "Oh, that's weird." The map is gone." Couldn't find it anywhere. Either someone loved it or someone hated it and we figured it had been destroyed or stolen.

I learned that no, on that weekend students in that room were very upset about the content of the map. You never want a student or staff member to be in any kind of weird predicament and it was actually hidden in an office upstairs. This is a learning experience, we haven't had to deal with this before so we just decided to a big display. As I was bringing it down, I realized that a part of map had been destroyed, it was scratched out. So then we really wanted to make sure we had a display up that explains why these maps existed. That in an academic setting there's aspects, if you can't talk about it in a university where else can we talk about it? Maps are no different from a book or a piece of art. It's meant to elicit emotion, it can provoke you, it can offend you, it can make you laugh.

So we put that up and Maureen took a piece of paper and she just stuck what the text had been before it had been scratched out. Three more times in the last year that piece of paper has disappeared and people are now writing on the map. Which in a sense I like that people are engaged with it but I also would like them to see it from a bigger perspective. About a month ago, two guys came to the desk, some students, they were very upset. Why would we have this map? They were so focused on the one aspect of the map that they couldn't see the display material. So they were saying, you know, "You didn't tell us that this was this or that." I said, "Actually if you took a step back from the map you would see all the contextual information around it that lets you know why we have it." So like, I explained it all to them, they were fine when they left. And I'm glad they talked to someone.

We had it down on the first level in the maps collection which isn't very well monitored, uh such as nights and weekends. That seems to be when they would damage the map or vandalize the map. The Exhibits Committee was interested in putting it somewhere else to be more front and centre. I was asked if we can bring that collection to the main part of the library. The display right now is back in the newer part of the library in an open space. It might be a little hidden but that, this area of library ah does have a lot, a lot of traffic. The Exhibits Committee, the Carleton Library Exhibits Committee, has a policy related to ah, offensive material. There is a process behind that to deal with offensive material where you would actually fill in a form and you would, it would take it to the University Librarian to deal with but the main part of the material that might be offensive, is the, the fact that we don't take it down.

When the display moved up here, I think it will show that this information is out there. The map isn't going to change anything, if we destroy it or remove it that's belief system is still out there and it's really important for us to talk about it, find solutions, you know, not to paint one whole group as one thing and that seems to be where we're at right now.

When the Freedom to Read came out, I let the library office about our situation ah what had happened with the map over the past year and they thought it really qualified to be part of Freedom to Read. They were looking for different types of formats and this fit in perfectly.

Martha Attridge Bufton

It sounds like the Exhibits Committee has a process of making decisions that involve also determining that any material that's displayed does not qualify as hate speech, correct?

Sherri Sunstrum

That's correct. Some of the stuff that's on that map, it's not hate speech. It's looking at our society as it

is, where people make these generalizations about society and groups of people, countries and this map just sort of highlights it and this map just highlights it.

I think it was it is actually a satirical map. The person who made it, he created this, these maps based you know just looking through the internet seeing what people are talking about these countries it's not academic in the sense of map. It's definitely to be taken in jest. Like, I look at it from a very different perspective, right? I was born in Canada, I'm a white woman but a student from another perspective, from another ethnic group for example, comes to see it and they're like, "Oh that's really offensive to me." So it's been a real learning situation for me too because my perspective is that, "I can't believe that they, that they believe these, this stuff." Now I've learned another side of it. And of course we want to create a safe space for every group of students. We do try to highlight on that the display wall but it's not always resonating with certain groups.

Martha Attridge Bufton

How could it be used for research?

Sherri Sunstrum

You know, we do have people come down to look at it, make notes about it. If you're doing a class on stereotypes and you're looking judgement, bias whatever, then this is an interesting spot to come from. It's not that just that world, the World According to the United States map. There are many other types of maps that Yanko has created. The children's map have obviously been used in research before. Now we've got this new set that came out two years ago and there are some stereotype maps in there. Anything related to presidents, you know you could look at this and think, "Okay this is an interesting start." I definitely did a few journal article searches on stereotypes and maps. Not a lot comes up but there is obviously a lot of information about prejudice and stereotypes, etc. by country, immigration, sexism all that, it's all out there. But the mapping aspect, I don't think that a lot of people have really looked at the maps that, that display this information. They've done, there's been more research done on propaganda for sure, which we have maps of that as well. But they don't resonate the same way these maps have.

Martha Attridge Bufton

So are maps basically research data?

Sherri Sunstrum

Yes, they're data visualizations tools. They display information in a geographical way. And, there, they, like I said it's no different from any other format.