With a good queue of maps forming, newsletters should be back to schedule next month. Other work continues too, and there is a new research paper to read, with more on the way.

Date for your diary

The third Schematic Mapping Workshop will be held on 15th/16th April, 2021, at Universität Würzburg, Germany. The basic workshop website is complete and includes the full scope and submission timetable. The portal for submissions is now open, and we are happy to take questions about these at submissions@schematicmapping.org. Reports on all aspects of schematic map research are most welcome.

Research News

Just accepted for publication: A Survey on Transit Map Layout from Design, Machine, and Human Perspectives by Wu, Niedermann, Takahashi, Roberts & Nöllenburg is an international multidisciplinary collaboration that discusses the state of the art of transit map research, looking at design, computer automation and human (usability testing) approaches, common ground between the three and future research challenges. A copy can be downloaded here.

Map of the Month: Making abstract concepts concrete

Almost exactly two years ago, Newsletter 55 described the newly-created twelve regional Brexit maps, highlighting the issues, and their connectivity, faced by businesses in different sectors around the country. Since then, the maps have proven to be both robust and durable, enlightening hundreds of entrepreneurs via training courses and exhibitions. One of the reasons why they proved to be so effective is that the concepts of lines (business sectors), stations (issues) and interchanges (issues shared between businesses in different sectors) are logically equivalent to actual transit maps, so that the information could be displayed without creating false analogies.

Contemporary world events are, unfortunately, taking a darker turn, and in emotive times people focus their attention strongly on the most emotionally salient issues, sometimes at the expense of less salient, but by no means less dangerous, forces lurking in the background. In collaboration with Sietske de Groot of TradePeers Ltd we wanted to see whether the Tube Map metaphor could be augmented to show how the economic forces summoned by the UK Government might build up and interact with each other. The result is the first infographic created in the name of Info Design Central.

Transit maps are not usually directional. Networks sometimes have one-way loops, but one-way travel is needed on a much larger scale for this map. It is easy to supplement lines with arrow symbols to indicate direction. The greater challenge is showing causality and contingency. In a complex system, multiple causes are often needed for an event to take place. For a map displaying economic forces, time comes to the rescue. Hence, it is possible to identify a chronology for the major events, the causal influence of each feeding down the network, but not necessarily directly creating the next station along the line. The map distinguishes between contingent lines, which are directional, and whose events/stations impact
down the network, and non-contingent lines which receive causality from contingent lines, but do not generate their own, and whose events are not in a chronological order. We are not claiming that our solutions are foolproof, and this is certainly not a formal macro-economic model, but it does highlight the complex forces in a visually salient way, indicating how they relate to each other within and between lines.

We hope this map is able to play its part in waking up the British public from its intellectual coma, caused in part by a media feeding them endless ‘human interest’ stories and failing to do its duty by scrutinising policies and asking politicians difficult probing questions. We live in complex times, and only genuinely holistic thinking has a chance of identifying the pathways likely to cause the least long-term damage.

Apologies for the bleak content but some things have to be said, especially with questions being asked about the legality, execution, and appropriateness of Government strategy. The aftermath of current events will be felt for at least a generation. If this pessimistic vision of the future has not put you off receiving newsletters, rest assured that normal services will be resuming for June, and Map of the Month will be revisiting Vienna.

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