Welcome to my December 2014 newsletter. Christmas is fast approaching so do order books or posters as soon as you can, especially if parcels need to be sent overseas. For UK customers, the Royal Mail is offering a discount for parcels this year, so I can offer Underground Maps Unravelled for £40 including UK delivery until mid-January 2015. The first 75 book orders will receive a free calendar, see below.

New: **Tube·Map·Central**. 2015 calendar
I have printed a limited number of wall calendars. These display twelve of my maps, one for each month throughout 2015. They are folded A3 format, digitally printed on 170gsm silk-finish paper. Each month comprises an A4 landscape map or map extract in the upper panel and an A4 calendar in the lower one. For more details, and to order, go to my web pages. Price including delivery to the UK is £12.00.

In the media, on the web
- My Boston map marathon generated a lot of interest in the city, with articles from Curbed Boston, Boston Magazine, and Universal Hub.
- Designers at Karlsruhe in Germany have been taking an interest in some of my suggestions for design, and KVV (Karlsruher Verkehrsverbund) have now released a curvilinear map of the local S-Bahn network. Overall, it is a nice piece of work that fits in a large number of stations, and it is good to receive a credit for the idea.
- Peter Lloyd is an expert in the history of the New York Subway map and I can’t recommend his book more highly. He has recently made a breakthrough in tracking down a photograph of an innovative competition-winning map from the 1960s (the original was destroyed by the MTA in the 1980s). Work is now proceeding to reconstruct the design, and he hopes to have it completed in early 2015.

Map research
- My online survey has now reached 550 people. My target is 600 respondents by the end of the year. As ever, opinions and evaluations from women are just as welcome as from men. It takes around 15 minutes to complete, and you can access it at www.tubemapcentral.com/survey.

Map of the Month: Lampooning schematic maps

Last year, at one of my presentations, I was discussing my curvilinear map of the Paris Metro, which consistently beats the official version in terms of time taken to plan journeys. Irrespective of objective measures of usability, some people are skeptical about this type of design. During the questions, the map received a standard criticism, that it looked like a plate of spaghetti.

One reason why curvilinear maps attract adverse comments is because they don’t look as though they have been designed. No matter how painstaking the smoothing of Béziers, elimination of S-bends, and creation of curves that relate to each other, the end-product will always look more free-form and organic, and thrown together, than something like this.

Making unfavourable comparisons has a long history in map design. The first geographical maps tended to be curvilinear, and one hundred years ago, at least one cartoonist (Punch, 1909) was not impressed by the claim that these maps were simple to use. His artwork implies something twisted and convoluted, perhaps string, spaghetti,
or a cobweb. The earliest direct reference to pasta that I am aware of is in a letter written by Henry Beck in the 1960s, using the phrase vermicelli map as a disparaging reference to the previous design that his own map replaced (created by Frederick Stingemore). Abstract, geography-distorting linear schematic maps also have their detractors, so what comparisons might be used to make their points humourously?

The most famous lampoon of Henry Beck’s design shows it as an electrical circuit diagram along with electricity-related puns. It appeared in the London Transport magazine, Train Omnibus, Tram, in 1933. It might have been created by Beck, but could also have been the work of an unimpressed Stingemore. Even so, the cartoon is merely making fun of the basis of the design, rather than its success. Schematic maps can go wrong for all sorts of reasons. They might distort geography so much that they are misleading. They might be unbalanced, with an empty centre and squashed suburbs. They might look incoherent if angles clash with each other. The basic requirement of simplification is often neglected, so that the line trajectories are just as chaotic as reality, and all that has been changed is the shape of the complexity.

Back to the Paris Metro, with its dense network of lines, so intertwined that they seem almost knotted. This challenges any attempt to depict it as a linear schematic, resulting in many different approaches over the past 50 years. Using angles which permit the straightest lines results in an incoherent mess. London-style horizontal/vertical/45° diagonal lines (used for the current official map) result in a tangled mass of zigzags, almost as though someone has taken a bunch of lollipop sticks and dropped them onto paper …

Yes, those are real lollipop sticks, around 200 of them, all hand-dipped in paint. Do you know of any other examples of cartoons satirising schematic maps? Massimo Vignell’s controversial New York Subway diagram of 1972 surely attracted the attention of American cartoonists. Wishing all my readers a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. You can subscribe to the newsletter at my web pages www.tubemapcentral.com.