

Diverse Approaches to the Importance of Geography: the Death of Geography or Geography Matters in the Information Age!

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Abstract

A new form of diversity appears nowadays when theoretical geographers rethink the importance of geographical space, place, distance or other principal notions. This paper aims to introduce how geographical approaches to the phenomena, which evolved in the so-called information age, got diffused in everyday life. Statements considering spatiality or geography of information economy and society are basically influenced by the type of space being applied in examinations, such as physical, network, or web space, or virtual realities. This diversity primarily influences the discussions on modern interpretations of geography. The traditional concept of place will be revalorised: it actually dissolves in virtual space, meanwhile the role of discrete place disappears by the possibility of spatial independency, while on the other hand, spatial dependency differentiates space again, and appreciates selected places. The importance of physical distance has unambiguously decreased, instead of that the role of network distance and social distance can be emphasised. The paper tries to call attention on those numerous different ways in which geography is being revaluated in the 21st century.

Keywords: information and communication technologies, geography of information society, virtual space, death of geography, geography matters

The End of Geography or Geography Matters!

The extreme wordings of “the end of geography” and “death of distance”, as well as formulas of “geography matters”, together with the same content appearing is an expression of “the revenge of distance” and “geography returns” and calls attention to recent geographical diversity in the research of the information economy and society. These seemingly funny, or on the other hand gruesome phrases are undoubtedly extreme, trying to emphasise empirical considerations; mentioning remarkable novelties in the information age. Behind this terminology, actually the alteration of the aspect of traditional geography is hidden, as well as the concealed notice, or simply the recognition that one should be cautious concerning recent usage of geographical terms.

The simple definition of distance used in the everyday sense, or other accentuated notions of geography such as space, place or mobility have gone through significant changes with reference to their interpretation, irrespectively of which above-mentioned phrase has been chosen. According to extreme opinions, it is not about just the revaluation and content changes of terms, but also about their fundamental novelty, or else about the emergence of new forms of interpretations radically different from the foregoing. On the contrary modulated and more rational aspects prefer to see the new interpretations as complements and enrichments of the foregoing, while in certain systems of connections they support the existence of traditional approaches.

The big “battle” is to be discovered between the two most comprehensive reactions; the aspects advertising the end of geography and those emphasising the reconsidered (or rediscovered) importance of geography. One of them has the starting point that in the aura of the possibilities ensured by new information and communication technologies, the everyday troubles originated from spatiality disappearing, namely the ardently wished dream, the overcoming of space may become reality. The other aspect, to the contrary sees the reshaping for the justification of geographical theories and notions in the age of information and communication networks. This opinion – in a sense – does not say anything in particular, only that social processes and spatial relations of differences are still decisive parts of our life.

The opposition of these two standpoints seems hardly soluble at the first attempt. But do these approaches really conflict with each other? Can any of the statements be refuted or confirmed? Is it possible that proponents of both aspects are in the right, and consequently can these opposite statements coexist at the same time?

Before the 1990s, a reconciliation of ideas did not emerge, the ignorance of geography or spatiality in the world, discounted the utopian, perhaps futuristic, but no way empiric concepts of science. Looking at the traditions of the last decades, however, the theories of advertising geography’s turning to weightlessness appeared partly independently from the examination problems of the information society in several different contexts. One should only think of certain findings of the global world economic or political geography (Ohmae, 1990, O’Brien, 1992). From time to time, certain economic theories sound the discontinuance of the role of the nation states, because of the emergence of multinational companies, and on the contrary due to the increase of global market systems, the geographical location of countries on the planet is not an important question any more.

Later the altered possibilities of interactions generated by the information and communication technologies were obviously superposed on everyday life, making previous considerations of geography unimportant in the space of information economy. In connection with the seemingly immediate appearance of communication possibilities of ICT and particularly the internet and intranet technologies, the radical compress of space-time relations was often supposed; which may result in the complete “destruction” of space through time (Atkinson, 1998; Brunn – Leinbach, 1991; Cairncross, 1997; Morgan, 2001). In certain compositions this new digital and globalized world is similar to a pinhead, or at least to its “sense” (Negroponte, 1995). The fast diffusion of information and communication technologies obviously offered new, and so far unobtainable opportunities to restructure enterprise activities; for example in form of shaping up new balances between centralised and decentralised functions, or in connection with distant control of the production of goods and services. This could result in many service industries, which were in the past obviously location-specific and relatively sheltered from effects of international competition became less independent from the location of consumption, since it became possible to be directed from the other side of the Globe (Cairncross, 1997). All these made it generally a ‘rational thought’ in the economy to ignore geographical space in decision-making.

Similarly, the appearance of ICT instruments can be deemed important regarding their social consequences. In the specific information space of interconnected worldwide networks, namely in cyberspace, the emergence of social spaces could have been observed, which completely liberate the users from physical bounds of the human body. Virtual space is a social space, where people meet each other, henceforward personally, but besides new definitions of “meeting” and “personalisation” (Stone, 1991). The collapse of space-time relations and the evolution of new “space-less and placeless” social spaces lead to the query

of the importance of geographical places (Benedikt, 1991) to such a pitch that some believe geography and time do not constitute boundaries any more (Hauben, 1996).

The early work of William Mitchell (1995) titled "*City of bits*" expressively formulates the breaking of geographical traditions: Cyberspace is profoundly anti-spatial, you cannot say where it is, or describe its memorable shape and proportions, or tell a stranger how to get there. But you can find things in it, without knowing where they are. The Net is ambient – nowhere in particular, but everywhere at once. You do not go to it, you log in from wherever you physically happen to be. The Net's de-spatialisation of interaction destroys the geocode's key (Mitchell, 1995).

Theories representing "the death" of geography are basically arguing with wider interpreted influences of globalisation, as well as with the consequences of digitalisation; of these however, neither seems to be of considerable depth. According to Kevin Morgan (2001) the representatives of this opinion largely overestimate the "distance-dissolving" effects of information and communication technologies. While the key problems with these claims are that they conflate spatial reach with social depth, and they forget that the rapid diffusion of information and codified knowledge does not mean that tacit knowledge and understanding are also so freely available. Morgan (2001) is of the opinion that the above-mentioned approaches treat geography as simple physical space, when it needs to be understood rather as relational space.

Researchers, who stand against the radical transformation of spatial relations, or in opposition to geography's re-evaluation and decreasing importance, are representing the other end of the discussion, arguing with the importance of geography itself. In their opinion the theory of "geography matters" actually just rediscovered basic terms of geography. They respectively realised that previous geographical principles are also standing their ground in a brand new environment; the rules are exactly the same, only the comprehension needs some mental twists. As if we reordered the elements of the contents of our recent geographical terms, while having the substantive meaning unchanged.

Although there isn't any "terra incognita" on recent map of the World, some still designate nowadays the second age of geographical discoveries (e.g. Johansson, 2000). Development theories of innovation and technology recognise and rediscover the importance of geography in ever-wider circles. In contrast, with radical standpoints it is getting more accepted that although the Internet and virtual space have essential corrective effects on time-space relations, geographical aspects have important roles henceforward in many ways.

It is important that possibilities of information communication network connections and infrastructural grounds of bandwidth, which determine the speed of communication connections, are still unequally distributed in space. This new form of communication is dependent on real world spatial bounds, on geographical position of access points, materiality of cables, as well as on other infrastructural phenomena, influences outside the world of wires. One should not forget that global infrastructural advantages and disadvantages will exist in some way also in the future, since international differences are kept up in the digital age also, besides new e-services (Huws, 2002). Also when information takes online form it becomes (seemingly) geographically delocalised, and turns out to be useful only in the locality, where it is interpretable and expendable, which also certifies the importance of geographical position and location.

The statement that virtual space can never be a real copy, or substitute for geographical space is at best doubtful (Morgan, 2001). Beside the many reasons, a fundamental one is that it's hard to imagine in virtual space the similarly rich diversity of physical distance, where nuances of body talk and different forms of personal (face-to-face) communication mediate at least as many, if not more information than verbal communication.

The material character of the Internet and other elements of the technical infrastructure were always of great importance for those who argued for the significance of geography. According to Brian Hayes (1997) the Internet cannot exist independently of conventional geography. No bit can proceed via the Net without passing through kilometres of wires and optical fibres or tons of computer hardware, which are all in physical space indeed. All the cables and routers have well defined and with coordinates described places on the surface of the Earth, even when users of the Internet do not take into consideration where their information package is actually travelling. In this sense geography can be discovered in the background of all telecommunication interactions.

In the discussion of the ignorance, or the importance of geography, not only the opposition of virtuality and materiality is to be seen. Representatives of the free choice of geographical location have the additional argument that communication technologies already make it possible for the population and economic activity to 'twitter' with geographical 'places', thanks to fact that it is possible for telecommunications to link up to the network and peripheral places far from nodal centres. These perspectives treat Internet as a great equalising power of the business world since it makes it possible for distant places to compete even with metropolitan areas (Gorman, 2002). The Internet and the intranet, or as Robert M. Kitchin (1998) says the "cyberspace technologies" may cause sharpening of differences, or the intensifying of competition between geographical places by making it possible in the organisation of production to access places with lower wages or better labour force. By and large Krugman's new economic geography has the same conclusion about the role of information and communication technologies in the settlement strategies of companies (Krugman, 1999). In many cases information technologies foster centralisation tendencies by being connected to telecommunication infrastructure and social milieu of large cities. Similarly services that can be decentralised, are settling rather in regions with suitable labour market and transport conditions (Castells, 1996).

To better understand and be able to compare statements of different interpretations about the importance of geography in the information age, the following table can be created (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of interpretations of the importance of geography in the information age

	Concept of "the end of geography"	Concept of "geography matters"
Substance of the interpretations	Interpretations radically different from the foregoing	Interpretations as complements and enrichments of the foregoing
Space	Overcoming of space may become reality, liberation from the bounds of physical space, instead of that web space or virtual space is important	Justification of geographical theories, spatiality and geography are still decisive, physical space is important
Place	The role of discrete place disappears by the possibility of spatial independency	Spatial dependency differentiates space and appreciates selected places
Distance	Physical distance is not important,	Distance is a major constraint. The

	only network distance and social distance can be emphasised	roles of physical and social distance are both important.
Geographical differences	Global, accessible networks everywhere may cause global equalisation	Unequally distributed of infra-structural and other capabilities still results in geographical differences
Character of the concept	Utopian	Empirical

Detailing of standpoints announcing the end, or the importance of geography can obviously be continued, however, it is already observable that many arguments can be found alongside both approaches. As a matter of fact, to keep off the sterile polarisation between the two concepts, the physical and virtual proximity, or geography and cyberspace, the best defensible solution is to recognise that they cross, intersect and pervade each other. It can be declared that virtual space is not a province separated from geographical space, but empirical continuation of people's everyday life (Dodge – Kitchin, 2001). Virtual proximity can be a good substitute for geographical distance at connections of standardised interactions, but not if complexity, ambiguousness and tacit character play a great role in communication (Morgan, 2001).

The statement that the above-mentioned radically different narratives exist parallel is unwarrantable until it is recognised that in reality it is about different aspects of the same thing. The concept professing the “end of geography” is focusing on equalising effects of globalisation; while proponents of the concept of “geography matters” accept the standpoint of spatial differences, which appear in national, regional and local frames. These two tendencies – equalisation and differentiation – form a permanent dialectic in regional economies, comparing geography to a two-way street between localisation and diffusion, in contrast to a one-way highway of spreading (Storper, 1997). After all, currently geographers have the task to call public attention to the existence of both concepts, and to declare that geography is still important but in different aspects.

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