

Introduction to the Special Issue on Geographies of Information Society

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In 1997 the National Science Foundation launched the Varenius Project with the aim of advancing geographic information science (Goodchild et al., 1999). Varenius incorporated three components: computational, cognitive, and societal. In a review paper titled “Geographies of Information Society,” Sheppard et al. (1999) explored the third (societal) component with the aim of introducing the key research initiatives and also to set “a benchmark by which to assess, a few years from now, the specific contributions of the Varenius project to that increasingly vital research area” (p. 798). This special issue revisits that benchmark and initiative 10 years after its publication.

Judging by the diversity of topics and the scope of literature of the last few years, one could safely argue that research on the societal aspects of geographic information science and technology has maintained, and indeed intensified, its vitality. Researchers from geography and neighboring disciplines have since tackled many key and critical issues, specifically around the three initiatives of the societal component of the Varenius Project: (i) place and identity in an age of technologically regulated movement, (ii) measuring and representing accessibility in the information age, and (iii) empowerment, marginalization, and public participation geographic information systems (PPGIS). The growth in recent years of interest in critical PPGIS also contributes to this line of work, posing new questions and offering fresh insights. This has resulted in a healthy exchange of ideas between those who are concerned with the social, cultural, and political implications of modern technologies and practices and those who

take more interest in the development and application of those technologies. These exchanges can be further extended by involving information scientists who also think about similar questions with regard to modern information and communication technologies (ICT) and the information society. There are many interesting parallels in the types of questions and issues that face these scholars, making a mutual conversation intellectually productive. The purpose of this special issue is to contribute to that conversation.

The range of possible topics is rather large. We take our lead from the Sheppard et al. original review, revisiting its key themes and questions. As these authors had suggested, the title “geographies of the information society” is interpretively flexible, meaning different things to different people: the *actual* geographies that evolve on the surface of the earth in the information age, the *virtual* geographies that are the direct products of modern ICT, or the *conceptual* geographies gradually developed in individual and social consciousness through the representations of earth by these technologies. Each of these meanings introduces their own set of themes, questions, and challenges. To capture these multiple meanings, in the original call for papers (CFP) for the special issue we used the metaphor of information society as a universe at the intersection of three distinct but interdependent spaces: the geographical space, the social space, and the informational space. By invoking this metaphor, we aimed to attract attention to the differences and similarities among these various spaces. This is how we described these:

In each of them, we discover asymmetries, inequalities, and hierarchies. We also identify similar features and activities—most notably, links, bridges, and associations being continuously assembled, disassembled, and reassembled; borders drawn, erased, and redrawn incessantly; and boundary objects shuttled along the links and across borders tirelessly.

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People, organizations, and communities find it increasingly difficult to negotiate their way through this convoluted universe. (CFP to the special issue)

We are pleased to report that the metaphor bore interesting fruits. As you see in the articles of this issue, the contributing authors seem to have found the metaphor useful, widely drawing on it to develop their ideas and discussions. In discussing the representational practices of religion-online, Pauline Cheong, Shirlena Huang, and Jessie Poon conceptualize religious websites and blogs as imagined spaces that, in turn, generate proximal spaces that annihilate distance between a pastor and his congregation while maintaining the pastor's moral authority as a gatekeeper of religious knowledge. On the basis of this conceptualization, they show how the Internet facilitates pluralistic spaces made possible by the creative use of its multimodality and multifunctionality that together convey the church as a community asset, and how geographical markers and symbolic meanings intertwine in a crucial discursive space online. Rather than eliding the real or physical geography of the church, the virtual space of various religious organizations functions as a "proximal" sacramental space where members connect by being and imagining themselves as part of "the body of Christ," reinforcing the importance of church grounds.

Vincent Homburg and Yola Georgiadou, on the other hand, examine the notion of SDI (spatial data infrastructure) as it "travels" from North America to other parts of the globe. Understanding SDI as a myth that both seduces and inspires, they demonstrate how this notion mutates throughout its relocation from think tanks of the developed world to the real-world settings of the developing countries in Africa and elsewhere. By unpacking the metaphors that are invoked in official discourses of SDI—metaphors such as "commons," "quilt," "blanket," "marketplace," and so on—these authors create a colorful *bricolage* that clearly illustrates the development of these discourses in the last decade and a half.

Francis Harvey engages in a similar critique of another infrastructure, in this case cadastral information in Poland. Interested in the discrepancies between the geographic, social, and information spaces of land use in a historically conflicted part of the globe, he brings our attention to the various day-to-day practices of landowners, local governments, and officials in tackling the discrepancies and in stabilizing the geographic boundaries. The concept of "boundary objects" allows Harvey to explicate the roles of technologies, documents, registries, and other nonhuman actors in this historically and geographically contingent stabilization process.

Finally, Ekbia and Evans explore another aspect of the relationship between social, geographic, and information spaces—namely, in the land-use decision-making processes of land managers who are exposed to various types of information from different types of sources. Taking their lead from ethnomethodologists and pragmatic sociologists, they argue that something becomes information only insofar as it is acted upon in practice. They develop the concept of "regimes of information" to discuss how such practices acquire their meaning from the particular situations and "worlds" in which they are manifested.

The perspective pieces by Laura Forlano and Suchool Kim, similarly, navigate geographically vast and remote spaces as they become connected, circulated, and reorganized through the ubiquitous use of modern electronic information and communication technologies (ICT). Forlano examines how wireless community networks have reshaped the urban-scape in New York and elsewhere, creating new organizational, collaborative, and creative spaces. Kim studies the reshaping of public and private spaces in Seoul, and characterizes the process of social communication in transition in terms of the organizing principle of social space from containment to distribution and connectivity.

Our interviews with Michael Goodchild and Eric Sheppard provide a historical background and also introduce some of the more recent topics and questions that need to be investigated at the intersection of geography and information science.

The contributions, as you see, cover a wide variety of topics explored by a diverse group of scholars from various disciplines. More interestingly, however, in terms of geographic extent they span the globe, covering areas from North America to Africa, from Poland to Singapore, and from New York to Seoul. The diversity of topics, concepts, and questions, as well as geographic areas, speaks to the potential for ongoing discussions and debates over the geographies of information society. We hope that this special issue contributes to the continuation and liveliness of such discussions.

REFERENCES

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