

Mining Spatio-temporal Data on Industrialization from Historical Registries

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Abstract

Despite the growing availability of big data in many fields, historical data on socioeconomic phenomena are often not available due to a lack of automated and scalable approaches for collecting, digitizing, and assembling them. We have developed a data-mining method for extracting tabulated, geocoded data from printed directories. While scanning and optical character recognition (OCR) can digitize printed text, these methods alone do not capture the structure of the underlying data. Our pipeline integrates both page layout analysis and OCR to extract tabular, geocoded data from structured text. We demonstrate the utility of this method by applying it to scanned manufacturing registries from Rhode Island that record 41 years of industrial land use. The resulting spatio-temporal data can be used for socioeconomic analyses of industrialization at a resolution that was not previously possible. In particular, we find strong evidence for the dispersion of manufacturing from the urban core of Providence, the state's capital, along the Interstate 95 corridor to the north and south.

Keywords

structured text, historical data, geocoding, page layout analysis, socio-environmental analysis

1 INTRODUCTION

In most states in the U.S., detailed registries of manufacturers are compiled annually, dating back to the 1950s. These printed historical registries are a rich source of data on the location, size, and type of industrial activity over time. However, mining that data is not straight-forward using existing OCR tools, because of the registries' structure. To address this, we developed *georeg*, a pipeline for extracting addresses and other business information from historical registries, and tested it with images we scanned from Rhode Island manufacturing registries spanning the 1950s through the 1990s. In these scanned images, *georeg* identifies each heading and the ordering of manufacturer listings, so that we can extract the name, address, business type, and number of employees as tabular data, which is then geocoded to provide latitude and longitude.

With this spatio-temporal data, we are able to perform more detailed socio-environmental analyses of changes in industrialization and locations of potentially hazardous manufacturing sites than was previously possible. Among other findings, the data show a dispersion of industrial sites from Providence, the state's capital and most populous city, to adjoining cities along the Interstate 95 corridor.

2 BACKGROUND

While many robust methods exist for digitizing historical documents, there has been less focus on modeling the complex structure in printed texts like directories, which use combinations of headings, font styles, and column and block layouts to organize and present repeated listings of structured data. The two primary components of digitizing printed documents are page layout analysis and optical character recognition (OCR). Page layout analysis provides information about the position and arrangement of blocks of text within a page. OCR converts pixelated images into characters and words.

While OCR makes it possible to extract all text from scanned images of directories, it fails to automatically detect complex structure, even when using more advanced OCR methods that incorporate page layout analysis, such as

those in the Tesseract package (Smith, 2009). Tesseract includes an OCR mode that detects tab-stops to extract text that is consistent with the document’s column layout. However, this approach does not segment individual text blocks within the columns.

Although there is an extensive literature on page layout analysis (for a review, see Tang et al. (1996) or Mao et al. (2003)), existing approaches to segmenting documents are largely based on physical features such as the relative position and size of lines or blocks of text. In general, physical segmentation does not capture the hierarchy or logical structure of a complex document. The existing approach that is closest to ours is a method created by Ma and Doermann (2003) that segments documents with repeated entries of similar structure, such as phone books and dictionaries. In this method, both physical features (e.g., line structure) and logical features (e.g., word patterns) are used to train a segmentation model, starting from sample documents which have already been correctly segmented into repeated entries. However, the segmentation provided by this method is limited in that it does not distinguish between different kinds of entries (e.g. headings vs. listings) and does not capture the structure of data elements within an entry (e.g. name vs. address vs. phone number in a phone book entry).

3 METHODS

3.1 Scanning

We scanned printed registries through a combination of book scanners and photography. Manufacturing registries for 16 individual years between 1953 and 1994 were accessed at the Brown University Library and the Rhode Island Historical Society. We used the open-source software ScanTailor (<http://scantailor.org>) to trim edges, straighten, de-warp, and convert the images to grayscale.

3.2 Contour merging

We developed a contour merging algorithm to partition a page image into the areas that correspond to individual records. Contours are the outermost boundaries of a set of contiguous pixels of the same intensity (Suzuki and Abe, 1985) and we initially identify them using OpenCV (Bradski, 2000). However, these contours frequently outline individual characters in the text. We use thresholding, erosion, and dilation to merge nearby contours into contiguous areas of the image that cover all characters in a record (Figure 1a).

After thresholding and inverting the grayscale image to white text on a black background, we repeatedly perform a close operation, which is an erosion followed by a dilation. The close operations eliminate small gaps of black-space between characters and lines of text. Then, we perform fewer iterations of an open operation, which is a dilation followed by an erosion. The open operations de-noise the contours and smooth them, removing small artifacts of white pixels. For the erosion and dilation operation’s kernel shape, we use a rectangle with dimensions that the user can configure. Formally, binary erosion of image I by kernel K is defined as:

$$I \ominus K = \{p | K_p \subseteq I\},$$

where K_p is the kernel for pixel p . That is, each pixel p remains white only if every other pixel in its kernel is also white. Similarly, binary dilation is defined as:

$$I \oplus K = \bigcup_{p \in I} K_p.$$

In some cases, there is no additional space between the lines of text for each manufacturer record. In these registry formats, a new record is denoted by indenting the first line. When we merge the contours of these pages, a single merged contour may encompass several records or an entire column of text. In this case, we use the indentation to identify individual records and split the contour at each indentation. We identify each indent by following the contour and noting where the x-coordinate stretches beyond a given threshold distance from the left bound of the contour.

3.3 Identifying manufacturer records

After merging the contours, some correspond to manufacturer records, but others are image artifacts or correspond to extraneous information, like page numbers. The manufacturer records are bounded within the columns of the page, so we only consider a contour as a candidate for a manufacturer record if it is aligned with a page column. We use k-means clustering (Lloyd, 1982) to group the contours by their left and right bounds, setting the number of clusters equal to the number of columns in the page (Figure 1b). Column-aligned listings have left and right bounds close to the column boundaries and generally outnumber the extraneous contours, so the clusters converge around the left and right bounds of the columns (Figure 1c). To filter out extraneous contours, we eliminate those which are greater than a given number of standard deviations away from the cluster centroids.

3.4 Parsing information from records

For each potential manufacturer record, we perform OCR with Tesseract (Smith, 2007) on the sub-image defined by the bounding box of the contour (Figure 1d). We use regular expressions to extract the business name, type, address, number of employees, and other standardized information included for each record. If the text is more consistent with a heading (for example, it contains only a city name), we retain that information and include it with each subsequent manufacturer record under the heading.

Some headings are centered across the page, in which case they are not bounded within the page columns and are eliminated from potential manufacturer records. If such headings exist and contain meaningful information, we OCR all headings centered across the page and note their vertical positions. For each manufacturer record, we include the information from the closest heading above it (or the last heading on a previous page if there is no heading above it).

3.5 Geocoding

For each manufacturer record in which an address was identified, we geocode the address to obtain a latitude, longitude, and confidence score. To improve geocoding success, we match the cities to a list of correctly spelled cities within the state. If the match ratio (based on Levenshtein distance) for the best city match is above a given threshold, we replace the city name found by OCR with the matched city name. We geocode each address using a local ArcGIS server at Brown University, but any geocoding service supported by the `geopy` package could be substituted.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Accuracy

To evaluate the accuracy of `georeg`, we compared the number of identified manufacturer records with an estimate of the actual content of the registries. For the estimate, we manually counted the number of records on ten pages of each year's directory and then multiplied the average number of records per page by the total page count. Overall, `georeg` identified 99% of the estimated number of records across all pages tested (Figure 2). Individual years differ in how closely they approximate the estimated number of records, but each year's results are within 15% of the estimate.

We also measured the number of records in which the address was geocoded with a confidence score of at least 75%. `georeg` successfully geocoded 61% of the estimated number of records, but the results differed dramatically by year. In 12 of the 16 years, between 62% and 75% of the estimated number of records were successfully geocoded. However, in 1971, only 26% were successfully geocoded, and in each of the worst four years fewer than half of the estimated number of records were successfully geocoded.

One challenge with historical data is that geocoding may be impossible for some records, for example if the address is a post office box, or if the street no longer exists. However, there are several ways in which we could improve geocoding success in future work. A more robust named entity recognition methodology could improve the ability to parse addresses from the text when compared with the current approach relying on regular expressions. Also, we could use additional features in Tesseract to increase the accuracy of the characters returned during OCR. In particular, we could train Tesseract for the different fonts which appear in the registries, and we could blacklist characters that never appear in the registries.

4.2 Application to Socio-environmental Studies

This new approach to historical data collection has already made substantial contributions to the sociological literature on urbanization and environmental inequality (Elliott and Frickel, 2013; Livanos, 2015; Mohai and Saha, 2015); and has direct relevance for industrial economics and geography as well (Duranton and Overman, 2005; Frenken et al., 2015; Martin and Sunley, 2006). For example, in their initial series of studies, Frickel and Elliott (2008; Elliott and Frickel, 2011, 2013, 2015) also relied on state manufacturing registries, but practical concerns limited data collection to the seven most polluting industrial sectors in the urban core of their cities of interest. Combining this narrower subset of industrial site data with tract-level data from the U.S. Census, as well as geocoded hazardous site lists from state environmental regulatory agencies, made it possible to conduct longitudinal analysis of demographic and regulatory changes and how those dynamics influence the spatial and temporal accumulation of environmental industrial risk.

By extending this previous approach to include all industrial sites in an entire state over a 41 year period, we obtained several new results:

- 1) By including annual data for all manufacturing activities in Rhode Island, we are able to study not only deindustrialization in the urban core of Providence, but also the consequent suburbanization of manufacturing as industrial activities gradually shifted to adjacent cities to the north and south.
- 2) The additional spatial scope allows us to generate stronger evidence that the spatial redistribution of manufacturing has been impacted by changes in the transportation infrastructure of the state. In 1953, manufacturing concentrated in the urban core of downtown Providence near the large rail terminals and shipping port; by 1979, manufacturing had begun to relocate southward following the newly constructed Interstate 95 corridor (Figure 3).
- 3) By mining data for all manufacturing sites, the new approach has allowed greater flexibility in the exploration of sector-specific clustering and distributional changes over time. For example, preliminary analysis of the spatial and temporal distribution of jewelry and textile manufacturing (Figure 4) – two historically important industries in Rhode Island – shows that jewelry manufacturing exhibits a distinct pattern of clustering while textiles have a more uniform and widespread distribution.

These preliminary findings illustrate the advantages of our comprehensive approach to data mining, which allows for richer empirical analysis of socio-environmental change and greater opportunities for theory development than was possible in prior research.

5 CONCLUSION

We have demonstrated a successful approach for mining and geocoding structured text in historical registries, and shown its utility for analyzing industrialization in the US state of Rhode Island. Although we have applied these methods specifically to manufacturing registries from Rhode Island, the same principles apply to other US state's registries and to other printed historical documents with similar structure, such as phone books, almanacs, and city directories. We are currently adapting `georeg` to these additional data sources. In particular, we believe phone books will be an ideal supplement, adding commercial, non-profit (e.g. schools, hospitals, churches) and residential data to provide a comprehensive history of land use in urban areas.

AVAILABILITY

Source code for `georeg` is freely available for non-commercial use at <https://bitbucket.org/brown-data-science/georeg>. All results presented in this paper were obtained using the version of `georeg` at commit hash `cacda11`.

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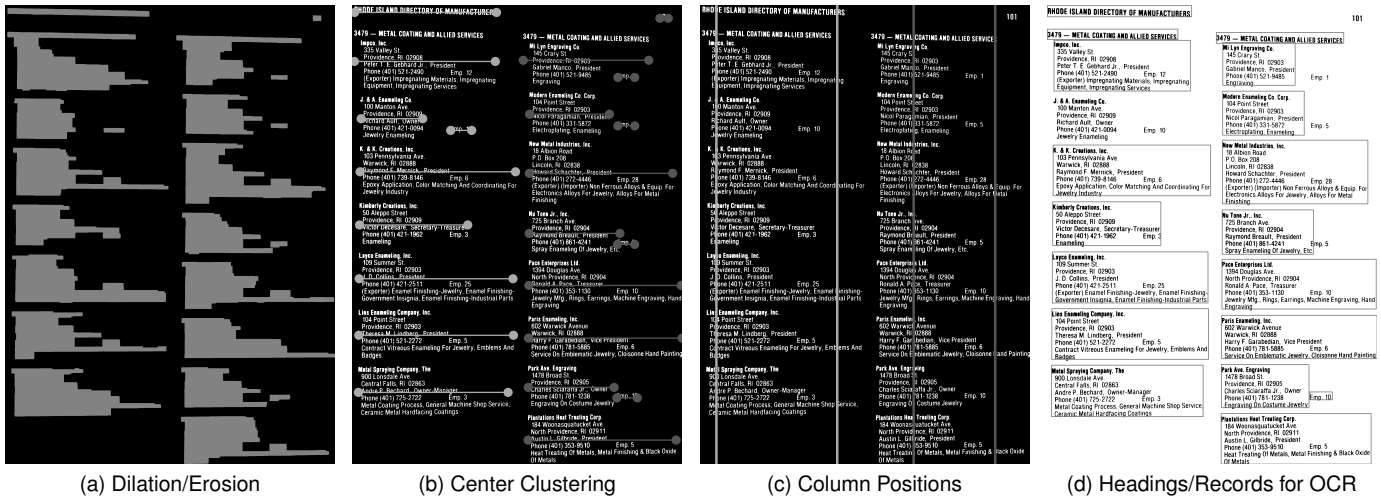


Fig. 1. A contour merging and column clustering approach to identifying headings and records in the registry pages.

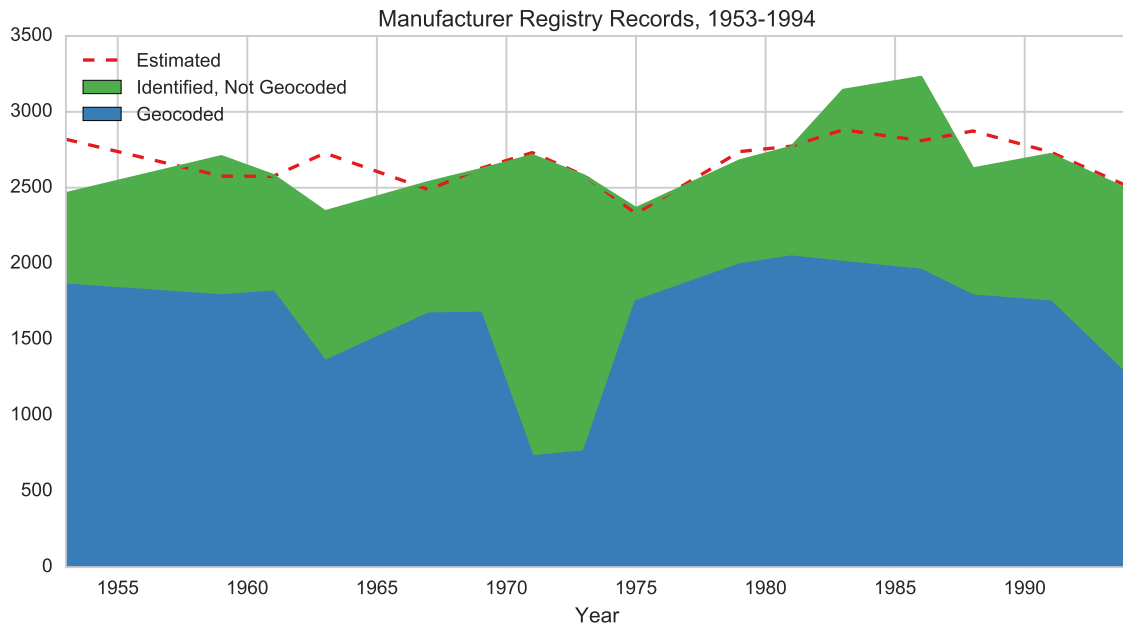


Fig. 2. The number of manufacturers identified and geocoded in each year's registry, compared to the estimated number of manufacturers.

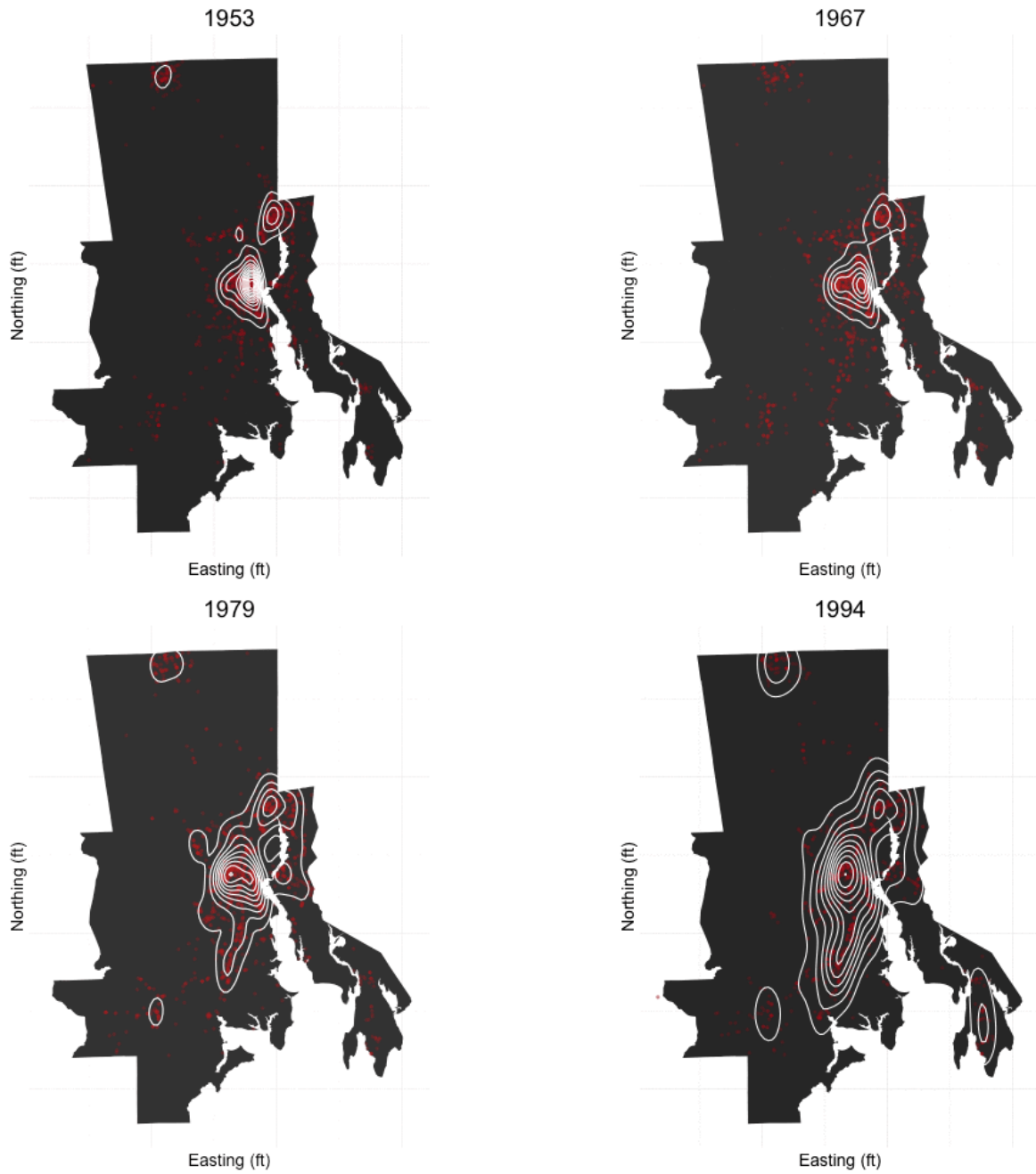


Fig. 3. Density contour plots for all active manufacturing facilities.



Fig. 4. Density contour plots for active manufacturing facilities in the jewelry (purple) and textile (green) industries.