2013

Geographical Literacies and their Publics: Reflections on the American Scene

Karen M. Morin, *Bucknell University*

Progress in Human Geography
37(1) 3–9

DOI: 10.1177/0309132512466800
phg.sagepub.com
SAGE

Geographical literacies and their publics: Reflections on the American scene

Karen M. Morin
Bucknell University, USA

I Introduction

The well-known geographer Harm de Blij (in Murphy et al., 2005: 168–170), author of *Why Geography Matters: Three Challenges Facing America* (2005) and its later iteration *Why Geography Matters: More Than Ever* (2012), was interviewed in summer 2011 on a Boston WGBH radio program about the sorry state of American geographical awareness. In the interview, De Blij warned that Americans' persistent geographic illiteracy constitutes nothing short of a national security risk. 'We're in a shrinking world', De Blij asserted, and 'our competitors know about us, but we don't know about them'. As evidence, De Blij recalled that when he speaks to audiences he routinely finds that only about half of those present know whether China borders Afghanistan, one of his 'litmus test' examples that confirm over and again a pattern of geographical illiteracy. Yet, later in the interview, De Blij asserted that such 'place naming' is not what geography is about anyway. What geography is really about are pressing global issues such as disparities in wealth between cores and peripheries, globalization, and climate change. In fact, the subtitle to De Blij's 2005 book identifies the challenges facing Americans as climate change, the rise of China, and global terrorism. (He added others such as a destabilized Europe and the ascent of India and Brazil in his 2012 volume.)

In this commentary, I examine how such slippage around geography's content presents a problem for studies of American geographical literacy and awareness, and raises serious questions about relationships between academic geography and various publics. I also draw attention to the fact that such discussions around geographical literacy carry significant implications beyond American borders, specifically in how arguments for tackling illiteracy are often associated with particular 'pro-American' narratives and ambitions.

For starters, we might consider how public knowledge and awareness about de Blij's (2005) themes of climate change, the rise of China, and global terrorism may be quite a bit different than that of any number of 'map borders' or 'longest river' questions. Thus, whenever a researcher or study defines geography as an array of such place facts, the effect is to reaffirm a definition of the subject from which most geographers want to distance themselves. (And in case you were not sure, China and Afghanistan do share a border.) That said, it seems axiomatic to most that Americans, except those ensconced in the university Ivory

Corresponding author:
Department of Geography, Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA 17837, USA.
Email: morin@bucknell.edu

Tower, are grossly ignorant of the geography of the planet. Indeed, an extensive body of scholarly research beginning in the 1990s (but with roots much earlier) avowed concern not only that American geographical literacy (information, knowledge, skills) was 'stuck' in the Ivory Tower, but also that Ivory Tower geographical knowledge itself was somehow disconnected from and irrelevant to real-world economic, social, and environmental problems. Discussion among geographers about this disconnect today has largely shifted to a critique of the pros and cons of 'public geographies' and academic geography's effect on policy (e.g. Fuller, 2008), notwithstanding the enduring perception that geographical literacy among the American public remains generally lacking.

My comments here pose questions about what is meant both by 'geography' and the illiterate American 'public' in such discussions, as well as attempt to raise awareness about the implications of both for those beyond US borders. Many agree that 'geography' of a sort is extensively represented in the public domain, but they claim that it is not the geography produced or informed by academic experts (Murphy, 2006: 2). The geographically illiterate 'public' is an even fuzzier category in such analyses. I offer below some illustrative examples of the many close linkages that indeed exist – for better and worse – between university geography and many publics (including federal, state, and local governments, a vast array of businesses and corporations, and non-profits). Such linkages challenge the notion that most of academic geography's work sits alone in the Ivory Tower, unused and unusable by most, and allow us to ask what this implies about the extent – and, for that matter, content – of American geographical awareness and knowledge, a.k.a. 'literacy'.

My sense is that proponents of the illiteracy argument tend to either offer contradictory definitions of the subject, or advocate for a return to a traditional regional geography or area studies definition of our discipline. I suggest that it is not so much that 'the public' is ignorant of geography, but that studies that purport to measure geographical literacy are inappropriate and/or have suspect goals. As Gregory (in Murphy et al., 2005: 184) and Barnett (2008) have argued, literate or other kinds of 'publics' do not pre-exist discourse – they are brought into being and formed through it. Thus, associated with various geographical (il)literacies are various publics that exist or might be brought into being by various studies, actors, policies, or events. Many who fret over geographical illiteracy appear mostly concerned that the USA retains a dominant global position, and argue that a return to education in regional studies geography will help ensure it.

II Geographical (il)literacy: the 'problem'

Most studies that draw conclusions about American geographical illiteracy have focused on deficient primary and secondary (K-12) school education. For instance, the National Assessment of Educational Progress found in its 2011 survey that only one in three American students was proficient in geography (Hu, 2011), 'with most eighth graders unable to explain what causes earthquakes or accurately describe the American Southwest'. Such illiteracy, so the argument goes, carries consequences for an uninformed public of news anchors, voters, policy makers, city planners, business leaders, and others. A short surf through YouTube shows the average 'Joe on the Street' made to look ridiculous in not being able to find Canada on a map. From the floors of Congress to cable news networks, very little substantive connection seems to exist between such publics and the intellectual products known as the geography (especially human geography) of university men and women. Meanwhile, and as others have noted (e.g. Fuller and Kitchin, 2004), there is oftentimes a subtext to such

observations, which is that academic geography is largely about creating useless theories that have no relevance to solving real-world problems.

Many of the recent complaints about American geographical illiteracy have as their source the results of the 2006 National Geographic Society (NGS)-Roper Public Affairs survey that studied the geographical knowledge and skills of young American adults aged 18–24 (for methodology, see NGS, 2006: 5; see also Trivedi, 2002). The survey focused on three areas: (1) factual knowledge of population sizes and growth, trade, and natural disasters; (2) skills in map reading; and (3) an ability to find specific countries and significant natural landmarks on a set of maps (NGS, 2006: 4). The results of the survey indicated 'that young people in the United States, the most recent graduates of our educational system, are unprepared for an increasingly global future'. Admittedly, some of the results are rather unsettling: for instance, that three in 10 respondents estimated the size of the US population to be 1–2 billion people (NGS, 2006: 30). The survey found that 74% of respondents believed that more people speak English in the world than any other language; that 75% did not know that Indonesia is predominantly Muslim; that 63% could not find Iraq on a map; and only half or fewer could identify the US states of New York or Ohio on a map (50% and 43%, respectively; NGS, 2006: 4–7).

In response to these ominous findings, a national-scale project called 'Roadmap' was launched in 2011, aimed at evaluating and reforming the effectiveness of geographic education in America. The project is funded by a US$2.2 million grant from the National Science Foundation and is sponsored by the major geographical societies in the USA: the National Geographic Society (NGS), the Association of American Geographers (AAG), the American Geographical Society, and the National Council for Geographic Education (AAG, 2011). This project goes hand in hand with the National Geographic's spearheading, along with three major partners, a push for national legislation to study and improve American geographical literacy. According to the TGIF (Teaching Geography Is Fundamental) Act, Senate Bill 434 and House Bill 885, teaching geography is fundamental to addressing the two most critical issues facing the USA today: (1) 'To create jobs, curb the unemployment rate, and ensure that the U.S. retains its standing as the world's largest and most influential economy'; and (2) 'To resolve global conflicts for the benefit of U.S. interests' (TGIF, 2011).

Importantly, the 'geoliteracy' coalition behind the legislation, along with the NGS, includes: CH2M HILL, a construction management and design firm; ESRI, the world's largest provider of GIS software; and the US Geospatial Intelligence Foundation (USGIF) – a group comprised of over 200 member companies and organizations 'dedicated to promoting geospatial intelligence statecraft in support of national and international security' (TGIF, 2011: 4). This coalition of interests – business, military, professional geographical societies, and educational networks – alerts us to the stake-holding 'publics' that will be served (that is, created) by the geographical knowledge ostensibly to result from this legislation. That knowledge, moreover, fundamentally derives from the NGS-Roper survey's definition of geography as map-reading skills and area studies facts.

A number of university scholars apparently support the coalition's position on geographical literacy. Murphy (2006: 6–7), for instance, argues for re-embracing regional geography, which to him involves an understanding of 'the history, environment, languages, cultures, and economies of different world regions'. De Blij similarly argues that those geographers who practice traditional regional geography 'fill classrooms' and are highly prized by government agencies and private firms (in Murphy et al., 2005: 167–168). Geography, De Blij

asserted, should regain its almost proprietary control of such information on global regions and foreign areas. Such information, he asserted, ultimately should be dedicated to advancing American national security and competitiveness (a theme he further stressed in his *More Than Ever* 2012 volume).

III Universities, geographical literacies, and publics

Many scholars, but from many different ideological perspectives, discuss the need for university geography's public, 'real-world' application (Fuller, 2008; Fuller and Kitchin, 2004; Murphy, 2006). Though crossing ideological divides, most of them share a core value that geographical research must be usable to a constituency of people/users, must relate to or solve real-world problems, and must detach from the confines of the Ivory Tower and engage citizens in university research. Fuller (2008: 834) sees a new field of 'public geographies' taking shape. Many have complained, though, that university geographers do not influence public policy in ways they should and are equipped to do (e.g. Murphy, 2006). Of course, and as others have pointed out (Fuller and Kitchin, 2004; Harvey, 1984: 7; Ward, 2006: 496), 'influence' or impact can mean many different things, and thus pose questions about whose interests are to be served. We need to keep in mind, therefore, that geographies within and beyond the university will not only have different 'contents' – what I am calling literacies – but will also produce a wide range of real-world manifestations among a wide spectrum of associated publics.

Many scholars maintain that geographical knowledge(s) quite obviously serve an array of interested publics. Harvey (2001: 213–218) lists the gamut as extending from the state apparatus and military power to supranational institutions, non-governmental organizations, corporate and commercial interests, the media, entertainment and tourism industries, and education and research institutions. Many of these sites of geographical knowledge production are closely linked with university departments. For instance, Turner (in Murphy et al., 2005: 173–176) argues that academic geographical thinking pervades discussion of global environmental change, risk-hazards analyses, sustainable agriculture, agroforestry, and environmental policy, informing the likes of the Peace Corps, the Nature Conservancy, and the Ford Foundation.

One helpful distinction often raised about various real-world impacts is that between what Burawoy (2005) has identified as policy versus public work. In the former, research produces a type of instrumentalist knowledge, financed by a client or sponsor, whose purpose is to solve the problem as presented by that client. Public work, by contrast, produces knowledge out of conversation with various publics (Burawoy, 2005: 7), through interaction and dialogue. To him, one type of public work is 'organic', referring to participatory work with area-based and/or single-interest groups. These he also refers to as active and local 'thick publics', which can be understood in contrast to 'thin' ones, which are more amorphous and unintegrated with one another, such as media audiences. Thick and thin publics, in turn, require different types of interventions by academics (see also Barnett, 2008; Fuller, 2008: 835; Ward, 2006: 499). Fuller and Kitchin (2004; along with scores of other critical and feminist geographers) offer a useful discussion about participatory work that is emancipatory and empowering and that challenges social inequalities. The authors contrast this with the work of those who identify as applied geographers, who 'serve the interests of the state and business through consultancy' and policy work, and who tend to reproduce the status quo rather than attempt to change it (Fuller and Kitchin, 2004: 5–6). 'Applied geography', 'business geography', and 'military geography', all specialty groups of the AAG, can be similarly positioned.

Many have noted the extent to which these 'applied' types of university researchers are locked into policy projects that reflect the priorities of government and corporate institutions – a 'triumvirate' fused since 1965 (Barnes, 2008). Actually the current revolving door connecting business, government, and academic geography dates to the mid-19th century, if not earlier (Morin, 2011; Woodward, 2005). Within this context, an important debate today surrounds the extent to which academic geography is especially aligned with the US military-industrial-complex (e.g. Inwood and Tyner, 2011). University geography has of course many ties to government agencies at various scales. At the federal level alone the State Department, Homeland Security, Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Interior, Pentagon, Office of Naval Research, and the US Army Foreign Military Office (among others) receive large amounts of funding for geographical research. Some of the most advanced geospatial research conducted today comes from the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA), which provides geo-intelligence to the Department of Defense and intelligence communities. The NGA also, not incidentally, has close ties to the USGIF foundation mentioned above, one of the sponsors of the geographical literacy (TGIF Act) legislation. Military entities regularly sponsor conferences and events that bring together academics, professionals, and government personnel to study places and regions for purposes of developing military tactics and strategies (Woodward, 2005: 722). In light of this, one might question the motives behind the 2011 'World Human Geography Conference' sponsored by the US Army Research Office and hosted by the University of Kansas Department of Geography, American Geographical Society, and the Haskell Indian Nation; particularly as three of these four entities had just been embroiled in an ethics controversy (Bryan, 2010).

Many academic geographers are rapidly changing research agendas to focus on applied activities aimed at entrepreneurship and environmental sustainability, and projects partnered with various urban stakeholders (civic and private-sector organizations, urban planners, weather programs, and community groups, among others). GIS development offers one of the most obvious examples of links between a corporate entity (the GIS software developer ESRI), university geography, and a public of users. ESRI both hires geographers and maintains extensive, albeit informal, links to the major players in university departments who research GIS, and with whom they share conferences, technology, and educational goals. The explosive growth of both applied geographical sciences/geoscience and VGI (volunteered geographic information, such as Google maps; see Elwood et al., 2012) illustrates other vast publics created through these technologies and techniques.

IV Rethinking American geographical literacy

My purpose in the above rough sketch of the many 'geographical literacies' we find throughout American social life is to alert us to their vast extent, the various shapes they can take, and the various institutions with which they are associated. Murphy's (2006: 3) claim that these geographies are not informed by the 'fundamental geographical insights' of university men and women also seems increasingly at odds with current trends; the fact is that there are many, oftentimes competing, types of real-world applications of academic geographical research. Meanwhile, many geographers, particularly over the last decade, point to the pitfalls of such policy-driven geography, particularly the corporatization of research agendas (Bauder and Engel Di-Mauro, 2008; Castree and Sparke, 2000). Uncovering links and connections between university geography and business, government, and other entities and institutions is important, as employing academic

geography's tools, methods, theories, and ideas in addressing real-world problems creates an informed public of users of such knowledge, and, again, for better and for worse.

Given the few examples above, we can envision widespread geographical literacy impacting a wide range of everyday social, spatial, and environmental problems of which a great number of 'publics' already are – or can be made – well aware, depending on the types of knowledge about the problems that accumulates and circulates (Barnett, 2008; Harvey, 2001). Barnett alerts us to the importance of these circuits of knowledge production in the creation of various publics themselves (see also Gregory, in Murphy et al., 2005). As Barnett (2008: 406–407) argues, putatively 'public' entities are constituted through the mediums of their representation. Thus, 'the public' or those in the 'public sphere' are as much brought into being through networks of communication and discourse as they are inhabitants of some tangible space.

This insight inescapably points us towards a need to rethink and redefine who or what constitutes a geographically illiterate American public. Ultimately, we should be concerned about what studies of American 'geographical literacy' are actually measuring (Hu, 2011; NGS, 2006), and, in turn, how models of geographical education based on such results – such as the 'Roadmap' project – are envisioned and implemented. Such literacy studies tend to associate geographical knowledge and awareness with an area studies or traditional regional geography definition of the subject, which many, if not most, academic geographers (including myself) have dismissed as promoting superficial understandings of foreign places. Many of those who advocate expertise in regional studies as tantamount to geographical literacy itself approach 'knowing' foreign places as a set of facts, skills, and other instrumentalist information that is aimed at procuring American competitive economic advantage or ensuring measures of 'national security'. As Harvey (2001: 211) usefully reminds us, 'there may be a vested interest for certain kinds of geographical ignorance'. With this admonition in mind, it would seem that we could serve ourselves best by questioning the latest dismal geographical literacy test results as they come along: what type of public do they aim to bring into being, and what national interests are they attempting to serve?

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Lee Schwartz and his staff in the US Office of the Geographer for taking a morning to discuss these themes with respect to State Department activities. They likely will not agree with my views, but I appreciate their willingness to talk. I also appreciate Janine Glather's valuable insights about GIS publics. A McColl Family Research Fellowship, American Geographical Society Library (Milwaukee), supported this research, and I am most grateful for it. Thanks as well to Noel Castree and Sarah Elwood for helping me sharpen the presentation.

References

Association of American Geographers (AAG) (2011) NSF funds Road Map for 21st century. *Newsletter* 46(7): 1–4.

Barnes T (2008) Geography's underworld: The military-industrial complex, mathematical modeling and the quantitative revolution. *Geoforum* 39: 3–16.

Barnett C (2008) Convening publics: The parasitical spaces of public action. In Cox K, Low M, and Robinson J (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Political Geography*. London: SAGE, 403–417.

Bauder H and Engel Di-Mauro S (2008) Knowledge grab: Corporate appropriation and exploitation of academic geographers. *Antipode* 40: 729–735.

Bryan J (2010) Force multipliers: Geography, militarism, and the Bowman Expeditions. *Political Geography* 29: 414–416.

Burawoy M (2005) 2004 presidential address, for public sociology. *American Sociological Review* 70: 4–28.

Castree N and Sparke M (2000) Professional geography and the corporatization of the university: Experiences, evaluations, and engagements. *Antipode* 32: 222–229.

De Blij H (2005) *Why Geography Matters: Three Challenges Facing America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

De Blij H (2012) *Why Geography Matters: More Than Ever*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Elwood S, Goodchild MF, and Sui DZ (2012) Researching volunteered geographic information: Spatial data, geographic research, and new social practice. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 102: 571–590.

Fuller D (2008) Public geographies: Taking stock. *Progress in Human Geography* 32: 834–844.

Fuller D and Kitchin R (eds) (2004) *Radical Theory/Critical Praxis: Making a Difference Beyond the Academy?* Vernon and Victoria, BC: Praxis (e)Press.

Harvey D (1984) On the history and present condition of geography: An historical materialist manifesto. *The Professional Geographer* 36: 1–11.

Harvey D (2001) *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography*. New York: Routledge.

Hu W (2011) Geography report card finds students lacking. *New York Times* 19 July.

Inwood J and Tyner J (2011) Geography's pro-peace agenda: An unfinished project. *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 10: 442–457.

Morin KM (2011) *Civic Discipline: Geography in America, 1860–1890*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Murphy AB (2006) Enhancing geography's role in public debate. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96: 1–13.

Murphy AB, De Blij HJ, Turner BL II, Gilmore RW, and Gregory D (2005) The role of geography in public debate. *Progress in Human Geography* 29: 165–193.

National Geographic Society (NGS) (2006) *Final Report, National Geographic-Roper Public Affairs 2006 Geographic Literacy Study*. Washington, DC: National Geographic Society.

Teaching Geography is Fundamental (TGIF) (2011) Pamphlet made available at a 'Geography Education Briefing' panel discussion, Washington, DC, 16 November.

Trivedi BP (2002) Survey reveals geographic illiteracy. *National Geographic News* 20 November.

Ward K (2006) Geography and public policy: Towards public geographies. *Progress in Human Geography* 30: 495–503.

Woodward R (2005) From military geography to militarism's geographies: Disciplinary engagements with the geographies of militarism and military activity. *Progress in Human Geography* 29: 718–740.