ABSTRACT

Vanishing Point is a presentation of the world as it responds to international newspaper coverage – not a measure of what the world is, but of what is most newsworthy. Consequently, countries that receive less media coverage gradually disappear from view. It consists of an interactive world map connected to a database fed by international news sources, and exists both in the form of a website (http://low-fi.org.uk/vanishingpoint) and as a physical gallery installation.

The goal of this piece is to decipher the world that news media reconfigures and to observe if media coverage, or lack thereof, is creating a new cartography.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
H.4.3 [Information Systems Applications]: Communications Applications - Information browsers.

General Terms: Measurement

Keywords: Visibility, disappearance, cartography, and media coverage.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Media and Representation

Media (namely television, radio, and newsprint) academics have remarked how the apparatus that claims to record reality, creates it instead [1][2]. Although the extent of this claim is debatable, it highlights the role of media in helping construct the social reality through which citizens understand the world.

One issue worth investigating is the long-term impact of the representation of the social world that media institutions circulate [3]. In this respect, Vanishing Point is an exercise in geography and journalism, which aims to depict the world cartography that news media generates.

1.2 Power Differentials

The scope of the piece centered on what the seven most industrialized nations in the world (the G7 group), Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, United Kingdom, and the United States, report in their newspapers. These countries became the ‘focus group’ of this project since by great measure their unilateral and collective influence affects fundamental aspects of most nations’ social and economic fates.

1 RSS is a format for syndicating news and the content of news-like sites (e.g., personal weblogs, news-oriented community sites, and major online news venues) [5].
Nevertheless, the results are a good metaphor for the type of news coverage that is available from this project’s news sources.

1.4 Countries’ Presence
Each country’s transparency level is calculated based on a mathematical model that considers the daily news available over a period of 50 days. With this mathematical model, more recent news items have a more relevant role when calculating the countries’ visibilities.

This way, countries that receive little attention fade away over time, whilst those that are continuously mentioned in the newspapers maintain a strong presence.

1.5 Map’s Projection
The world projection used in Vanishing Point is the Peter’s Projection map. This is an equal area map, which means that it shows each country, continent, and water mass according to its actual size, thus enabling accurate comparisons among countries.

1.6 Installation and Users’ Interaction
The physical gallery exhibition of Vanishing Point combines a projection of an interactive map on the wall set against a reading area in which a daily copy of the selected newspapers is displayed. At the end of every day, those newspaper copies are piled up on a shelf; after a few weeks the large piles of newspapers and the projection of the resulting world map offer a poignant contrast.

When someone rolls over an empty space on the map, the transparent countries reappear. Users can select any of the countries and read the news stored in the project’s database over the last 50 days; as well, they can read basic background information about the selected country.

2. RELATED WORK
Alfredo Jaar’s Emergency is a piece in which a 5-meter long model of Africa alternatively sinks and resurfaces from a black pool of water. Its goal is to bring back to mind a continent that during its harshest moments has been neglected by the world powers [4].

Marcos Weskamp’s Newsmap is an application that visually reflects the constantly changing landscape of the Google News news aggregator. A treemap visualization algorithm helps display the enormous amount of information gathered by the aggregator [6].

3. TECHNICAL NOTES
The search engine that scans and classifies the RSS news feeds was done using PHP scripts. After an article is associated with a country it is then sorted and stored in a MySQL database. A shockwave interface controls the user’s interactions with the map, and connects to the database through a series of XML-PHP-XML commands.

4. CONCLUSION
It is important to emphasize that the resulting map does not show the daily most popular countries mentioned in the news but the cumulative result of newspaper coverage. Thus the map represents a mediated memory of the world. The absences and presences on the map give an indication of what the news media priorities are, what the centers of attention are, and what zones of the world have been forgotten.

5. REFERENCES