Mapping What Really Matters

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What do you do when you open Google Maps to get directions to a restaurant that you know is good and quite nearby, and it simply isn't there? If you're me, you swear quietly and either get lost trying to find it or else go somewhere that is on the map. If you're Lauren Leek, you scrape details of every single restaurant in London and build your own unbiassed version of London's food map. But let's start with her map of London's latte line.

Lauren: The latte line is basically ... It started with in, Australia especially, specifically, in Sydney, they have a sort of invisible line the media often describes between those who make the coffees and those who buy the coffees. And it basically entails that socioeconomically speaking, through the city, there is this invisible line that divides the society up, and this has a lot of consequences. Think of the quality of the education, the cost of the transport. If you live on one side of the line and all the work is on the other side of the line, you have to always have time and money to travel to that side of the line. And this is sort of a reinforcing thing. Less public utilities were coming in those areas. And because of that, basically those areas are less desirable, and even more consequences. And knowing this story, I was curious whether I do could the same for London basically. And very agnostically I tried to get all kinds of different data on socioeconomic status, everything associated with that. And I said, can I just let the data speak and see the same divide happen in London?

Jeremy: So you're not personally looking to see whether there's a divide. You're asking the computer to take all this data and say, is there a divide? And clearly there is one. But what's it actually, what? ... It's not about latte, is it? I mean, is it about cafes?

Lauren: I think partly it also has to do with cafes, but it's more a metaphor for who are the workers. Who are the ones who have

workers basically work for them. And I think latte is a concept that sort of resonates with a lot of people, because a lot of people grab a coffee on their way to work, et cetera, but they don't realise that to get your coffee at 7 a.m. on your way to work, it means that someone at 5 a.m. has to wake up and come from a different part of the city, because they can't afford on the latte salary to make that coffee, living in that part of the city. And I think this is a easy to sort of grasp way of explaining something underlying inequality, basically, within a city.

Jeremy: I mean, it's always historically it's been true that a lot of the support jobs — nursing, teaching — have had a London weighting because on their salaries they can't live in the places where they work. But this kind of approach just says, well, show me whether that's true. How clear is the line? Is it ... I mean, on the map you draw, it's a clear, bright white line, but on either side of the line is it at all fuzzy or can you really say this district is inside the latte line, that district is outside it?

Lauren: So what I get is not, I guess, one very strict line. I get a sort of cross and that cross has areas around it. And what you often see is, we always talk in boroughs or councils or whatever, but within a borough, within a council, you have a really strong, distinct difference. You have the good streets and the bad streets. And the problem often is that we don't have enough data to really go down to that. So in this analysis, I also use restaurants. I also use basically all kinds of extra data that goes a bit more granular than the data the government normally uses to determine these inequality measures in general.

Jeremy: So where does that data come from?

Lauren: Anything I've scraped on the internet myself to what the government also uses, right? So I do most of my analysis on the so-called LSOA level, which is one of the smaller levels, a sort of administrative level, that the government uses. Think of about 1500 people fit in that one LSOA. But 1500 people can be, yeah, can still be a division, right? But it goes already way more granular than a council or borough level, which they normally was used for this analysis.

Jeremy: You mentioned cafes, do pubs come into this as well? Is there a kind of — I don't know quite what to call it — a lager line?

Lauren: Probably. I mean maybe you could if you look at the prices of beer, you could also see a sort of clear divide where you have, this

is a very nice area premium versus, that premium doesn't have to hold here. But I think that also partly reflects the property prices and everything around it, which needs to be taken into consideration. But what we do see, if we look systematically at the data, is that certain pubs have a higher risk of closing, and often those pubs that have a higher risk of closing are actually in the neighbourhoods which really rely on the pub for employment and as a sort of community centre.

Jeremy: I want to come back to the pub in a minute because I know you've done work on that, but before we get to that, on the map, which people can explore, of the latte line, you've got restaurants and you've got menu prices, but I can't do anything with menu prices. It's there, but you can't see where a menu price is higher and where a menu price is lower. Does it affect the outcome of the line?

Lauren: So with a line like this, and also the method I use, is that it allows for strong correlations between different explanations. And it's very difficult to disentangle this is that, or this is that. So one could make the argument that if the house prices, for instance, are higher there, it means that property prices are more expensive, which means that an area in itself is more expensive and the big change, for instance, that have more money to spend can more easily locate. So it's all basically associated with each other.

Jeremy: Isn't property price then just the simple explanation, that where things are expensive, you have shops that rely on richer people and poorer people can't afford to live there, so they live somewhere else. Isn't property price just the answer?

Lauren: Yes. But then also a lot of the question is why these property prices here are higher or lower in these areas, but it also has to do with a lot of the migration background of people who then cluster in certain areas because they feel more at home in these areas. And some of these areas are more or less accessible. And that then goes together a lot with the opportunities of certain migrant groups. Yes, it goes together with property prices, but those property prices are partly the result of chosen government policies.

Jeremy: But when a migrant arrives in a city like London, they want to be with, probably, with with other migrants. And they also probably don't have so much capital. So I'm intrigued by how much is in their, as it were, up to them as a choice. You know, it seems to me very constrained.

Lauren: Exactly. If you as a migrant group, with a slightly less high socioeconomic standing basically, come in, there are certain areas where you can just come and live. And these are often the areas where the property prices are lower and it's less desirable to live for the people already living there. And these areas are not always the best located, or don't always have the best facilities. Think also of education, or health care and stuff, could be less there.

Jeremy: And does your mapping of these restaurant types, does that tell you where to go? Can you use that to find a restaurant?

Lauren: Yeah. I would say. Often if these neighbourhoods are clustered with good, basically ... I don't know, just to give an example, good Bangladeshi restaurants or good Chinese restaurants, or ... They are often clustered in these areas where a lot of these migrants also live because they want to eat good food themselves, so why not make that good food themselves? So if you, as an outsider, are looking for an authentic food experience within a certain cuisine, it might be a good idea to also look at where those migrants have settled within a city and really go in there.

Jeremy: But then, I might know that there are, or used to be, Bangladeshis in Brick Lane in London, for example. But if I look for a ... If I'm a visitor to London and I look for a restaurant there using Google Maps, TripAdvisor, whatever, am I going to get a good recommendation?

Lauren: So, back in the days I thought yes, until I actually was looking for restaurant myself, and I knew of a really good place. And then I opened Google Maps and it just didn't show up. Which sort of made me scrape basically all these restaurants in London to see indeed which restaurants show up and which don't show up. And what I then discovered was that certain restaurants have less visibility when they show up in Google Maps. And the ones that do have a lot of visibility get a lot of reviews, get a lot of tourism. Tourists give often high reviews to the restaurants they find the most accessible. And in that way, certain restaurants, which are maybe not the best restaurants out there, are getting a lot of prominence within the Google Maps algorithm. A lot of reviews, a lot of high reviews. While other restaurants, which are maybe more authentic and more unique that are not in these pure tourist areas, are sort of being hidden by this algorithm.

Jeremy: So the counterargument to that is, well, it's just an expression of what people like.

Lauren: Yes, but there is Google Maps as sort of a market maker, is also sort of not only showing you what's out there, it's already making a pre-selection for you. And if the pre-selection already excludes more authentic restaurants, it's sort of your taste also will adjust to that limited selection that Google Maps shows you. So you think that this is the best, but actually you haven't experienced anything out of it because that doesn't come up through the algorithm. So what I also try to make is the bigger argument or the larger argument that Google Maps is not only this describing that's out there, it's actively influencing not only what's out there, but also your preferences basically by what you see.

Jeremy: So by showing you only things that have been reviewed, and reviewed positively I expect, it's limiting your exposure. So if you find a restaurant, like, that wasn't recommended to you, is it a good idea to rate it highly on Google Maps, for example?

Lauren: I think that's in any case a good idea, especially if there are new restaurants, upcoming restaurants that not a lot of people know about, to create, indeed, that exposure to also not only have people do these ratings, but also you as a company could give up-to-date information on a lot of these review websites, et cetera, and it will place you better in these algorithms because what Google Maps also does, and this is a bit secret what they do, but they basically look at what's available about the restaurant on the internet. And based on that, they partly based their recommendations and algorithms. So if you have better exposure, if you sort of play the game on the internet, you will show up higher in these algorithms, more people will come, et cetera.

Jeremy: Yeah, I remember the story, oh, it must have been 5 or 6 years ago about some people in North London who created a completely fake restaurant and got it to the top of the ratings. And were you aware of that?

Lauren: Yeah, no, I've heard this story before, and I think it's very intriguing, the fact that this is possible without any checks or control. And this also means that some restaurants use this in their advantage, while others who might have a way better product just don't know how to use this.

Jeremy: Anyway, that's that's an aside. Um, pubs, pubs. You mentioned pubs earlier. Looking at your work on pubs, basically what you say is that yes, a lot of pubs have vanished. I think about a quarter, maybe even more, a third of pubs have vanished in the UK. And the ones that vanish are the ones that are kind of isolated, that have no neighbours. And that struck me as very peculiar, because I would have thought that a pub with no neighbours has a larger group of people to draw from to be its customers. So to actually, you know, it's the only place to go, so it would be successful. So first of all, am I right? It's just, the biggest predictor of whether a pub will close is whether it has a neighbour?

Lauren: Exactly.

Jeremy: Why?

Lauren: Well, I was also a bit surprised initially. And for that, I went and looked at, who owns this pub and who makes the decision whether the pub stays or not, basically, whether it closes or keeps going in business. And what I then discovered is that there is this whole network basically of pub owners, large pub owners, often not situated in the UK, but — for instance, there's a very big one in Hong Kong — that own these pubs and basically decide on whether it's profitable or not to keep it. And these are large private equity funds, and if they see they can make more profit off selling this land or doing something else with this land, rather than keeping the lights on in the pub, they will just do this because they don't have a bigger incentive of community or something like that. And if you look very systematically, this is what explains the closure of most pubs, whether a private equity firm in a different country decides whether it's more profitable to keep it or not.

Jeremy: But the old system for pubs in the UK was that the brewery owned the pub and the landlord was a client of the breweries. Was that any better at keeping pubs open?

Lauren: I guess yeah. Then you have a different problem also, that these breweries are sort of trying to exploit the fact that you need to join them. And they would probably put the prices up higher if they could, et cetera. So you still have, sort of, the dependency of a local pub on an external party. It could be better in the sense that maybe it's still more locally owned. And I think the big difference between having it externally owned or locally owned, is that there is a sort of

community aspect that makes it worth keeping open the pub for other reasons than just how much profit is there going to be at the end of the month.

Jeremy: I have a friend whose village pub was due to close and they all got together and they were — I don't know the details — but they were successful in buying the pub and it's now managed as a community pub. I have no idea what the profit and loss accounts look like or anything like that, but is that a way forward for places? And you talked about not merely how much profit it would make, but how else are you going to have a third space as a community space unless it pays for itself?

Lauren: Yeah, that's the that's the thing. I think having it sort of owned by the community is often the best solution for a community to keep something like this open. But still, yeah, you have to pay in order to have this third space, and the profits are never going to be that high. I mean, other countries have other solutions. I also have a piece in which I talk about Australia, actually, who let in the so-called pokies, which is the gambling machines, to sort of fund their third spaces. So the beer and everything itself didn't have enough profit. And the fact of this, keeping it open as a community space didn't have enough profit. So their solution was to have gambling machines in the basement. And the people addicted to gambling are basically paying for the pub to be alive. That's another solution, but also not the most desirable.

Jeremy: Not sure where I stand on that. Is London different as far as pubs are concerned? Because while pubs have been closing everywhere else, in London the number of pubs seems to be staying about the same.

Lauren: Exactly. Which also surprised me because I was just looking at pub closures and I was like, surely in London the same is going to happen, right? Surely in London it's not always profitable to keep the pub open. But what I saw is that in London something else is happening. So these more traditional pubs with very traditional names, very traditional interior et cetera. are being actually replaced by modern pubs. So these old traditional pubs are actually closing at the same rate, but what's happening is that some of these closures are instead substituted into more modern pubs. More bistro-pubs also aimed at a different socioeconomic audience than basically

everyone who just wants to go out for a drink in the community. So yeah, London was very much an outlier in this, and I sort of discovered this by running an algorithm on the names of pubs. So the names of pubs, once a new pub or more modern pub is made into existence, these names often become more modern too. And you can see just looking at these names already, that pattern of replacement happening.

Jeremy: So, I don't know, The Red Lion becomes The Taproom or something like that?

Lauren: Exactly, exactly.

Jeremy: And you could trace that using ... You didn't have to go through all the pub names and say ... You did that with machine learning?

Lauren: Exactly. So most of my analysis uses some kind of machine learning. And also this one. So what I did is, I basically let an LLM determine whether something is a traditional name or a new name. And then by hand, I manually check a subsample of that, just to make sure whether it was of good quality or not. And yeah, it's very striking how it exactly come up within minutes, this division, just looking at the names indeed.

Jeremy: Let's go back to the London food map and what you were saying about Google Maps. The original London food map is sort of saying, well, you know, these restaurants are underrepresented and the kind of restaurants that are underrepresented are maybe ethnically diverse cuisines in maybe less economically rich areas. You say Google kind of ignores them. And there's this problem that Google ignores them so people don't go to them. So Google ignores them so people don't go to them. But people don't go to places they're not familiar with. So is there any way you can use that data and say, well, why? Why is it that some areas have brand name after brand name after brand name on the high street and others don't? Is it just economic deprivation? What is it?

Lauren: Yeah. So there's a lot behind it. And what I sort of did to identify the restaurants that are basically hidden in the algorithm was I looked at the structural characteristics of a restaurant. Think of the location, the menu prices, basically any information I could find on them. And then I used that information to predict what the score

would have been, purely objective, without looking at what Google Maps would have given it that score. And then I looked at what the differences between this sort of theoretical score it should probably get and the actual score on Google Map. And then I saw a big difference between these two for some restaurants. And these restaurants I sort of closely investigated, and I saw that they're often indeed in areas where this problem emerges of specific ethnic groups maybe not knowing how to game the Google Maps algorithm, maybe not knowing how to get a foot in the door in these algorithms. And on the other side, it's also a big divide between independent restaurants and chain restaurants who do have that outside visibility already and already are present on the internet, which Google Maps also uses to determine which restaurants show up and which don't, what is available already of this restaurant on the internet. So because of that, rather than these more structural, better explanations, there is actually also a very technical one.

Jeremy: Two final questions. One, what can people do for themselves? I mean, your maps are great for London, but what can people do for themselves if they're looking for good food and want to go beyond the algorithm? And two, what can authorities do to try and, I don't think erase the latte line, but maybe make it a little less prominent?

Lauren: So I think in terms of what individuals can do, I would say as an individual, you can do not so much, there are bigger structural problems underlying this. But if ... I say what you can do to sort of explore, I would say go out on the street and instead of opening your Google Maps, look what's open, look where people are at. Basically look what looks nice, and just try and explore yourself. And I think this gives also a certain satisfaction that it isn't determined by some kind of algorithm, but it's a bit more authentic by you just walking through the street and going in there. And sometimes it disappoints. And sometimes it really highly surprises and it's worth the risk.

What can authorities more structurally do? I mean, in terms of Google Maps, I think the solution is to audit or make the algorithm transparent. That determines whether some restaurants show up and others not. Google Maps has no accountability whatsoever, and governments are not involved in this whatsoever. I think this should be audited heavily or at least made transparent. What determines this, given that so many people are relying and it's basically a monopoly in

the industry with a lot of market power. So I think that's on Google Maps, specifically. On the socioeconomic line, a lot is historically determined. So a lot comes from, I don't know, the sell off of council houses historically, or certain areas that have high development by government policy. What can they do next time they decide on such a big policy? Look at what further consequences could be and how they could mitigate this and not just let people on their own basically be priced out of a market or an area, and have to be forced to move to a lower socioeconomic area in order to afford living there.

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