Copyright and the Circulation of Geographical Knowledge in 18th Century Britain

Concerns regarding control over geographic data, its economic value, and associated public interest issues may seem more pressing in the days of iPhones and TomToms, but they are far from new. While it is often observed that new technologies of the twenty-first century have transformed our relationship with and understanding of space, the 18th century was similarly transformative. New technologies and techniques relating to improved transport, navigation and communications as well as the demands of trade, the military and empire meant knowledge of the world was opening up apace. This knowledge was sometimes represented in new maps, but often mapmakers simply reproduced old, out of date and copied maps. In 1767, the first statute explicitly to protect maps through copyright law was passed in Britain. The mapmakers of London were not slow to make use of this new legal tool, and in the following three decades eight cases were brought before the courts of law and equity against unauthorised copyists. This paper examines these cases in order to uncover what they can tell us about the changing strategies employed by mapmakers to protect their investment in geographical data and its aesthetic representation in the eighteenth century, and how the changing legal environment impacted on their business practices as well as the content of the maps they produced.

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