

Chapter 5

City Networks in Cyberspace and Time: Using Google Hyperlinks to Measure Global Economic and Environmental Crises

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ABSTRACT

Geographers and social scientists have long been interested in ranking and classifying the cities of the world. The cutting edge of this research is characterized by a recognition of the crucial importance of information and, specifically, ICTs to cities' positions in the current Knowledge Economy. This chapter builds on recent "cyberspace" analyses of the global urban system by arguing for, and demonstrating empirically, the value of Web search engine data as a means of understanding cities as situated within, and constituted by, flows of digital information. To this end, the authors show how the Google search engine can be used to specify a dynamic, informational classification of North American cities based on both the production and the consumption of Web information about two prominent current issues global in scope: the global financial crisis, and global climate change.

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INTRODUCTION

The lexicon surrounding cyberspace, the Internet and “new” technologies is replete with spatial metaphors and analogies (Adams, 1997): e.g., online *community*, *web site*, *information gateway*, *portal site*, *chat room*. At one level, the reading of this spatial language is straightforward. Spatial/territorial analogy superimposes upon the otherwise intangible (and unintelligible) sphere of bits and bytes a determinate and visible/visualizable *representational* surface. Cyberspace, so imagined, becomes knowable; written in “geographical language” (Kellerman, 2002, p. 31) it becomes definable, mappable and understandable in terms of standard spatial rubrics of distance and proximity, connection and flow (see, in relation to virtual worlds, Hudson-Smith et al. 2007). But an alternative reading of this spatial language suggests a problematization of the supposed separation between underlying reality (intangible/unintelligible) and overlaid representation (tangible/visible) (see Cicognani, 1998). This second reading recognizes that the “virtual” world of cyberspace is already fundamentally imbricated with the “real”, material life of the contemporary city (Crutcher & Zook, 2009). It is this more nuanced conceptualization of the relationship between the “virtuality” of cyberspace and the “reality” of cities that we seek to build on in this chapter.

Hyperbolic claims that distance—and with it, place, city, and geography—is, or soon will be, “dead” (e.g., O’Brien, 1992; Negroponte, 1995; Kaba, 1996) belie an important paradox of the contemporary information-based economy: even as ICTs become accessible “everywhere”, demand for the physical, corporeal transportation between places, and for prime, proximate real estate within “core” urban locations continues to grow (Densstadli & Gripsrud, 2010). The vision of so-called “post-industrial” theorists of a world without distance, where “everyplace is everyplace” (Abler, 1974), remains entirely unmet in several key respects. Society and technology shape each

other in complex ways. While, at the most basic level, ICT implies a decoupling of simultaneity in time from contiguity in space (Castells, 1996), informational flows—the informational “cloud” of ubiquitous communications—are in fact, underpinned and enabled by a vast, *physical* (placed) ICT infrastructure. Thus, rather than rendering place irrelevant, cities’ economic performance and their prominence within the global urban network becomes, increasingly, a product of their positions vis-à-vis all other places in relation to ICT networks. Electronic communication has not and cannot be substituted for the social, cultural and economic advantages of urban agglomeration. Or, as Goldsmith and Wu (2006, p. 56) put it, very simply: “[f]ar from destroying cities by making place irrelevant, the production and consumption of Internet content, and the infrastructure to support it, are concentrated in cities.”

This chapter seeks to unpack this question of the positions cities occupy in relation to ICT networks, meaning that we seek to understand “cyberspace” as an *object* of study in the context of global urban networks. In contrast to earlier ICT-based urban research in which analyses tend to trace out a ‘cyber’ geography via *physical* infrastructure and *material* connection, we suggest two ways cyberspace can be incorporated into global urban network research. First, we consider cities as lived places with attributes—experiential, economic, representational, infrastructural—which are represented in and produced by their cyberspaces. And, second, we consider cities as nodes in transnational networks of capital, ideas, representations, and information. Our focus on cyberspace offers a new take on the methodological question of how to study cities’ positions within urban networks, especially, in the context and under the aegis of the information-based Knowledge Economy.

The remainder of this chapter proceeds as follows. We first turn to debates within the literature on the conceptualization of “hierarchies” versus “networks”, “world cities”, and “cyberspace”. We examine the nature of the global urban network in

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