Dialogues in Human Geography

Commentary

Dialogues in Human Geography
1–5

DOI: 10.1177/20438206231157891
journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg
SAGE

Challenging opacity, embracing fuzziness: Geographical thought and praxis in a post-truth age

Taylor Shelton
Georgia State University, Georgia, USA

Abstract
Recent years have seen a resurgence of interest in critical approaches to mapping and quantification within geography. Such works have embraced the potential of these methods to advance the cause of social and spatial justice in an increasingly data-driven world. But as more geographers are turning to these approaches, it seems that conventional sources of social data are less and less able to capture emerging forms of social and spatial inequality, or are made unavailable to researchers interested in uncovering and challenging these inequalities. This therefore opens up the question of how geographers interested in mobilizing maps and data for critical purposes can even study or make definitive claims about phenomena or processes for which there are no reliable or available sources of data? Together, these issues point to the fundamental challenge of opacity to the future of geographical thought and praxis, and the necessity for critical geographers to not simply abandon these methods because of such challenges, but rather embrace this fuzziness in new and productive ways.

Keywords
Critical GIS, geographic thought, housing, mapping, quantitative data

> Rudy Giuliani: I'm not sure what 'opacity' means. It probably means you can see.
>
> Judge Brann: It means you can't. (U.S. District Court in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, November 17, 2020)

The challenge of opacity

Despite the proliferation of new forms of big and open data (Kitchin, 2014), and a resurgence of interest in critical approaches to mapping and quantification among human geographers in recent years (*The Canadian Geographer*, 2018; *ACME*, 2022), it seems that the data most necessary to make sense of our increasingly complex world is counterintuitively less and less available. Whether because institutions actively seek to conceal their operations, because they don't have the resources to devote to creating and maintaining such data, or because the data that exist have an exorbitant price tag beyond the reach

Corresponding author:
Taylor Shelton, Department of Geosciences, Georgia State University, 730 Langdale Hall, Atlanta, Georgia, 30303, USA.
Email: jshelton19@gsu.edu

of most researchers, many of the most pressing questions we have yet to answer have been made incredibly difficult to grasp.

This is *opacity*: the increasingly obscured nature of social and spatial phenomena that puts limits on our collective ability to measure and define the precise contours of these phenomena and their importance for society. The problem isn't that we don't know the general outlines of a given issue based on our experiences and inferences, but that the data necessary to make more definitive claims about it are out of reach. This is especially true for all manner of data about social and spatial inequalities, which one rarely needs authoritative quantitative data to recognize exist. And while we *shouldn't* need data to care about inequality, the reality is that without the data necessary to win over skeptics and speak the language of powerful institutions, scholars and advocates are simply engaging in unilateral disarmament.

In this commentary, I argue that opacity represents a fundamental challenge to geographical thought and praxis in our current 'post-truth' era. At its core, opacity is an epistemological problem. But it is an epistemological problem that can beget an ontological crisis. As more and more efforts are made to obscure definitive knowledge of the who, what, when, where, how, and why of our world, it becomes nearly impossible to say what actually *is*. And while it is important not to see data, information, or knowledge as a panacea for our various social problems, the result of such opacity and imprecision is usually a reinforcing of the status quo.

But, at the same time, I argue that recognizing and challenging the opacity of our social structures requires embracing a level of fuzziness and indeterminacy not usually welcome in more conventional positivist approaches to mapping and data analysis. It requires us to be creative about studying and making claims about emerging (and sometimes established) phenomena for which there are no available or reliable sources of data. Similarly, it forces us to more directly grapple with the implications of the so-called post-truth era, where scientific 'facts' are insufficient to convince a large portion of the population that something even exists, much less whether it is worthy of substantial attention or intervention. But even when facts and truth are in dispute, data remains crucial for telling stories and crafting narratives that help to shape the way we collectively see the world. While the challenges of opacity are abundant, it also presents countless opportunities for advancing geographical thought and praxis, should we choose to embrace them.

What opacity looks like

The increasing prominence of opacity as a governing logic is evident in a variety of domains, though it takes no single form. The first, and arguably most common and obvious, form of opacity is what I call *intentional opacity*. This is the purposeful obscuring of information from public view in order to protect a given institution. Whether because the data are intentionally never collected or aren't allowed to be publicly released, this form of opacity represents the classic challenge of academics and journalists. One of the most obvious examples of intentional opacity within housing research is the use of shell companies incorporated as limited liability corporations (LLCs) or limited partnerships (LPs) to hide the full extent and true nature of property ownership (Badger, 2018). By taking advantage of legal loopholes that conceal the beneficial ownership and limit the legal liability of the parent firm or owner, this enables landlords, developers, and other real estate speculators to use these networks of LLCs, LPs, and other corporate structures to obscure the full extent of their operations and property holdings. And even as academics and activists have developed methods for unraveling these networks in order to identify concentrations of ownership (An et al., 2022; Ashwood et al., 2022), some jurisdictions have taken the additional steps of rolling back what information about property owners is publicly available even on an individual basis (Briggs, 2020).

The second manifestation of opacity is *structural opacity*, which refers to the organizational inability of different institutions to create or maintain data infrastructures to counter opacity. This is especially the case for smaller firms or government entities that are understaffed or run on shoestring budgets, but also larger organizations operating under conditions of austerity where otherwise essential functions

are continually rolled back because they're seen as unnecessary or threatening to the status quo. The result of this kind of structural opacity is that data that should or could exist about countless issues of significant importance simply don't. For researchers, this is especially felt in the geographical unevenness of data, making it difficult to study certain kinds of places (often rural and impoverished), and further reinforcing the focus on a handful of places that are heavily researched to the exclusion of all others. For example, even though geographers and other social scientists have been especially interested in issues of eviction and housing dispossession in recent years, one analysis found that one-third of US counties have no annual eviction figures whatsoever, to say nothing of the completeness and availability of the data for the remaining two-thirds of the country (Robustelli et al., 2020).

The third type of opacity is *neoliberal opacity*, where otherwise public information is commodified for private profit. This type of opacity is closely related to, and in some ways a logical result of, structural opacity; if governments don't have the resources to do this kind of data work themselves, they'll either charge citizens for it, or private companies will step in to capture that service and produce profit from it. In the case of property ownership data, this is seen in the fact that widespread analysis of property ownership – particularly in the United States, but also elsewhere – is all but impossible without purchasing data from corporate data brokers like CoreLogic or CoStar for upwards of $50,000 even with an academic discount. Even at the smaller scale, some places, like Cobb County, Georgia in the Atlanta suburbs, charge more than $20,000 for access to geospatial data, with no exceptions for public or nonprofit entities. Whether or not these financial barriers to access are intentionally put in place to limit scrutiny – and thereby potentially overlapping with the intentional opacity described above – they serve as a key way of reproducing opacity.

Embracing fuzziness

These various forms of opacity undoubtedly create additional obstacles to understanding the finer details of social and spatial inequality. And yet, at the same time, the very entities who are responsible for the production of opacity demand data as a prerequisite to any meaningful action on such inequalities. But, in a post-truth world, definitively establishing a universally agreed-upon truth is something of a fool's errand, and powerful institutions leverage this doubt to insulate themselves and reproduce the status quo. While this doesn't mean that we should *completely* abandon the classic search for 'Truth', as I've suggested recently, it *does* mean that we should simultaneously turn our attention more toward using what data we do have to produce alternative understandings of the world and mobilize around such understandings (Shelton, 2022).

A number of recent works engage with precisely this challenge (e.g., Kim, 2015; Williams et al., 2019; Wegmann, 2020; Harten et al., 2021), and two of my recent projects exemplify the importance of embracing this fuzziness in the research process in order to more systematically examine previously opaque social practices. In the first project, I sought to examine the emergence of so-called gameday homes as a new form of housing speculation in college towns of the American South (Shelton, 2021). Meanwhile, the second project focused on quantifying the extent of residential hotel living in metro Atlanta as part of an amicus curiae brief meant to support the legal claim that hotel residents should be afforded the full rights of any long-term tenant in the state of Georgia (Housing Justice League et al., 2021).

In both of these projects, it was obvious that no usable or reliable data had ever been collected on these subjects, meaning that the data would either have to be created anew or some proxy measures would have to be identified. While interview or survey-based methods could have been useful in both situations, it was evident that in these cases this would not only be time- and effort-consuming; it also wouldn't necessarily yield any more definitive results. It's likely that gameday homeowners would be unwilling to divulge that their properties sat empty the vast majority of the year or were acquired in order to legally avoid taxes, just as hotel owners would be unlikely to reveal how

many of their rooms were occupied by semi-permanent residents on the verge of homelessness. Ultimately, parcel data – of the exact same kind mentioned above – was used to construct proxy measures of both phenomena, marking the first and most extensive known efforts at quantifying these two phenomena.

On the one hand, some data on – and grounded understanding of – these emerging forms of inequality are better than none. But, on the other hand, they remain *incredibly* fuzzy and partial, and situated in a context where they really might not matter to much of anyone at all. But, by trying to leverage the special legitimacy afforded to maps and data, this work – and particularly other work cited above that takes up the same task of quantifying that which hasn't previously been measured – we can collectively help to reset the agenda to take account of such phenomena that have been largely 'off the map' and embrace the fuzziness that comes with trodding new ground.

It is important to note, however, that these challenges to doing critically informed and rigorous quantitative or GIS-based research are going to become more and more commonplace and applicable, especially with the issues identified with the recent 2020 US Census and the data being released from it (e.g., Wines, 2022; boyd and Sarathy, 2022). At the same time, it also provides an opportunity to reflect on the ways that these have *always* been significant issues with *any* kind of data-driven research, insofar as the kinds of questions we ask are constrained by the data and methodological tools available to us. If we are going to continue pushing geographical thought and praxis forward in our post-truth age, it's imperative that we embrace, rather than shy away from, this fuzziness in order to challenge these multiple forms of opacity.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Taylor Shelton https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0776-9296

References

ACME (2022) Special issue: Doing critical GIS. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 21(4): 327–447.

An B, Jakabovics A, Orlando AW, et al. (2022) Who owns urban America? A methodology for identifying real estate owners. Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4156785 (accessed 13 February 2023).

Ashwood L, Canfield J, Fairbairn M, et al. (2022) What owns the land: The corporate organization of farmland investment. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 49(2): 233–262.

Badger E (2018) Anonymous owner, L.L.C.: Why it has become so easy to hide in the housing market. *The New York Times*. 30 April. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/30/upshot/anonymous-owner-llc-why-it-has-become-so-easy-to-hide-in-the-housing-market.html (accessed 13 February 2023).

boyd d and Sarathy J (2022) Differential perspectives: epistemic disconnects surrounding the U.S. Census Bureau's use of differential privacy. *Harvard Data Science Review* 2.

Briggs R (2020) Why did Mayor Kenney disable a tool for fighting blight in the name of 'public safety'? *PlanPhilly*. 22 September. Available at: https://whyy.org/articles/why-philly-residents-are-mad-you-cant-search-city-property-owners-by-name-anymore/ (accessed 13 February 2023).

Harten JG, Kim AM and Brazier JC (2021) Real and fake data in Shanghai's informal rental housing market: Groundtruthing data scraped from the internet. *Urban Studies* 58(9): 1831–1845.

Housing Justice League, Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation, The Southern Poverty Law Center, Aiello D, Shelton T and Goldstone B (2021) *Brief of Amicus Curiae in Efficiency Lodge Inc. v. Neason et al*. Court of Appeals for the State of Georgia. Case No. A21A1263. Available at: https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/a21a1263_-_brief-amicus_curiae.pdf (accessed 13 February 2023).

Kim AM (2015) *Sidewalk City: Remapping Public Space in Ho Chi Minh City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kitchin R (2014) *The Data Revolution: Big Data, Open Data, Data Infrastructures and Their Consequences*. London: Sage.

Robustelli T, Panfil Y, Oran K, et al. (2020) Displaced in America: Mapping housing loss across the United States. The New America Foundation. Available at: https://www.newamerica.org/future-land-housing/reports/displaced-america/ (accessed 13 February 2023).

Shelton T (2021) Gameday homes: Mapping emerging geographies of housing speculation and absentee ownership in the American South. *Cities* 115: 103230.

Shelton T (2022) Situated mapping: Visualizing urban inequality between the god trick and strategic positivism. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 21(4): 346–356.

The Canadian Geographer (2018) Special issue: Speculative and constructively critical GIS. *The Canadian Geographer* 62(1): 1–101.

Wegmann J (2020) Residences without residents: Assessing the geography of ghost dwellings in big US cities. *Journal of Urban Affairs* 42(8): 1103–1124.

Williams S, Xu W, Tan SB, et al. (2019) Ghost cities of China: Identifying urban vacancy through social media data. *Cities* 94: 275–285.

Wines M (2022) The 2020 census suggests that people live underwater. There's a Reason. *The New York Times*. 21 April. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/21/us/census-data-privacy-concerns.html (accessed 13 February 2023).