

Keeping in Touch: Maps for the Visually Impaired

As society becomes more reliant on image-based information for the purposes of mobility many people are excluded precisely by the visual nature of these graphic representations. An important example is those who are blind or partially sighted.

Yet mobility is especially important to people without sight: they have to deal with the challenges of orientation and navigation every day in a way that those who can see take for granted. This means not only way finding but also seeking out information that enables the visually impaired to generate an overall picture of spatial relationships and add knowledge to enrich their travel experiences.

The map, however it is conceived or defined, is the premier tool for both representing mobility and promoting access to it. So how do blind people access this information? Primarily through raised relief tactile maps, three-dimensional spatial representations that use Braille-like representations. However, users report a dearth of such tactile maps. When they do exist they are difficult to obtain, offer poor geographic cover or are of limited quality.

The ICA Commission on Maps and Graphics for Blind and Partially Sighted People works to improve communication and education in the design, production and use of tactile maps and graphics.

This includes:

- sharing, exchanging and disseminating information on design, and developing new production technologies appropriate to user needs
- providing guidance on and encouraging good practice in design and production
- developing co-operation with organisations representing blind and partially sighted people involved in cartography and communication
- creating accessible databases as sources of information about tactile symbols and tactile production
- investigating user perspectives and the implications these will have for tactile-map design.

Most designers of tactile maps are working in isolation, often producing bespoke tactile maps for single-purpose, individual use. So it is vital to communicate with all of them. In order to promote consistency and improve design the Commission website INTACT (www.surrey.ac.uk/~pss1su/intact/) continues to expand. A newsletter, TacNews, published three times a year, has also recently been introduced.

The renewed interest in this subject is illustrated by the large numbers of papers submitted for the International Cartographic Conference in A Coruña in July 2005 (along with a specialist session at the recent 2005 Association of American Geographers meeting). Theme sessions at the conference included Tactile Mapping: Use and Production, Perceptual & Cognitive Approaches, and Technological Innovation. This last theme is also important to the Commission as new developments in ways of gathering, representing and providing spatial information pertinent to visually impaired users are constantly being monitored: links with GPS look particularly exciting.