

Zomias of reality

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am
Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich**

Band (Jahr): - **(2018)**

Heft 33

PDF erstellt am: **22.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-919087>

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ZOMIAS OF REALITY

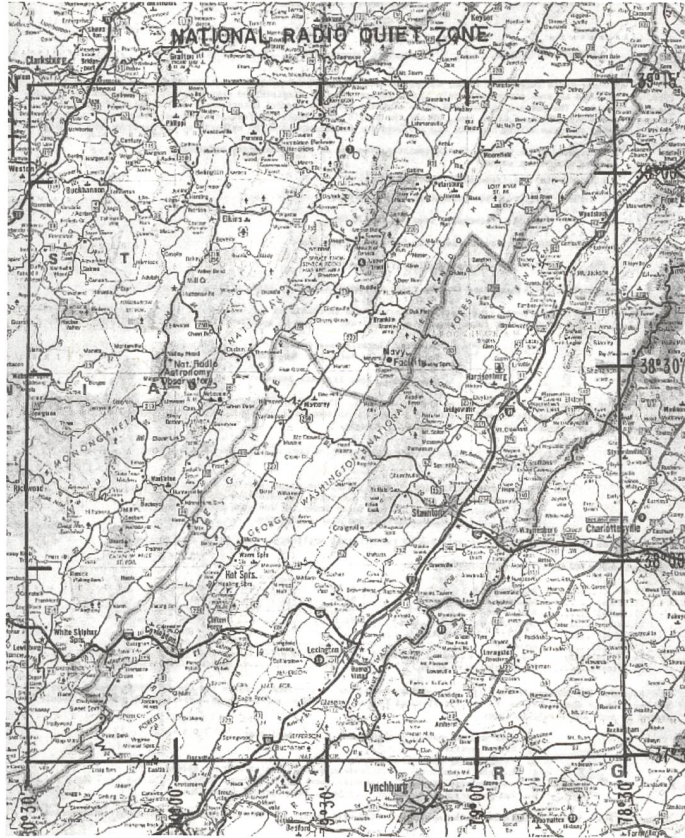
Nitin Bathla

A cascade of recent global events triggered by the «Cambridge Analytica» Scandal have challenged the way the construction of reality is understood. Consistent with how the British consulting firm used the Facebook data of millions of users to deliver specifically targeted political messages, the digitally embedded radical technologies⁽¹⁾ of today not only mediate our individual perception of reality but also manipulate it. The hidden digital communication apparatus harvests our every move, transaction, curiosity, and conversation. The planetary web that hides behind black mirrors, today completely surrounds us and either wittingly or unwittingly has imbedded our daily lives. Consequently, the social discourse today is not only created through physical interactions, but also through the mere act of being connected, the socialization of the one often intermingling and converging into the other. This is evident in how the prevalence of misinformation and propaganda on the digital web has transpired into acts of violence, extremism, and disputes in daily material life. To discern the construction of reality today, it is not merely enough to follow the socially constructed dialectic, but also its interface with the «digital realm».

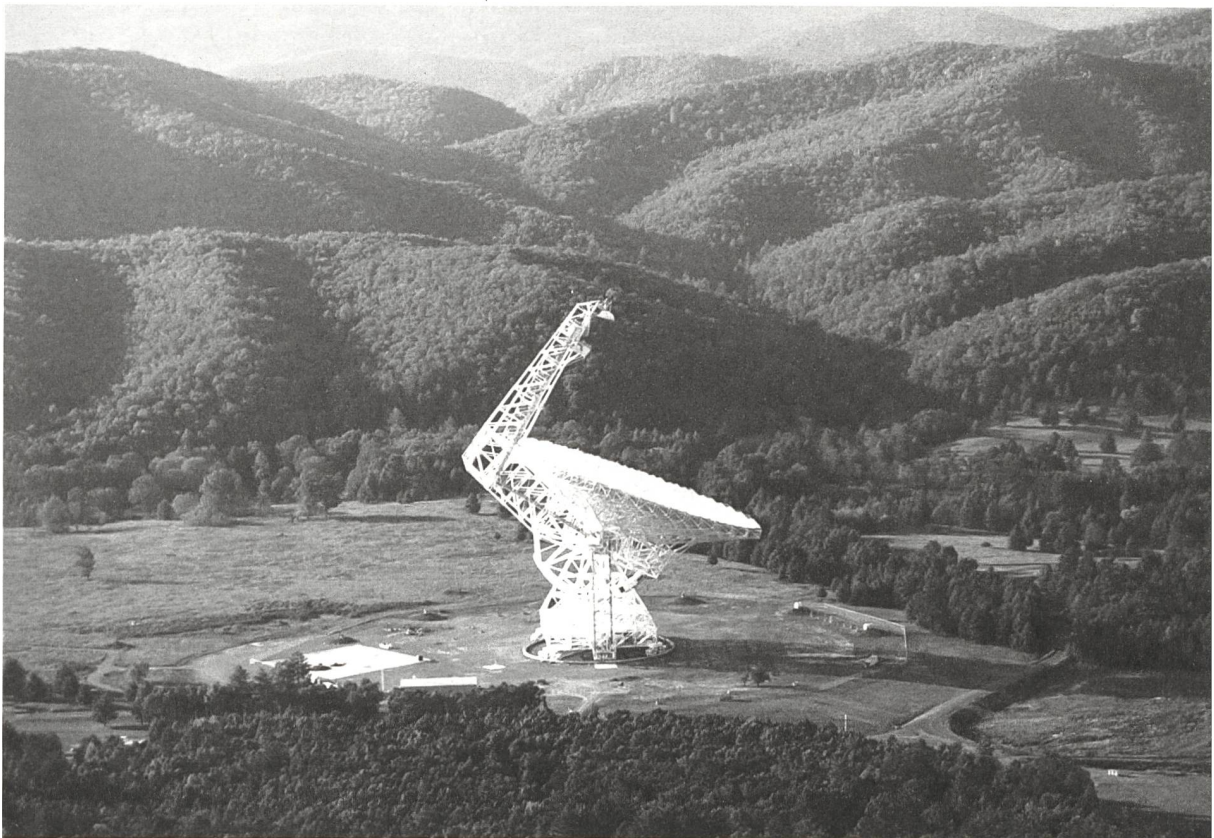
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To extend the theory of Berger and Luckmann⁽²⁾, the digital dialectic can be understood as being composed of the mutually constitutive moments of externalization, objectivization, and internalization. We begin to internalize the subjective expression of others on the digital web to make it subjectively meaningful for us. The mediation of the digital institutions then helps us to objectivize the subjective reality inter-subjectively and thereby constructs a digital common sense. Finally, we start to externalize the subjective meanings on the digital web through our physical relations, thereby starting over the cycle of internalization, objectivization, and externalization.

Similar to the spatio-temporal shifts through which the modern state managed to monetize biopower⁽³⁾ and planetary resources, we are today in the midst of a new wave of enclosure: the one of our perceived space and hence our «sense of reality». What distinguishes the digital web from being merely a passive means of communication is the territoriality of the institutional fabric that it is built upon. The infrastructure requires regulation not only by private institutions, but also by the state. The digital web is not merely a virtual space, but one whose reach extends to the farthest and remotest corners of the world through the invisible aerial and subterranean networks. It is not merely an attempt to commodify social interactions among populations but also an attempt to exert control. Thus, while the digital web simultaneously opens up a translocal space where information can move easily across the borders, it also provides a medium for the state to exercise statecraft on its population. Thus through inhabiting a territory, one is explicitly or implicitly subjected to a construction of reality that is mediated by the state and the global networked infrastructure. Through the fusion of power and social relational space, the territory becomes an agglomeration of reality and knowledge even though unevenly spread. In other words, territories



Map of the US National Radio Quiet Zone, a «Zomia of digital reality».



View of the Green Bank telescope at the heart of the US National Radio Quiet Zone in West Virginia.

can be understood as an uneven fabric of mediations of reality. However, what I would like to argue here is that the fabric of reality is not just uneven but is also marked with sinkholes that allow for spaces of refuge from the manipulations of the global institutions and the state.

There are conditions under which the planetary fabric ceases to exist and the construction of reality weakens, allowing social reality to thrive without the manipulation from constructs. These spaces can offer logics and qualities that help establish spatial autonomy from the power, social and knowledge mediations of the digital statecraft. In the forthcoming text, I shall present the possibility for existence outside the digital reality and discuss some concepts to describe this condition.

II Introducing Zomia

To begin my search for spaces that exist outside the digitally constructed reality, I turn to a rarely discussed territorial concept from area studies: ‹Zomia›. The Dutch historian Willem van Schendel coined this word in the early 2000s to describe the transnational region in the Himalayan massif that runs across South, Southeast and East Asia. This region cuts across the modern nation states of India, Nepal, Myanmar, Tibet, Thailand, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and parts of Southeast China, covering an area of over 2.5 million square kilometers. It has been home to ethnic minorities (totaling roughly 100 million people) that have preserved their local cultures by residing far from state control and influence. The autonomous communities that make up this transnational territory voluntarily moved to the upland remote locations where the modern state could not practice its power and statecraft. Zomians thus escaped what Scott describes as ‹The acts of last enclosures of the modern state to integrate and monetize the people, lands, and resources of the periphery so that they become, to use the French term, ‹rentable›—auditable contributors to the gross national product and to foreign exchange.›⁽⁴⁾ In the book *The Art of Not Being Governed* James Scott abstracts the formation of this region and its character into the concept of ‹Zomia› and ‹Zomia Studies›.⁽⁵⁾ It is not merely a non-state space inhabited by autonomous communities that resisted the projects of state making, but a concept that also brings into question the assertion that modernity once experienced by communities cannot be undone. In other words, Scott explores the possibility of a return to autonomy from the luxuries and securities afforded through an incorporation into the structures of the modern state. Furthermore, the concept also helps to bring into question the dialectic distinction that the modern state makes between the settled, state-governed populations and virtually autonomous peoples. More importantly, through Zomia, Scott opens a new genre of ‹area studies› in which the designation of sinkhole areas has nothing to do with national and strategic boundaries but rather with the notions of autonomy, reality and ecological regularities.

III The Sinkholes in the Digital Fabric

The fabric of digital reality is not without spaces of autonomy. To bring the concept of Zomia in relation with the fabric of digital reality, we need to

establish that instead of looking for isolated tribes, we are looking for regions of conscious refuge from modernity. Thus in order to locate sinkholes, the following characteristics might offer important guides: (i) the terrain must offer some form of hindrance for statecraft to take root, (ii) the region must be comprised of autonomous communities, and (iii) the region must be inhabited by conscious refugees from modernity. Using the first guide of hindrance to statecraft as a starting point, high security military facilities, nuclear testing sites, and scientific testing facilities (such as Antarctica) come forth. While the aforementioned might not allow for a possibility for refuge or inhabitation, another type of region namely the Radio Quiet Zones (RQZ) that requires isolation for extraterrestrial communication and observation, satisfies the former possibilities. The RQZ are exclusion zones where terrestrial communication and electronic infrastructures are barred in order for radio telescopes to function. Currently, there are three RQZ on earth and two in the outer space; these are located in West Virginia in the United States, Atibaia in São Paulo State in Brazil, and Western Australia on earth, and on the far side of the moon and the Lagrangian point in the outer space. The RQZ usually have an exclusion radius stretching over a hundred kilometers around the radio telescopes to cancel out any terrestrial interference to sense vibrations coming from millions of light years away. While the exclusion has ensured that the residents of the sparsely populated RQZ have missed out on modernity touching their lives, it has also attracted autonomous communities that are turning away from the affordances of modern society, like the electrosensitive people who are sensitive to electromagnetic pollution. The RQZ thus starts to emerge as a region where the statecraft is unable to establish itself owing to infrastructures that require it to cease. It is this moment of isolation through a special condition, or the remoteness of geography that Scott calls the «geography of ignorance», and which cannot be controlled.

IV Life inside the Radio Quiet Zones (RQZ)

The United States National Radio Quiet Zone (USNRQZ) is a peculiar illustration of what I referred to as the «Zomia of Reality». It is located in West Virginia and has an area of 34,000 square kilometers.⁽⁶⁾ To put this in comparison, this single zone alone is larger than the entire nation of Belgium. In the 1950s, when the United States government wanted to install a radio telescope, it chose a sparsely populated rural site in the hinterlands. The part of West Virginia around the town of Green Bank was chosen as it sits in a mountain valley, and is hence shielded from terrestrial signals. Additionally, at the time it was assumed that due to its isolation and low economic potential, this site would not have to deal with a later population influx. Consequently, two powerful radio telescopes were installed here—the Sugar Grove telescope and the Green Bank Observatory. The Sugar Grove telescope is one of the largest movable man-made structures ever built, and was designed to listen to the echoes from the big bang. This meant that not only its structure had to be monumental: 55 stories in height and 200 meters across, but that it also required a «zone of quiet». The West Virginia state legislature passed a law in 1958 that strictly controls interference from every kind of electrical device in a 100-kilometer radius around it. Although the mammoth construction

makes the telescope a monument in the middle of nowhere, the people that were already there had to comply with the enforced regulations in this zone.

The town of Green Bank has a modest size of 143 inhabitants, and has lately seen an influx of refugees and migrants that are turning away from the hyper-connectivity of their daily lives. Over time, the Quiet Zone has become a place where mystic scientists, gun-loving locals, and electromagnetic hyper-sensitives all live together.⁽⁷⁾ «On one side you're sitting next to people like Forest and on the other side of you is an architect from New York who has moved there because she is violently ill through Wi-Fi, and at the table across from you might be an astrophysicist from Russia.»⁽⁸⁾ The daily life in Green Bank is stuck in the 1960s. There are no overhead cables, people drive diesel cars to avoid spark plugs, there are no mobile towers. While most people rely only on landline for communication, some prefer no electronic communication at all. There are moments of tension between the locals and the migrants. Some residents would like to adopt modernity, while the migrants want to keep it as it is. It is not, however, without increasing reconciliation, as the residents are becoming aware of what it means to stay off the web.

Although there is no mobile coverage, no Wi-Fi, no radio communication, no digital cameras, no automatic door openers, in the USNRQZ, most accounts describe it as a place with a rich community life.⁽⁹⁾ People still have a «real» connection in these zones with their communities, with nature, and with themselves. The urban qualities of this territory do not have the space-time compression that digital technologies have offered. It is thus a territory not only almost free of electromagnetic pollution but also the affordances of the modern society, which allows for autonomy from the digital manipulation of reality. In recent years, there have been attempts to decommission the USNRQZ, but the residents have advocated keeping the quiet zone in place.

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Using the concept of Zomia, we can find other existing structural sinkholes, in order to create autonomy from the acts of (extra) state enclosure of the cognitive space. For example, the quiet zones around existing radio telescopes and similar infrastructures can be mapped and expanded through advocacy to exert autonomy. According to the Committee on Radio Astronomy Frequencies there are currently over 30 radio astronomy observatories in Europe that have a minimally defined (between one and three kilometers) quiet distance around them.

The sinkholes that I refer to as the «Zomias of reality» can emerge in spaces where either due to their remoteness or due to regulation, extrastatecraft cannot be practiced. The existence of digital zomias such as the one in the US, Brazil, and Australia, helps us imagine what lived and material realities can look like outside the mediations of the digital age, and why communities are choosing to locate there. More importantly, it demonstrates the possibility of locating an autonomous topographical space at the behest of a regulation that might seed a «geography of ignorance» for the state and its statecraft.