

Flow 2012 Conference Roundtable Panel

Media Studies and the Digital Humanities Movement: Response Statement

Joe Straubhaar, Jeremiah Spence and Josh Gleich, Media Studies/Radio-TV-Film, University of Texas, Austin

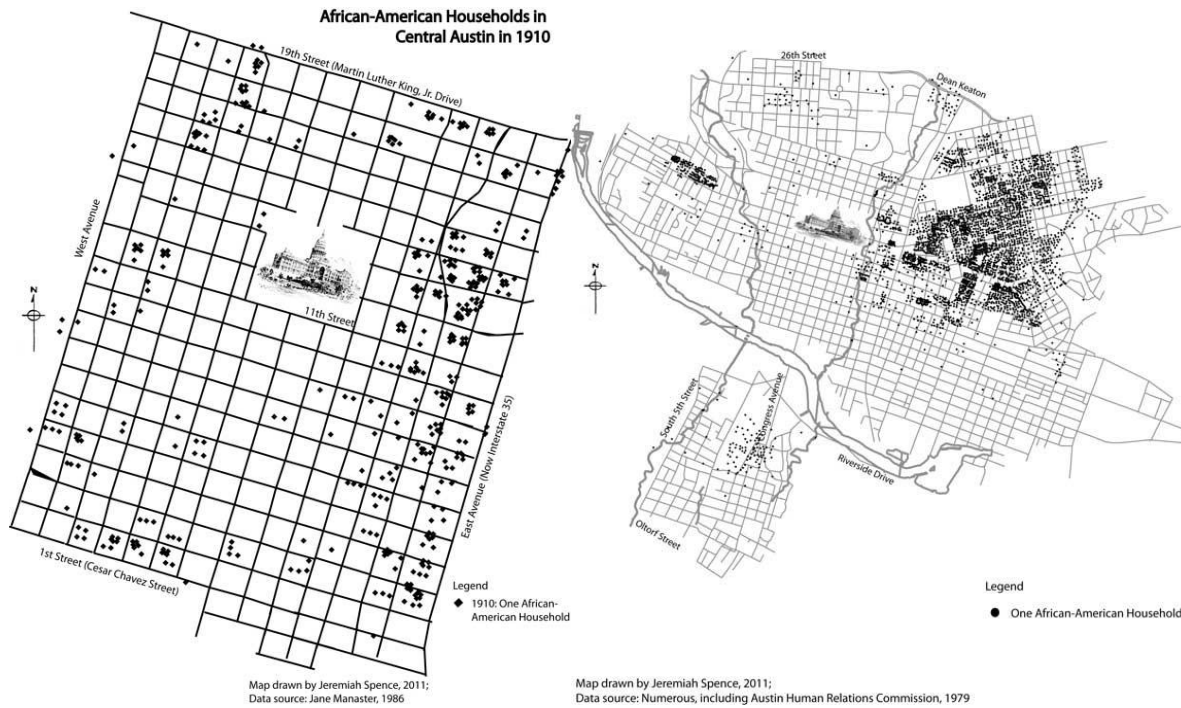
The digital humanities movement seems to offer media studies several opportunities. One is its interdisciplinarity, which much like cultural studies, offers an opportunity for a wider interchange with other disciplines over topics of mutual interest like digital media. Another is the opportunity to rethink and perhaps bridge old disputes, like when it makes sense to try to quantify some object of study, versus more purely qualitative or traditionally humanistic approaches. (Maybe certain kinds of quantitative content analysis are useful outside their traditional confines in social science research? It seems like digital humanities offers the chance to rethink at least some of our past paradigmatic boundaries. Which paradigmatic bounds are important to maintain and which can be relaxed?)

Another opportunity is to learn new paradigms and tools, like cultural geography and mapping, in our case, to expand our horizons as media oriented scholars. The digital presentation of our research, often in modes beyond words, shows us other ways to communicate, at least in part, our research to others. That responds to some degree to Alexis' challenge to use digital humanities to rethink what research means and how it is presented.

We offer two cases of using visual mapping to shed light on related humanistic issues. One is the racialized history of the information and cultural landscape of Austin; something that Joe and Jeremiah treated in a recently published book, *Inequity in the Technopolis*, about Austin. In that effort, we were employing history, political economy and ethnography to try to understand how Austin's segregated past has set certain boundaries around its seemingly radically transformed social and economic landscape as one of the most visible technology oriented cities, or technopolis, as the original planners of Austin referred to it, in the U.S.

Austin seems so hip, so open-minded that it is hard to see its sources of lasting disadvantage for many of its poorest minorities, although both history and ethnography had begun to open our eyes. We discovered that using maps as key guideposts for understanding communicated complex history in simple, elegantly insightful ways. Austin was segregated formally in 1928 by a city zoning act that carefully skirted U.S. federal restrictions on segregation to achieve massive movement of Black Austinites to East Austin, designated in 1928 as the zone of segregation. Consider two maps, one (on the left) of where Black households were in Austin in 1910, pre-segregation, and another (on the right) of where they were in 1940, post-segregation.

African-American Households in Austin, Texas - 1940



Furthermore, this kind of structuring from above, as de Certeau calls it, is very hard to subsequently undo. Despite desegregation efforts of the 1970s-90s in Austin, followed by widespread digital and social inclusion efforts in the 1990s-2000s, a 2000 map of where Black households are in Austin, would look similar to 1940 and reflect the persistence of the lines of segregation.

Many of us, and probably even more of our students, really are visual learners. Maps, when relevant, seem to be an extremely elegant way to express certain aspects of history. Seeing these maps shows concisely and elegantly the lasting impact of the now seemingly remote era of racial segregation upon the changing cityscape of the now seemingly very modern Austin.

These maps also predict current outlines of local media territories, particularly in radio, community radio, access to broadband and wireless, etc. See the next page for a GIS image that maps information from an Austin City survey of who has access to what kind of media and technology. It shows that broadband Internet access is much lower on the East side of town in a section that overlaps the African-American ghetto created in 1928 and the largely poor Hispanic neighborhood just south of it.

