

Graduate Student Opportunity at University of Alberta in Social/Cultural Geography

Project: “Putting Data Driven Urbanism in its Place”

There are currently two openings for graduate students (masters or PhD-level) interested in academic research projects related to the social and cultural geography of smart-cities, urban science and ‘big data.’ These opportunities include financial support (minimum of \$26,000/year). Graduate students will have the option of co-investigating case studies currently planned or developing case-studies of their own. A general description of the project is below. If you have questions please contact Dr. Joshua Evans, Assistant Professor of Human Geography, Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences (joshua.evans@ualberta.ca).

Project Description

Cities have an endless appetite for knowledge. Increasingly, cities are turning to data-driven and computationally intensive forms of urban analysis to address so-called ‘wicked problems’ (e.g. crime, poverty, climate change). Fueled by the proliferation of ‘big data’ and accelerating computational power, this data-driven urbanism is celebrated as offering new understandings of urban problems and new ‘smarter’ forms of urban governance and organization. In a short time, it has given rise to new sites and spaces such as urban observatories, urban laboratories, urban data platforms, urban operating systems and urban dashboards. Seen by many as cutting-edge and innovative, at the core of this data-driven urbanism is the timeworn belief that objective, evidence-based understandings of the city, arrived at using the scientific method, can improve the quality of urban life. This is one of the appeals of the new urban science. Its realist epistemology and instrumental rationality give the impression that research and planning processes can be uncoupled from the value-laden realities of urban politics. But several decades of scholarship in science studies challenges this impression: science is fully imbricated within networks of power, perceptions of validity and relations of trust. Moreover, space and place matter in the conduct of scientific inquiry. Issues of politics are fundamental to science and, by extension, the new urban science and data-driven urbanism. This research project will critically reflect upon the data-driven urbanism by concentrating analytical attention on the social and material assemblages and networks that make urban data viable. The project will undertake and compare case studies of data-driven urbanism (i.e. urban observatory, urban laboratory, urban data platforms) in Canadian cities. Each case study will tell stories of data-driven urbanism that reveal the complex assemblages of people, places, documents and technologies that must be held in place to produce data. By unpacking this ‘holding in place’ case studies will shed light on an important yet under-acknowledged political register in urban affairs. Furthermore, comparing and contrasting these case studies will illuminate what such registers mean for how cities are known and governed in the 21st century.