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Google, a major stakeholder in local governance?

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Abstract

Despite its pervasive presence in urban life, Google has received comparatively little scholarly attention within urban studies, especially relative to other platform companies. This special issue addresses that gap by examining Google's evolving role in local governance. We argue that Google should be understood as an *urban firm*—an actor whose influence emerges not from a unified strategy but from a patchwork of experiments, negotiations, and contingent engagements across diverse territories. Three core assumptions guide our inquiry: Google is not a monolith but a constellation of actors; its operations are shaped by local socio-political contexts; and its strategy is better described as experimental and adaptative rather than a fixed or unified global plan. Conceptually, we distinguish Google from other tech companies by highlighting its dual role as both platform and infrastructure, enabled by its unique capacity to collect, organize, and monetize data. Grounded in diverse empirical cases, this issue foregrounds the fragmented, negotiated, and sometimes resisted forms of Google's urban presence—challenging the notion of a uniform digital capitalism and emphasizing the uneven, situated nature of tech power in cities.

Keywords

Google, urban governance, platform, smart cities, technology, data

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摘要

尽管谷歌在城市生活中无处不在，但在城市研究领域受到的学术关注相对较少，尤其是与其他平台公司相比。本期特刊通过考察谷歌在地方治理中不断演变的角色，填补了这一空白。我们认为，应将谷歌理解为一家“城市型企业”——其影响力并非源于统一的战略，而是来自不同地区的一系列实验、协商与偶然参与的拼合。我们的探究基于三个核心假设：谷歌并非一个单一整体，而是由众多行为主体构成的聚合体；其运营受地方社会政治环境的影响；若要描述其战略，“试验性”与“适应性”比“固定统一的全球计划” 更为贴切。从概念上讲，我们通过强调谷歌作为平台和基础设施的双重角色（这得益于其收集、整理数据并将数据商业化的独特能力），将谷歌与其他科技公司区分开来。本期特刊以各类实证案例为基础，聚焦谷歌在城市中呈现出的碎片化、协商性，有时甚至被抵制的存在形态——这一视角既挑战了“统一数字资本主义”的固有认知，也凸显了科技力量在城市语境下不均衡、具情境性的本质特征。

关键词

谷歌、城市治理、平台、智慧城市、技术、数据

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Introduction

In 2025 Google Maps marks its 20th anniversary. What began as a seemingly simple interface for navigation has grown into something far more expansive over the last two decades. Today Google Maps is not just a visual way-finder but also a “central infrastructure for local commerce” (Courmont, 2025). In addition to depicting cities, the mapping platform ranks businesses, recalibrates foot traffic, and dictates what places become visible and what may fade into the background. The shortest route determined by its algorithms becomes the default route. The highest-rated cafe is likely to become the one most visited. Streets and landmarks that do not appear on Google Maps may be likely to disappear in the minds of residents.

This special issue takes Google Maps as an emblem of how Alphabet—originally Google—has embedded itself into the urban experience across the world.[1] In popular narratives, the company’s power is considered spectacular and hard to pin down precisely. In the everyday life of a city, Google’s products and interventions are both ubiquitous and more subtle. Through a collection of articles from different geographies, we aim to trace the social and spatial implications of Google’s political-economic influence in cities since the 2000s. We ask: how has Google evolved into a substantial—and to some extent unique—force in local governance?

In recent years, several studies have investigated the growing presence of technology companies in urban life and local politics. Through concepts such as “smart cities” and “platform urbanism,” scholars have examined the implications of digital platforms, the use of data analytics in municipalities, and the shifting labor practices and resistance propelled by gig companies (Barns, 2020; Baykurt and Raetzsch, 2020; Gabrys, 2014; Mattern, 2021; Sadowski, 2021; Shapiro, 2020; Wiig, 2015). Macro-level explanations in this vein spotlighted the emerging “innovation complex” (Zukin, 2020) in which the tech industry’s symbolic weight and economic capital attempt to turn urban environments into mini Silicon Valleys. Rosen and Alvarez León (2022) identified the emerging urban system as the “digital growth machine”, in which the city’s

traditional fixation on a land-based growth model is now mediated by data extraction and platform governance.

These macro explanations are invaluable for understanding how digital capitalism is increasingly embedded in urban environments and what roles local institutions play in facilitating this transformation. But they may overlook the differences between individual tech companies or even the varying strategies pursued by a single company across different places. Plus, existing research in urban studies prioritizes companies such as Airbnb or Uber—firms that ostensibly disrupt different parts of local governance such as housing, tourism, or transportation—rather than investigating the multiple interventions undertaken by tech giants such as Google or Amazon.

Our goal in this special issue is to resist the urge to isolate global technology conglomerates within a single industry. Drawing on media studies and science and technology studies (STS) in addition to urban studies, we follow the reach of big tech companies as they thread through diverse institutions, geographies, and even everyday experiences of urban life. We find inspiration in Siva Vaidyanathan's (2012) *The Googlization of Everything*, for instance, which traces how Google, aspiring not just to dominate the web but to *become* it, is expanding laterally into social networking, education, search engines, or arts as well as vertically pulling data from disparate areas into an integrated platform. Our inquiry is similar to the *Logistical City* project at the Leuphana University of Lüneburg that examines the impact of Amazon systematically through its fulfillment center, last-mile delivery practices, and the globally distributed network of its logistics infrastructure.[2] These scholarly pursuits recognize that companies like Google and Amazon desire to become essential infrastructures—omnipresent, unavoidable. But, unlike traditional public utilities, their operations depend on continuous data extraction in service of dynamic pricing, thereby structuring access in ways that remain largely inscrutable and that perpetuate durable inequalities in the city.

Across each article, we treat Google simultaneously as a search engine, a data analytics firm, an infrastructure provider, a public policy actor, and a real estate developer. Each article investigates how Google, with its vast economic, symbolic, and political power, not to mention enormous computing capacity, embeds itself within pre-existing structures of urban planning and local governance. We ask: What shifts when a tech company such as Google attempts to shape the built environment and local politics? What enables and what restrains these efforts? What are the specific characteristics of this company as a player in local governance?

By taking Google as a central actor in the relationship between digital capitalism and urban environments, our goal is not to craft a narrative of Big Tech as this monolithic, all-encompassing force in cities. On the contrary, we explain how a company such as Google acts in ways that are more often erratic and contingent, revealing that its power is not absolute but continually shaped, contested, and negotiated by local publics. Speaking against the assumption that digital capitalism unfolds uniformly across all territories, the articles in this special issue focus on the localized practices in which Google's influence falters, meets resistance, and mutates into new, sometimes unexpected, forms.

Theoretically, our approach builds upon a body of research that emerged in the United States in the 1970s, notably through the work of Molotch (1976) and Stone (1989), which sought to uncover the dynamics of local power. While this tradition acknowledges the significant influence of private actors, the concept of

"governance" (Le Galès, 1998) offers a more nuanced and complex understanding. Governance moves beyond a primary focus on economically driven coalitions to examine the complex web of interdependencies and power relations among a diverse range of actors—not just private entities but also various levels of public authorities, civil society organizations, and even transnational actors. Among these actors, urban firms play a significant role. They are not simply external economic actors trying to influence urban policy but rather active participants with their own strategies, resources, and political agendas. They attempt to shape urban development through direct engagement and embedding themselves within local governance networks (Lorrain, 2017).

This theoretical orientation underscores the negotiated and dynamic nature of urban policy making, in which actors form shifting coalitions, engage in strategic interactions, and navigate institutional arrangements across multiple scales. In doing so, we depart from purely neoliberal interpretations, which emphasize market dominance and state retrenchment. Instead, we examine the continued, if evolving, role of public authorities within these multi-actor governance arrangements. Our approach also moves beyond universalizing Anglo-Saxon models as we pay attention to the embeddedness of urban governance in specific political, social, and institutional contexts.

Studying Google presents a particular kind of methodological challenge, too. Not only is the company notoriously secretive, but its products are also intentionally designed to be opaque. Its experimental platforms are ever-evolving and expanding so fast that it is often hard for researchers to keep up with the changes. In addition to theoretical and empirical contributions, each article in this issue offers methodological models for making sense of what is available, albeit elusive, about Google's presence in cities: web archives, financial statements, third-party records, online reviews, interviews, ethnographic observations, rare off-the-record interviews, and even rarer on-the-record conversations. Each contribution highlights the frictions, malfunctions, and failures, all of which resist interpretation, as well as the silences and dead ends that constrain grand conclusions.

In the rest of this introductory article, we first make a case for why Google has become an urban firm and what constitutes its capacities in local governance. We then offer a conceptual framework to explain what distinguishes Google not only from other, more conventional urban firms in local politics but also from other tech companies that have received more attention in urban studies. In the final section, we offer a summary of our findings based on the articles in the special issue.

Google, an urban firm?

Google's original business model seemed, at first, far removed from urban issues. Founded in 1998, the company self-defined primarily as a technology firm and prioritized selling advertising (Figure 1). This model, however, began to shift over time as the company's more recent revenues were more diversified. In 2010, for instance, 96% of its revenue came from ads, whereas by 2023, that figure had dropped to 77%. The company has expanded into cloud services and various other ventures besides advertising. Even though it may not be immediately considered an urban firm (Lorrain, 2017), Google has quietly embedded itself in city life in recent years.

The company launched Google Maps in 2005 and acquired Waze in 2013. It has experimented with telecommunications—Google WIFI, Google Station, Google Fiber—extending its reach beyond software into physical infrastructures. Since 2011,

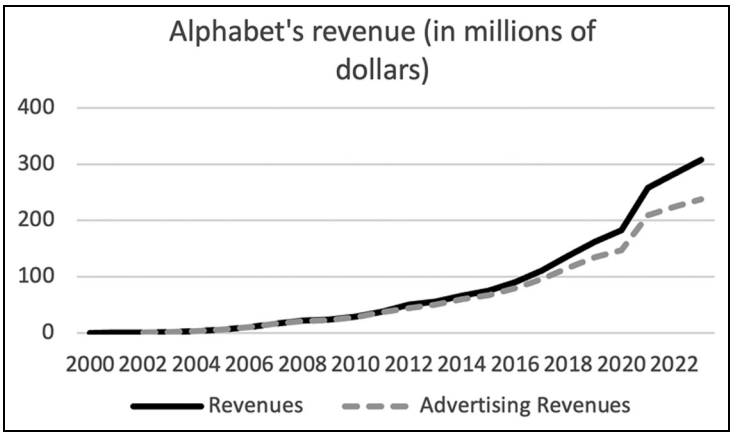

Figure 1. Alphabet's revenue, in millions of dollars (source: annual reports)

Google Arts & Culture has worked with cities, museums, and cultural institutions to digitize cultural heritage, shaping how local histories are preserved and accessed. Through its investment arms, Google Ventures (GV) and CapitalG, it has poured money into mobility (Uber, Lime), energy (Nest), and real estate (NextDoor, OpenDoor). Some of the company's subsidiaries such as Waymo (autonomous vehicles), Wing (drone delivery), Google Fiber (internet access), and, of course, Sidewalk Labs, have placed Google even more firmly within urban life. When Google restructured under the Alphabet holding company in 2015, it was an attempt to keep these growing investments separate from its core search and advertising business.

Sidewalk Labs, launched in 2015 under Dan Doctoroff, former Deputy Mayor of New York City, was arguably Google's most explicit urban venture so far. Conceived as an urban innovation arm, this unit gained considerable traction when it won a competition to redevelop Toronto's Quayside district (Goodman and Powles, 2019). The project claimed to build data-driven, sensor-filled neighborhoods that would rethink the way cities functioned. It however collapsed under public scrutiny—concerns over privacy, governance, and corporate overreach led to its demise (Carr and Hesse, 2020; Filion et al., 2023; Valverde and Flynn, 2020). After Doctoroff's departure, Sidewalk Labs was quietly absorbed into Google in 2022 and its ambitious vision for urban transformation was rewritten as another experiment that did not quite take.

Google's spatial presence in the built environment has also grown over time. The company owns vast real estate assets all over the world in contrast to its placeless digital image. Although it was founded in California and headquartered in Mountain View, Google began extending its international presence in 2000, setting up national subsidiaries and new offices. Today it has offices in 147 cities in 49 different countries (Google, 2024). Google's spatial footprint is further reflected in the less-visible networks that sustain digital life such as data centers, fiber optic networks, and undersea cables (Alizadeh et al., 2017; Bratton-Benfield, 2023). The Alphabet group has thus a significant territorial presence and land resources, which will further expand once Google's cloud computing business grows.

How to meaningfully understand Google's role especially as we try to redefine

Table 1. Alphabet's revenue in 2023, based on the addresses of its customers.

	Revenues (in millions)	
United States	US$146,286	47%
Europe, Middle East, Africa (EMEA)	US$91,038	30%
Asia-Pacific (APAC)	US$51,514	17%
Canada and Latin America	US$18,320	6%

Source: Annual report.

it as an urban company? The tech giant's relationship with cities is too sprawling and fragmented to be summarized into a clear and consolidated strategy. However, three key assumptions guide our inquiry in the special issue. First, the company is not a monolith—it is a collection of multiple organizations, teams, and individuals, each operating with their own interests, resources, and constraints. To treat Google as a unified macro-force with a singular intention is to miss the messy, decentralized ways in which it actually operates on the ground. Therefore, we are careful not to reify Google in our analyses.

Second, the company's global reach means that it is constantly negotiating with the diverse histories, cultures, and power structures of each place in which it operates. Google continually adapts its strategies and products to fit diverse conditions. As a result, its urban interventions look vastly different depending on where they unfold. For example, some subsidiaries like Google Fiber or Waymo have remained entirely US based, while drone deliveries via Wing have been tested primarily in Australia (Zenz and Powles, 2024). Despite its global reach on five continents, Google's financial center remains in the United States, where it generates the majority of its revenue (Table 1).

Finally, Google's primary approach can be described as a "budding strategy" (Daniélou, 2024), that is, a series of experiments across different themes and locations. Thanks to its vast financial resources, the company can afford to test ideas without committing to them and see what survives. As the case studies in the special issue show, failures and reversals are common, and they are built into the company's way of operating. The sheer volume of attempts, rather than a single technology or service to be rolled out uniformly across the world, is what defines Google's urban presence.

Google's power: Infrastructuring platforms and platformizing infrastructures

Is Google merely another participant in urban governance, or do the company's distinctive features fundamentally reshape the politics, social life, and landscape of the city? The question is not just one of scale but of form, too. Unlike traditional urban firms, which are more directly involved in the physical design and management of cities, Google's presence in cities may appear less obvious. The company primarily operates as a data aggregator, which collects, organizes, and monetizes information. Through digital platforms, data infrastructures, and predictive analytics, Google seeks to define the standards and mechanisms that shape how urban institutions operate and how city life is organized.

One might argue that Google is emblematic of the "digital growth machine," wherein tech companies and their algorithmic systems operate as inscrutable "black

boxes" in local governance (Pasquale, 2015). But Google is not just any technology firm. As Burcu Baykurt (2025) notes in this issue, Google is a member of Big Tech—a category that includes Apple, Amazon, Meta, and Microsoft—whose collective scale allows them to dominate not only Silicon Valley but also global technology markets (Birch and Bronson, 2022). These firms set the terms of the industry while new startups orient themselves toward them with the hope of acquisition (Hellman, 2022). This unique status allows Google to act as both a platform and infrastructure (Plantin et al., 2018).

As a platform, Google wields a particular kind of epistemological power that is agile and highly distributed across the city. As Google renders neighborhoods into searchable, quantifiable zones, it participates in a broader system of spatial regulation, one that often deepens preexisting inequalities (Graham and Dittus, 2022; Zook and Graham, 2007). Google's services influence spatial perception and navigation (Kitchin and Dodge, 2011; Luque-Ayala and Neves Maia, 2019). Consider Google Maps, again, which dynamically shapes the way people find their way around. The reviews do not merely describe places; they construct reputations. These reputations, in turn, can transform the metropolis–hinterlands relationship (Rosen and Alvarez León, 2024) or reinforce spatial, social, and racial distinctions between neighborhoods and businesses (Bhandari and Noone, 2023). This influence moves, shifts, and interferes, sometimes in real time. Take Waze, for example. This navigation app often introduces congestion into residential neighborhoods that are not designed for high vehicular volume by redirecting local traffic flows (Courmont, 2018; Fisher, 2022). This "platformization of urban life" (re)produces urban space and affects placemaking while also transforming existing local policies.

Google has also built fundamental infrastructural capacity over time, both globally and hyper-locally, upon which a wide array of organizations and individuals now rely (McNeill, 2021; Plantin et al., 2018). The company has positioned itself at the center of a vast digital ecosystem, particularly through key services such as Google Maps and its cloud infrastructure, making its systems indispensable for local stakeholders (Kenney and Zysman, 2020). Local actors become dependent on Google's infrastructure, especially via cloud services. The growing use of artificial intelligence—championed, in large part, by Google (Luitse, 2024), further entrenches the reliance of local businesses and political authorities on Google via its computational infrastructures as well as its AI models.

This infrastructural integration is so deep that Google's platforms have become as essential to urban functioning as traditional physical infrastructures like roads or public utilities. For example, local businesses now depend on visibility through Google Maps to sustain commercial operations (Courmont, 2025). Transport companies find it difficult to avoid sharing their data with Google (Guimbail, 2025). Google is no longer just a service provider but a structural force with the capacity to reorder how cities operate.

Google's platforms also provide an entire service infrastructure that captures public sector organizations and influences the way local policies are shaped and executed (Tomlinson et al., 2010). For instance, city managers rely on Waze data to monitor traffic incidents and guide drivers, thereby integrating Google's platform into the daily operations of local governments (Luque-Ayala and Marvin, 2016; Pérez Karich, 2025). Google also offers performance dashboards, such as the Environmental Insights Explorer, which provides cities with data on building, and transportation emissions or solar potential (Koch and Beyer, 2025). These tools not only provide descriptive

information and metrics but also shape the way municipalities interpret and engage with urban spaces. By embedding private data into public decision making, Google's technologies influence how local authorities sense, understand, and manage their territories, raising critical questions about the loss of autonomy and sovereignty in the face of private sector influence.

To understand Google as an urban firm is to see that the transformation of urban capitalism is not merely a shift in political or epistemological power but is fundamentally rooted in the commodification of data. Google has successfully harnessed this intangible capital, particularly within the advertising and cloud markets, and granted unparalleled economic value in contemporary urban capitalism. The result of what Google constructs is a "new asset class" (Zuboff, 2019): streams of information captured and resold, thereby becoming a profitable resource. This monopolistic control over urban data produces a steady revenue stream, positioning Google as the new rentier in the urban economy (Sadowski, 2020). The contributions in this issue provide empirical insights into the ways Google aggregates and valorizes urban information and monetizes it for a range of political-economic actors. For instance, mobility data becomes a valuable asset for transport operators, environmental data is made accessible to urban governments, and local business data is licensed through Google Maps APIs, all demonstrating how Google's control over urban data leads to new economic dependencies and redefines value within urban capitalism.

Google's negotiated local power

Google's expanding role in urban governance has not gone uncontested. In many cities, its presence has sparked public debate, with concerns raised by residents, officials, and local businesses alike. Residents fret about surveillance and data privacy. Local governments worry about the erosion of their jurisdiction and regulatory control. Smaller firms fear displacement in markets reshaped by digital platforms (Ho-Pun-Cheung, 2023). These tensions were particularly visible during the highly publicized Sidewalk Labs project in Toronto, which became a focal point for criticism regarding privatized urban futures and the commodification of public space. The project's ultimate collapse illustrates that even a company of Google's scale cannot act with impunity in urban affairs.

Our approach to Google emphasizes that its interventions in urban life do not occur in isolation. They are shaped—and often constrained—by existing political institutions, civic activism, and regulatory frameworks. What emerges is not a story of unchecked corporate power but one of continual contestation and adaptation on the ground. This issue pays close attention to these forms of contestation. In their article on Google's stalled data center project in Bissen, Luxembourg, Carr and Madron (2025) analyze eight years of uneven negotiations between the company and various tiers of government. They describe a strategy of alternating engagement and withdrawal, what they term a "suspended failure," which keeps local actors in a state of uncertainty. We saw similar examples in Google's office development projects where the company faced public resistance and revised its strategies (Hartmann, 2024). These cases remind us that local actors are not passive recipients of corporate agendas: they organize, resist, and develop new regulatory frameworks in response.

Yet beyond visible resistance, Google's relationships with local actors are often more ambivalent and multifaceted. Public authorities may see the company as a partner capable of delivering technical solutions to urban

problems. In contexts where state capacity is limited, Google's services can serve as stopgaps or workarounds. As Perez Karich's (2025) ethnography of Santiago's traffic control center shows, operators have informally integrated the Waze platform into their daily practices, treating it as an essential complement to traditional infrastructure. In such cases, Google becomes part of the city's operational toolkit, its technologies adopted and adapted by public actors to manage local complexities.

Google's services increasingly serve as intermediaries between governing authorities and citizens. As Guimbail (2025) illustrates in her study of Mexico City, Google Maps integrates data from both formal and informal transport systems in the name of offering a unified representation of the city's mobility networks. This integration is only possible through tight collaborations with a variety of local stakeholders, such as public institutions, companies, and transport operators, whose labor and expertise constitute Google's technical systems. As Guimbail demonstrates, Google's power as a platform is not imposed from above; it is co-constructed through embedded collaborations and negotiations on the ground. The challenges Google faces in "urbanizing" its technologies reflect the ongoing negotiation between global platforms and the particularities of place, politics, and public life. It also confirms that Google is heavily dependent on intermediary actors who translate global tools into local contexts.

Several contributions to this issue examine the economic dimension of Google's local engagements and highlight both the promises and the limitations of its involvement in urban development. For many municipalities, attracting Google, whether through data centers, urban campuses, or fiber networks, is often framed as an opportunity for economic development. Yet these aspirations often collide with the company's experimental and uneven approach to local partnerships.

Baykurt (2025), in her comparative analysis of Google Fiber and Sidewalk Labs in the United States, documents a recurring pattern: Google positions cities as "testing grounds", adopting a trial-and-error model that can leave public officials uncertain about the company's long-term commitments or objectives. This ambiguity complicates municipal planning and undermines the possibility of stable, reciprocal relationships. In France, Courmont (2025) shows how Google Maps reshapes local markets through algorithmic classification, effectively assigning businesses a "data capital" that conditions their visibility and economic viability. Small businesses find themselves locked into a data-driven imperative, compelled to continuously share data with the platform in order to remain competitive.

Finally, several contributions shed light on Google's growing influence as a platform operator, an entity capable of enrolling local actors into proprietary systems dictated by Google's own technical and economic terms. Koch and Beyer (2025) analyze the Environmental Insights Explorer and demonstrate how Google offers cities free access to environmental data dashboards based on its own opaque methodologies. While these tools promise new ways of monitoring urban sustainability, they also raise risks of data dependency and the erosion of local epistemic autonomy. And yet, as the authors show, public officials do not blindly adopt Google's metrics; they critically assess, contextualize, and triangulate them with other sources.

In the context of Silicon Valley, Sims (2025) examines how Google's real estate strategies shape the physical and political landscape. Focusing on Mountain View, Sims traces the shifting political coalitions that emerge in response to Google's expansion. He introduces the concept of *growth genre* to distinguish between diverse types of coalitions, showing, for example, how local

backlash prompted a shift from an "office-skewed" agenda to a "new urbanist" one, more focused on housing development.

Taken together, these articles reveal a recurring pattern in Google's involvement in urban affairs. Local governments often welcome the company as a source of investment and innovation. But this enthusiasm is tempered by Google's experimental and often opaque strategies, which weaken traditional consultative processes and strain the capacity of public institutions to respond in a coherent and coordinated manner. Its services may become indispensable for many local stakeholders, but Google's power is always negotiated and hybridized. The company's success depends on its ability to be embedded within local infrastructures, cultures, and working practices.

Conclusion

Grounded in a range of empirical cases, the contributions to this special issue challenge deterministic accounts of platform urbanism and resist the tendency to treat Google as a monolithic or uniformly dominant actor. They instead reveal the multifaceted, contingent, and often uneven ways in which Google participates in local governance. Far from operating as a singular force reshaping cities from above, the company's influence is assembled and reassembled through everyday interactions with local institutions, regulatory frameworks, and political cultures. This approach underscores the value of disaggregating corporate power, of opening the black box of private actors and examining the specific mechanisms through which they come to participate in and be shaped by local governance.

By foregrounding the situated nature of Google's interventions, this issue calls for further research that extends beyond case-specific findings. Comparative studies across cities, regions, and governance structures are essential to understanding the variable geographies of Google's role in urban governance. There is also a pressing need to examine underexplored sectors and geographies, particularly those outside of the Global North, or what is often called the Global Majority, where digital infrastructures operate under different socio-political conditions. Finally, placing Google's activities in comparative perspective alongside those of other major technology firms—such as Amazon, Microsoft, Baidu, or Tencent—will help researchers better grasp the evolving features of platform urbanism. Taken together, these inquiries aim to deepen our understanding of how digital platforms are reshaping the conditions and mechanisms of local governance.

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2. See Logistical City (2025) for more information.

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