

The Geopolitics of Google Inc.

Keyword Analysis of the Rise in Google's Geopolitical Influence

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Introduction

Google's Geopolitical influence has risen over the years. Its parent company Alphabet profiting a net income of over 34 billion.¹ In this keyword analysis, we will define the keyword, analyze its structure, describe its relationship to media/information technologies, and discuss some issues that arise from its geopolitical influence. First, we will define the term geopolitics, which refers to politics as influenced by geological factors. Although geopolitics is most closely tied to international politics, we will also discuss localized politics later. The second part of our keyword includes Google, which is a well-known search engine company owned by Alphabet. Together, the Geopolitics of Google suggests that Google, a subsidiary of Alphabet has a hand in geopolitics.

The Structure

To understand our keyword we will describe the structure of Google's mapping software. We will look at the mapping, and satellite imagery software that Google provides. Such software includes Google Earth and Google Maps. These products umbrella tools Google Maps has implemented tools such as Street View, Directions, and Timeline. Some tools in Google Earth include Flight Simulator, Moon, and Virtual Reality. These software's are helpful and innovative. This structure of Google tools is significant in our everyday lives. They can also be subject to criticism, especially in geopolitics. The bulk of our analysis of the keyword will lie in these geopolitics which will be discussed later.

Before the Geopolitics of Google

Before the time of Google Maps and Google Earth, cartography was long and tedious work. It required the combination of science, aesthetics, and technique to create objectively correct models of our world. Map-making is an inherently political process.² Maps are dominated by political narratives as described by Anna Moore and Nicholas Perdue in their publication *Imagining a Critical Geopolitical Cartography*. Maps are more than just tools. They are sets of ideas and power relations that influence how individuals interpret the world around them. You cannot make a map and not have a hand in geopolitics. You have an inherent bias of what you know, and what you think you know. This is not much different for Google as a company. The rest of our report will hinge on the following main points. Firstly, the Googlization of our world is happening. Google is gaining ground in the political discourse, and geopolitics is one of them. Secondly, Google Maps and Earth are becoming digital technical objects in a scholarly sense. Tracing back to Simondian ontology we can draw some cues that suggest Google Suite is not merely just a tool. Thirdly, Google Maps, and Earth are inherently political. With the history of cartographers, it is easy to see that Google may find itself in tense situations in times of geopolitical conflict. Lastly, we will discuss a real-world example of Google Maps as a political technique that aids the restructuring of urban informality in Brazilian favelas.

Googlization: Infrastructure Imperialism

The term Googlization is a neologism that defines the diversification of Google's search engine into different contexts, markets, and other applications. Google transcends itself from being merely a search engine and becomes increasingly involved in the political economy. Many scholars have keyed the term Googlization. One such example includes Siva Vaidhyanathan and his book, *The Googlization of Everything: (And Why We Should Worry)*.³ Vaidhyanathan was critical of the infrastructural imperialism and surveillance capitalism can be drawn from Google's services. First, we will discuss Vaidhyanathan's point of infrastructure imperialism. Google

¹ Duffin, "Most Profitable Companies in the World"

² Moore and Perdue, "Imagining a Critical Geopolitical Cartography," 892.

³ Siva Vaidhyanathan, *The Googlization of Everything: (and Why We Should Worry)*, 84.

requires massive amounts of data and will do anything it can to maximize the amount of data it can to grab off users. The deliberate choice to set defaulted options to require users to sign-in and reveal personal information shows its need to expand. Users have a choice to use Google's service, or to "opt-out". Unfortunately, Google's internet dominance generally forces users to use the service. Although the information is more accessible (compared to paper maps), it comes at a cost to the user. Users divulge important information which helps Google expand its products. This tactic feeds information and user data into Google's ever-expanding geopolitical empire.

Googlization: Surveillance Capitalism

This leads us to his second point of surveillance capitalism. Google has varying privacy policies across each service (Maps, Earth, Search, etc.). These varying policies can also change over time to accommodate its constant need for data and protection of its trade secrets in search algorithms.⁴ Yet, Google as a company is in control of so much data. Google Street-view is an image representation of our streets which provides Google with unforeseen political power. This is a result of the vast amount of user/environment images Google owns. At the time of Google Street View's introduction, it was met with controversy regarding user privacy.⁵ The images of our streets, businesses, and houses are so valuable in the world of Geopolitics. In 2013, Google reported that the Maps software published more images of the world every two weeks than the amount they had in 2006 (Maps launched in 2005).⁶ This Googlization of the geopolitics world is just another way that Google profits. As we can see, Googlization is just a larger and significant term that encompasses our keyword. Although Vaidhyanathan does not specifically coin the keyword Geopolitics of Google, we can draw parallels with the example he provides of Google Street-view. The Geopolitics of Google is one of the driving factors behind Googlization in our society, hence why we need to take notice.

Google Maps is a Digital Technical Object

Google's Maps has become the centre of Scott McQuire's essay at the University of Melbourne, titled *One map to rule them all? Google Maps as digital technical object*. This is another scholarly outlook on Google Maps, a large chunk of the Geopolitics of Google. McQuire argues that Google Maps exemplifies the characteristics of technical objects in Simondonian informational ontology. Simondon's concept of digital objects is reflected in McQuire's idea that "Google Maps constitute technical objects for the digital milieu, or digital technical objects".⁷ The intervention of the technical object acts as a "mediator between man and the world" in the sense that it defines the prior nature into culture.⁸ This is significant, as we have a basis to claim that Google Maps is defining our culture. Simondon argues that technical objects should be made the forefronts of our education similarly to mathematics, science, and nature.⁹ They exist everywhere, and we should very much learn about them. As we can see in a scholarly sense, Google Maps is significant in political and cultural development in our society. The technical objectification of Google tools reinforces the geopolitical power of Google in the Simondonian sense. Not only do we use Google Maps as a tool, but it also is changing the way we interpret our physical world.

⁴ Vaidhyanathan, *The Googlization of Everything*, 84.

⁵ Ibid, 84.

⁶ Google (Youtube). *Project ground truth: Accurate maps via algorithms and Elbow Grease*, 19:42.

⁷ Scott McQuire, "One map to rule them all? Google Maps as digital technical object", 151.

⁸ Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, 183.

⁹ Ibid, 183.

Google Maps is Inherently Political

Google Maps has the power to draw borders and landmarks. Cartography and toponymy have always been influenced by political powers. Google has been criticized before for its failure to label Palestine on Google Maps.¹⁰ In a Medium publication titled *Is Google wired for geopolitics?*, Miranda Bogen outlines the many conflicts and issues that Google has faced as a digital mapping company over the years. As mentioned before, diplomatic negotiators and historic cartographers run into trouble with their jobs. This is due to the inherent bias they may have considering border and political disputes. Many more examples can be recalled such as the India-China dispute and Iranian-Saudi Gulf dispute described by Bogen. As a result of being a worldwide company, it is difficult for them to appeal to every single self-proclaimed sovereign and their claim to lands, landmarks, and people. Google Maps must be intrinsically geopolitical as it is the main method of interpretation from our world to people. The inherent bias and Googlized interpretation are presented to meet the standards of Googlization and their political agenda.

Google Maps is as a Political Tool

The recent development of mapping Brazilian favelas have been taken on by ICT corporations, particularly Google. Andres Luque-Ayala and Flávia Maia describe the impact of spatial media companies on un-well documented areas such as Brazilian favelas in their publication *Digital territories: Google maps as a political technique in the re-making of urban informality*. In their paper, they reinforce that territory is not simply an object, but rather a process in which continual progressions are made.¹¹ This progressive geopolitical information is collected by Google and become a bundle of political techniques. They are comprised of censuses, statistics, and cartography. Furthermore, overlooked points of interests become “recalculated”, due to the computational nature of Google’s data processing method. Previously, overlooked points of interest, social groups, and statistics may be neglected and forgotten about. The recursive and logical nature of Google’s data collection ensures that all data is processed. Much like their search engine, results or data are queried and ranked. This is the basis of where Luque-Ayala and Maia justify Google’s political tools as a method for social-economical inclusion. These favelas are not as secluded before thanks to Google’s geopolitical influence. Local businesses, groups of socially outcast people are getting attention thanks to Google’s mapping software. As we can see, Google’s mapping software is a political tool. To capture more users, more data and ultimately leads to their gain in geopolitical influence.

Conclusion

The Geopolitics of Google is interesting as it takes on the geopolitical burden that cartography has along with the social, economic, and cultural burdens that ICT companies also face today. Google Maps and Google Earth are new mediums of information that are not only just tools but act as a Googlized lens interpretation of our world. Although cartography is inherently geopolitical, Google is much more powerful than the historic cartographer. It is important to analyze the other consequences that we have seen so far pertaining to the geopolitical power that Google owns.

¹⁰Miranda Bogen, “*Is Google Wired for Geopolitics?*”

¹¹ Luque-Ayala Andrés, Neves Maia Flávia, “*Digital territories: Google maps as a political technique in the re-making of urban informality*”, 6.

Further Readings

1. To read more related to Googlization with examples of Geopolitics:

Gorman, Lyn, and David McLean. *Media and Society into the 21st Century: a Historical Introduction*. United Kingdom: John Wiley & Sons, 2009.

Rogers, Richard. *The Googlization Question, and the Inculpable Engine*. Deep Search: The Politics of Search Engines beyond Google, Edison, NJ, 2008.

2. To read more related to Google Earth Mapping and Post Modern Cartography:

Farman, Jason. "Mapping the Digital Empire: Google Earth and the Process of Postmodern Cartography." *New Media & Society* 12, no. 6 (2010).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809350900>.

References

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- Erin Duffin, "Most Profitable Companies in the World," Statista, August 11, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/269857/most-profitable-companies-worldwide/>.
- Google, "Google I/O 2013 - Project Ground Truth: Accurate Maps Via Algorithms and Elbow Grease" YouTube Video, 40:20, May 16, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FsbLEtS0uls#t=%201182&ab_channel=GoogleDevelopers
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