

Mark Jarzombek: Let's create the Institute for the Study of Urban Metrics (ISUM)

Over the last decade Sustainability has entered mainstream political discourse, but the practices associated with it are built just as much around fantasy as around fact, and even the facts are often self-serving or narrowly defined. It is impossible to know what is green-washing and what might actually help, and even then, whom does it actually help, to what particular end, and to what degree of short-term or long-term efficacy? What we need is a robust understanding of urban metabolism. I mean by urban metabolism, not just how much electricity or water is used, or how much waste is produced, but the intricate networks and cross-networks of flows and energies that make up an urban environment. These flows are not just about materials, chemicals, and capital, but about humans, ideas and institutions as well. The global emergence of risk landscapes and tweet landscapes are part of the equation, as is the landscape of corruption.

We need, therefore, to think of creative ways to 'measure' the city and to think of equally creative ways to map and visualize urban systems. Too often the search for metrics is reduced to numbers, lists or graphs. Too often the message is about the rise of this or the decline of that. It is a result that might satisfy a certain vested interest, but has nothing to do with the larger picture. Too often informatics is built around an isolated problem, volcanic activity, product marketing, electrical output, or data usage, with little or no linkage between one system and the other.

The institute that I propose will seek out people with interesting ideas about how to measure the city and how to visualize its various flows and their interactions. Its mission will not be to "promote" Sustainability, which is why that word is not in the title, but rather to lay bare the various systems, large or small, hard or ephemeral, that make up our lives. It will show how difficult it is to change one system without impacting other systems, and in this way it will allow for a deeper understanding of global connections.

The city will always remain an elusive target, but today we are more capable of fathoming at least some of its mystery than ever before. The Institute will be organized around an interdisciplinary team of scientists, sociologists, architects, planners, philosophers, and visual artists who propose research projects that another team of researchers will then pursue over a period of time. The mission of the core members is not just to bring their expertise to bear on the discussion, since that is the death of all conversations, but to rise above the conventions of expertise culture and try to see the city through different lenses.

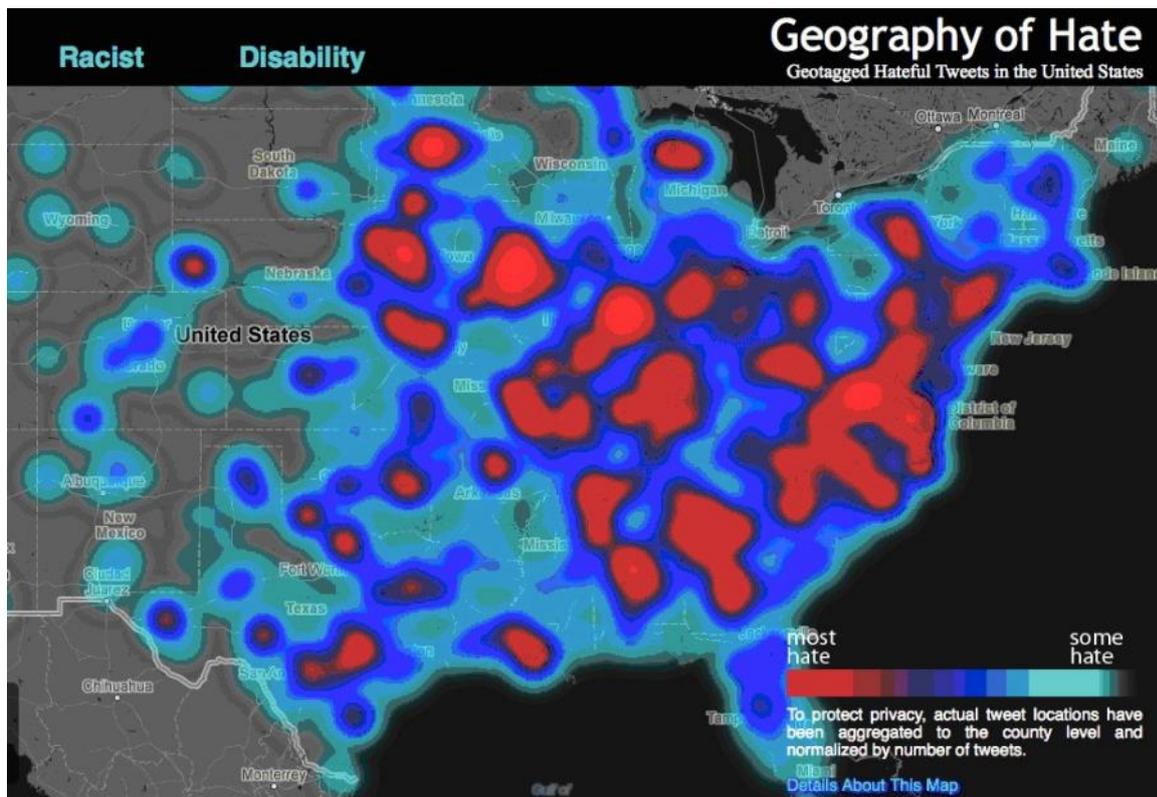
At a regular basis, maybe every 3 years, the ISUM will publish its findings. This can be done in any number of ways: through conferences, but more likely through interactive digital tools and exhibitions. Their mission is not to produce 'white papers' about the value of Sustainability, just as it is not to reduce the problem to the politics of CO2. Their mission is to produce information that interests officials just as much as the person on the street. In fact, it is to the latter that ISUM ultimately envisions as its audience. Urban residents should be able to 'see' themselves in larger participatory horizons. When that happens, they can then make hopefully more informed – or at least different – decisions.

Let's say, for example, I want to buy a washing machine that is supposed to be more ecologically friendly. I can go to the ISUM web site and in easy-to-read and understand visuals I can see where the parts of the machine are coming from, where the plastics and metals originate, how many and what kind of jobs are involved, and how much the new machine will save in emissions. I can also see how the old machine operates and how it will be recycled and even where its parts and chemicals are most likely to wind up. Maybe it turns out that keeping the old one is less

stressful to the economy to the environment than I think and that the new one, despite being more efficient, may not be the right choice.

The point is not to simply promote new technologies and some arbitrary myth of Sustainability, but to recognize the connections between distant labor and near-by labor, to recognize the connections between production and cost, and to see how changing one piece of the equation changes all the other pieces, both upstream and downstream – and thus to ‘measure’, to some degree, a particular decision. In all of this there is no right or wrong, but if I insist, for example, on using a product that uses cheap labor, maybe I will want to ask questions about the nature of that labor – or the politics imposed on the workers. If I choose a product that uses high-end materials, I might want to know more about the mining process and so forth. Is a product that needs 10 workers ‘better’ than one that needs a hundred? It is impossible to answer unless I see a more complex bundle of realities.

It is astonishing how little we know about urban systems. The Institute for the Study of Urban Metrics will be a bold step in that direction. Its goal is not to give the ‘right’ answer for the individual, but to allow the metrics to help as many people as possible see different types of answers and their consequences. The goal is not to create a single equation, like the ARUP equation that promises all and means nothing. The point is to help us see as many different interconnections as possible so as to improve our understanding of who we are in the world. The goal, ultimately, is not just to help us see ourselves as global citizens, but as stewards of the planet.



The Geography of Hate is part of a larger project by Dr. Monica Stephens of Humboldt State University (HSU) identifying the geographic origins of online hate speech.