
The Atlas as Gazetteer – facilitating historical research by enriching digital place names databases with digitized atlas indexes.

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Abstract:

The spatial turn in the humanities has redefined the potential importance of place name registers. In the spatial and digital humanities, they have become the vehicle for multiple research approaches. In this context, gazetteers are used to facilitate access in online geographic information applications, to integrate place related data, and to enable text-oriented search of spatial information (or spatially-oriented search of textual information), among other applications. In these various roles they mediate between discourses and humanities knowledge.

As the demand for information related to place names grows - not only in academia – digital online gazetteers such as GOV (Historical Place Inventory), GeoNames and thesaurus-like structured databases of geographic names (Getty Thesaurus) use technical approaches, including linking data or employing Volunteered Geographic Information, to enrich their information. On the other hand, numerous area-, period- and topic-related gazetteers are produced in and for specific, project-driven research contexts, rarely transcending disciplinary borders. In addition, most databases focus on expanding horizontally (more names) rather than (vertically) accumulating information about already documented geographical entities, which adds to multiplicity and to uncertainty.

Over the last two years, the project “Names changes, places too” has developed an online toolset to evaluate consistency, accuracy and uncertainty of historic place names in large gazetteer databases. In different historical and regional contexts the given digital data results in ambiguous information for users, leaving them with unclear georeferencing results.

Place names change over time, a major source of the ambiguity. Structured sources of historic place names mainly stem from comprehensive survey activities. As secondary source, atlases for centuries have been a main reference for place names. Based on concepts going back to Ptolemy, combining lists of place names with cartographic visualisation geographically identifies the locational referents of proper names. In this respect, every atlas is a knowledge organisation system, that can be understood as a gazetteer. Historically this function has driven the atlas development over time and „containing more places“ has been a major selling point in Golden Age Netherlands, 19th century US atlas productions, and booming 1930s global reference atlases. Even today, the 15th edition of the Times Atlas is advertised „fully updated mapping with now over 200,000 place names“.

This short historical record give a hint of possible use-cases that spatially and historically situate place names, historically (according to the atlases sources) to facilitate the validation of existing digital gazetteers.

The paper considers the possibilities of employing name indexes and maps of atlases to horizontally and vertically enrich gazetteers by examining some specific contexts and discourses in which atlases have been produced.