Keeping Up on Geo-Everything

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KEEPING UP ON GEO-EVERYTHING

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Adapted from a presentation at the ACMLA CARTO 2009 Conference

The Pressure of Geo-Everything

How many people have read the Horizon Report for this year? For those who are not followers of these reports, these are annual prognostications of technical innovations that are expected to impact higher education in the near future. The Horizon Report for 2009 identifies “Geo-Everything” as a critical trend in the next two to three years (EDUCAUSE, Horizon Report 2009—Chapter 8 on Geo-Everything http://wp.nmc.org/horizon2009/).

“Geo-Everything” is defined rather broadly as the rapid growth in geo-locative technologies incorporated into consumer devices such as cell phones and cameras and the parallel development of Web 2.0 neogeographies that allow people to share that georeferenced information over the Internet.

We, the map and GIS information specialists, know that this is a growth area because we live on the edge of the demand every day. But what alarmed me when I read the Horizon Report was the fact that I did not recognize one single example that they used in the report! I am supposed to be keeping up-to-date on these trends and I didn’t feel well informed. This uncomfortable feeling led me to my current research project. It’s all about keeping oneself up-to-date in an area of very rapidly developing technology.

I am a busy person. I believe I am presently speaking to a roomful of other busy professionals. If we only have one hour to devote to personal current awareness in our field, how do we use it most effectively and efficiently? What can I read or view that will get me the most information with the least amount of effort? That’s what this research project is about—identifying the best choices of tools and techniques in order to maximize my awareness and minimize my stress level. My research partner on this project is Dr. Susan Vajoczki, who is an Associate Professor in Geography and Earth Sciences and also McMaster’s acting director of the Centre for Leadership in Learning. We are interested in Geo-Everything and how librarians and faculty members in Geography can keep up to date. But the same principles could be applied broadly to any other field of information undergoing rapid technological advancement.

My research partner Sue is very big on top 10 lists, so I am going to structure my presentation in this way, offering 10 possible strategies or resources for keeping up-to-date. [The URLs from the handout provided at the conference session have been incorporated into the text that follows.]

Idea 1: 7 Things You Should Know About... from EDUCAUSE

7 Things You Should Know About is a publication series from the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative. If you do not already follow this series, it is well worth your time. The “7 Things” briefs each tackle a single emerging technology, and they describe what it is, how it works, where it’s going and why it matters for teaching and learning. There have been four briefs recently on geo-related topics:
- Location-Aware Applications
- Geolocation
- Google Earth
- Mapping Mashups
You will probably find other issues that interest you here. These briefs provide good concise information, well digested and organized, and are timely and very relevant to emerging technology issues in higher education.
I would strongly suggest that you employ RSS feeds and a good feed reader to help you manage your precious reading time. 

Bloglines (feed reader) http://www.bloglines.com
Google Reader (feed reader) http://www.google.com/reader

Idea 3: Technorati

So you’ve got an efficiency tool in an RSS feed reader. Now how do you figure out what to read? One massive source of information on emerging technology topics is the ‘blogosphere’. Blogs basically come in two varieties. There are blogs that specialize in original posts and blogs that specialize in aggregating and reflecting other people’s posts. Original posts can be good or bad. Sometimes they come from real thought leaders, and sometimes they come from blithering and self-absorbed idiots. Sometimes they come from corporations with a commercial agenda.

If you are just getting interested in a topic and you are not quite sure what blogs might be worth following, the Technorati blog search engine is a good place to start. You can do a keyword search in Technorati to find out what blogs are posting information on your area of interest. But even more importantly, Technorati makes an attempt to rank blogs by some kind of authority ranking system, based on the number of other blogs linking to that blog in the last six months. You can see some of the ranking numbers in Figure 2. This is not a straightforward number of links. Rather it is a position from number one within Technorati’s ranking system. Still, it can be useful to find out what blogs are available and are being followed by a significant number of people—the ‘wisdom of the crowd’ strategy.

Technorati offers a couple of other tools for comparing activity in the blogosphere. Figure 2 also illustrates an example of their widget for comparing post activities on two different virtual globes. This is an interesting way of keeping up on what is ‘au courant’ without much effort.

Technorati http://technorati.com
Figure 2. Sample Technorati search illustrating the ranking numbers beside the blog titles. The inset illustrates the Technorati widgit which compares the number of blog posts on two topics (in this case Google Earth and World Wind).

**Idea 4: Aggregator blogs**

Aggregator blogs, as I mentioned previously, are blogs that specialize in collecting and passing along posts from other people’s blogs. A good aggregator blog is worth its weight in gold in terms of efficiency, because it saves you from having to follow a large number of individual blogs. It does all the work of tracking and compiling new information.

One example of a particularly good aggregator blog in the field of geo-anything is All Points Blog from Directions Media Publications. This blog covers “All Things Location”, which means GIS, GPS location technology and cartography. The blog is moderated by Directions Media staff, who add comments or digest the original information sources.

Directions Media also produce a few other resources that might be quite useful for current awareness:

- **Directions Magazine** is an electronic newsletter that deals with GIS, GPS, location technology and remote sensing, especially from an industry perspective.
- **Map Hawk** is an interesting blog that focuses on how maps and location technologies are being used in the public media.
- **LBS360.NET** is about Location-Based Services, meaning technologies and software for mobile devices and web mapping portals.
Another useful aggregator blog is **Planet Geospatial**. This one has less direct mediation, and the postings are more directly streamed from the original sources. This is a great way to figure out which individual blogs are posting things that are of interest to you.

Another way to find blogs that have interesting content is to examine the **blog roll** of other blogs. A blog roll is the list of other blogs that this individual author follows. So it's like the classical pyramid search technique. You start with one known blog and then follow the links from that one back to its information sources. The blog roll for Planet Geospatial includes nearly 100 other blogs, many of them from individuals who are thought leaders in the fields of geo-everything. Signing up to an aggregator blog like Planet Geospatial can help you in two ways: 1) it can stream new information from a variety of different blogs directly to you through an RSS feed and 2) it can suggest other sources of information that might be worth investigating by means of its blog roll.

- **All Points Blog** [http://www.directionsmedia.net/all.points.blog](http://www.directionsmedia.net/all.points.blog)

Other resources from Directions Media:
- **Directions Magazine** [http://apb.directionsmag.com](http://apb.directionsmag.com)
- **Map Hawk** [http://maphawk.blogspot.com](http://maphawk.blogspot.com)
- **LBS360.NET** [http://www.directionsmedia.net/lbs.360.net](http://www.directionsmedia.net/lbs.360.net)
- **Planet Geospatial** [http://www.planetgs.com](http://www.planetgs.com)

### Idea 5: Blogs about Google Earth

Every individual who is concerned about current awareness is going to have specific interests. Two of the things I am particularly interested in are Google Earth for instruction use and educational uses of emerging technologies. So I have spent some time trying to figure out which are the most productive and interesting blogs for these fields of interest. I am assuming that these fields are of fairly broad interest to others in this group, so I am going to share some of my favourites. But if you are not interested in these topics—say you are interested in Nokia cell phone apps or geo-location apps for Twitter—then you can follow ideas 3 and 4 to develop your own lists of favourites.

One of my favourite blogs for finding out new information about Google Earth is **Ogle Earth**. This is a great compilation of information about Google Earth and also about other virtual globes. This is a popular blog. On the day I tested it while preparing this presentation, it had 6,814 subscribers linked to it by RSS feeds. If you click on the “Blogs linking in” link on the home page, it would take you to the Technorati ranking, which also is quite high for this resource.

One thing I don’t like about Ogle Earth is the amount of intrusive advertising. But one thing I really love about it is the “Link list” function. If you click on this link, it will take you to a mass of information and resources about Google Earth. This is definitely a one-stop shop: probably all the information I could ever need on virtual globes is gathered here.

- **Ogle Earth** [http://www.ogleearth.com/links.html](http://www.ogleearth.com/links.html)

### Idea 6: Blogs about Educational Uses of Emerging Technologies

**Digital Geography** is a blog created by a British educator named Noel Jenkins. He seems to specialize in compiling creative ideas for teaching and learning and is particularly interested in web-based technologies. This is a site that I find thought-provoking to follow.

Another really great resource which you might be interested in following is **On the Cutting Edge**, produced by the Science Education Resource Center, which is a project from Carleton College in Minnesota. They have a great website devoted to professional development for geosciences faculty and instructors, and a lot of it is devoted to the value and adoption of emerging technologies in teaching. There are a wealth of lesson plans here. For example, if you go in under “Visualizations”, there are many ideas and resources for teaching and assignments using Google Earth. Most importantly, there is also a lot of information about the pedagogy behind the excitement.
Another similar blog is the CIT Blog from the Center for Instructional Technology at Duke University (Durham, North Carolina). This is not a very active blog, so it isn't difficult to keep up with the volume. But I really like the quality of ideas that I get from this one. They are directly relevant to higher education, and they are usually broader than just geo-ideas.

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### Idea 7: Digg

The last idea—CIT Blog—is high quality and low volume. This idea is exactly the opposite; it is low quality and high volume.

**Digg** is what's called a “social news website”. It is an active community of compulsive sharers who constantly post links to everything they come across on the Internet. Digg is often accused of contributing to sensationalism and “group think”, but its community is very large and very active, and there is very little news that escapes its vortex. So used effectively, Digg can be a great current awareness tool.

What you can do with Digg to make it productive and not just annoying is to create a specific search profile for a subject that interests you. So for example, you could set up a Digg search for “Google Earth”. After that, you could set the parameters of the search to sort the results with newest first, and then limit the search to materials in the last seven days. At that point, you can request the RSS feed subscription for this search using the orange RSS icon. That will prompt the results of this search to feed into your Feed Reader every time there is an update. This strategy will result in a fairly small and manageable number of posts, so it's much more efficient than having to remember to go and search Digg at regular intervals.

| Digg | http://digg.com |

### Idea 8: Alltop news alerts

So far, I’ve talked a lot about blogs as an information resource for keeping up to date. Blogs are the Internet equivalent of journals and magazines. But there is also an Internet equivalent of daily newspapers, in the form of news alert services. Generally news alerts are much more digested and concentrate on breaking stories. There are many general news sites available.

One really good news alert digest for geo-anything topics is called Alltop. There is an Alltop for Geography and another for Geology. What Alltop does is compile the headlines of new stories from a wide variety of sources (including some blogs). It presents the top five headlines from each source. When you mouse over a headline, it displays a brief digest of the story. If you want to read the whole story you can click on the link.

This is a super fast way to skim over the story headlines and choose what you want to read. With a blog, you have to proceed in chronological order to get past the uninteresting stuff. Here you don't have to waste any time wading through things that are of no interest to you.

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<th>Alltop (Geography)</th>
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### Idea 9: Table of Contents alerts

Another way of maintaining your current awareness is to keep track of the kinds of articles that are being published in journals in your field. Assuming that you don't actually subscribe to every journal personally, you can take advantage of alerting services to improve your efficiency.

Table of Contents alerts are generally email notifications that let you see what articles are published in a new issue of a journal. Many publishing houses offer alert services. Figure 3 shows an example from Springer. You can choose to receive just the tables of contents of specific journals or you can choose all journals in a subject area.
In the Figure 3 example, I’ve selected the discipline “Geography” and can next choose a more specific discipline from a dropdown menu.

This Springer page is offering several different kinds of current awareness tools. You could choose an RSS feed for everything new in this discipline. Or you could go in under “SpringerAlerts” and sign up for just specific journal titles if you wanted to do that.

Very efficient. This service brings the table of contents to your email box as soon as the journal is published, so you can browse through the titles to see what’s new.

Another great Table of Contents alert service—if you happen to be interested in library and information science literature—is Informed Librarian Online. ILO offers a monthly compilation of Tables of Contents from more than 300 journals relating specifically to library trends. Some of these are full text so you can click right through to the journal.

There is a free version of this service, but it is pretty limited. I’m finding it worthwhile to subscribe to the paid version, which costs $35.00 US. Most of the advanced search features and full text link features seem to be available only through the paid subscription version. So, if you’re interested in
library and information science literature, this is a good efficiency tool. It brings current awareness right to your email box without any search time necessary.

- **SpringerAlerts** [http://www.springer.com/alert](http://www.springer.com/alert)
- **Sage E-mail Alerts** [http://www.sagepub.com/emailAlerts.sp](http://www.sagepub.com/emailAlerts.sp)
- **Informed Librarian Online** [http://www.informedlibrarian.com](http://www.informedlibrarian.com)

### Idea 10: High interest, just for fun

And because keeping up shouldn't be all work, I'm going to end with three things that are just for entertainment!

**Strange Maps** is a fun blog that dredges up the most outlandish maps and provides a really good commentary on each. Always entertaining, usually educational, sometimes puzzling or provocative.

**Earth Science Picture of the Day** is a site that I have in my browser favourites menu so I can flip it open every morning to see the image ‘du jour’. There is usually a short commentary and sometimes links to other information about the phenomenon in the picture. I’ve actually learned quite a lot about earth sciences. I had no idea there were so many different kinds of clouds in the world.

And finally, something not particularly geo-anything. The compiler of this weekly list, **Neat New Stuff I Found on the Web This Week**, is Marylaine Block, previously an academic reference librarian and now a librarian-at-large, writer and speaker. She always comes up with at least a few interesting new things that I have to check out. I would LOVE to know how she keeps herself up-to-date!

- **Strange Maps** [http://strangemaps.wordpress.com](http://strangemaps.wordpress.com)
- **Earth Science Picture of the Day** [http://epod.usra.edu](http://epod.usra.edu)
- **Neat New Stuff I Found on the Net This Week** [http://marylaine.com/neatnew.html](http://marylaine.com/neatnew.html)

### What Next?

That concludes my top ten list of ideas for efficiency and effectiveness in terms of personal current awareness in the field of geo-everything. For me personally, it is my goal to try to identify a short list of strategies that I can use myself within a limited amount of time each week.

I would like to emphasize that you don't need all of these tools or resources to feel that you are keeping up. I am going to pick a couple that work best for me and excuse myself from the stress of too much information. And I am going to try to set aside a little time on a regular basis for keeping up. Most of the literature I have read about current awareness stresses the importance of regularity.

Keeping up is important for professional development. Hopefully using some of these tools on a regular basis will make keeping current more manageable to achieve, even if it's just the last few minutes of the workday. I hope you also feel empowered by some of these ideas to develop a personal awareness plan for yourselves. I'm sure that you have strategies and techniques of your own that are working for you. It would be wonderful to find a way to pool our best practices.

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**Editor’s Note:**

Sincere thanks to Gail Curry, University of Northern British Columbia, for her willingness to act as “guest editor” for this article. As always, the result has been greatly improved by her excellent suggestions. Thanks, Gail! CM