

The Dynamics of Town Centre Retailing 1971-2003

The Context

The retailing sector in the UK economy constitutes at least 16 percent of GDP and it is still growing in importance. Its relatively prosperity is firmly established in the way the sector is organised and the way this interfaces with related commercial and financial industries. Geographical location is central to an understanding of the way this sector operates. In the last decade dramatic changes in retailing due to globalisation, down-sizing, just-in-time delivery systems, off-shore/back office relocation with respect to warehousing and information functions as well as new kinds of selling outlets at airports, stations, on the internet, have added to the volatility of the industry and there is no doubt that it is becoming ever more difficult to construct a clear picture of how the sector is changing (Thurstain-Goodwin and Batty, 2001).

This is nowhere clearer than in town centres which are not only the key investment hubs of the retail economy but also the foci where many public and private services are transferred and consumed by the population at large. Town centres have thus become the most significant features of the transport and planning system with the debate about in-town and out-of-town shopping showing no signs of lessening. Current debates about transport policy such as congestion charging are now entangled within this debate, and there is an ever more urgent need to generate unambiguous statistics as to the performance of different sub-sectors and locations of retailing activity within the UK space economy so that effective policies can be implemented to ensure that the prosperity of this sector is not compromised.

Retail Distribution and Town Centres

The information gap between what we know about retailing and what we would like to know is gradually lessening and in spatial terms, a major new annual survey of employment, floorspace, and turnover in land use of more than 1000 town centres in England and Wales is about to be released by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). This will be the first comprehensive statistical review of retailing since the Census of Retail Distribution, last carried out in 1971. It will set in motion a process of generating a clear and unambiguous time series of data that has immediate and obvious uses for policy makers and developers alike.

CASA has been involved in this project since its inception. We were the main contractors for the Feasibility Study in which we developed a technique for synthesising spatial information at fine scale unit post code level which enabled us to define town centre boundaries using conventional overlay analysis and map algebra within proprietary GIS. We demonstrated the method for 12 different towns in England and Wales (Thurstain-Goodwin et al., 1998) and then we were contracted to adapt the method for the Greater London region. This Pilot Study which enabled us to work with data on retailing for some 300,000 locations (unit postcodes) in London led to 200 or so town centre locations which we further extended into main town centres and retail cores and now constitute the units which will be used henceforth for the Greater London Authority (Thurstain-Goodwin et al., 2002). Currently the project is back within ODPM being rolled out for the rest of England and Wales. CASA, through Mark Thurstain-Goodwin, Research Fellow, is still heavily involved. Daryl Lloyd, an ESRC CASE student who is just finishing his PhD (2000-2003) was also working on the project with respect to error and uncertainty in the geographical data and was linked to ODPM. The experience and data we have acquired in this context is still vested in CASA, and it comprises an enormous retailing resource. There are several outputs from this stream of research seen on our own web sites at <http://www.casa.ucl.ac.uk/towncentres/> and <http://www.casa.ucl.ac.uk/newtowns/> and at the NRPF web site <http://www.nrpf.org/>. The current proposal is to exploit all these resources in a different way with a new sponsor as we outline below.

The Problem and the Proposal

We have in prospect a continuing and now regular retail census at a geographically fine scale which will enable detailed information on the health and prosperity of town centres in England and Wales to be closely monitored. This is what the Retail Statistics Working Group of ODPM and various other organisations such as the National Retail Planning Forum and the Association of Town Centre Mangers have lobbied for many years. However what this survey will reveal is how town centres are currently changing and although within 5 years, it will be possible to understand recent retail trends, none of this actually provides any clarity on the major changes in the retail sector during the last few decades.

However it is possible to say something about retail dynamics by using the current retail data from the Town Centres Project as a control to reconstructing the past from data sets pieced together in an *ad hoc* way. Using the current data and the 1971 Census of Distribution data as control totals, we can begin analysis of how retailing patterns have changed geographically during the last 30 years. Moreover there are various other studies based on these past data sources that we are able to utilise in this kind of analysis. The study carried out at the Manchester Business School in the early 1970s by David Thorpe (Thorpe, Thomas, and Kivell, 1971, Thorpe and Kivell, 1974) was a detailed analysis of the 1971 Census of Distribution and this provides a wonderful source of data which can be used for the initial control. David Thorpe has made all his original data available for this project and he is currently an Honorary Research Fellow in CASA at UCL, having finished as the Research Director of John Lewis Partnership in 2002. He has been involved in the ODPM Town Centres Project from the beginning as a member of the Steering Committee and is well aware of the differences and similarities between the two censuses.

Our second source for the project, also acting as the project sponsor, is the National Retail Planning Forum (NRPF). The NRPF is an organisation comprising retailing, developer and planning interests whose concern it is to provide timely and informed advice to the industry and to government. It has commissioned a number of key projects in retailing during the last decade including the creation of an on-line directory of retail data, which offers a rich source of potential information for this research. Finally the work carried out by Hall, Marshall and Low (2001) which involved reworking Smith's (1968, 1970) central place hierarchy for England and Wales using Yellow Page data is also relevant. Their data, which is more qualitative and relates to types of functions in different town centres, is available in raw form.

In short, Thurstain-Goodwin, the architect of the new Town Centres Distribution Census for ODPM, Thorpe the originator of the 1977 Study based on the census of Distribution, and Hall who is affiliated to CASA through UCL (Bartlett) would all bring various data resources to bear which make this retrospective analysis of the retailing system possible. Thorpe and Hall were members of the ODPM Steering Group on Town Centres and the resources of this wider network in terms of access to data would be utilised.

What we propose here is that the CASE student would develop such an analysis of the spatial retail system over the last 30 years, building a space-time series of relevant data which would link the 1971 to the 2003 census. The work would involve considerable expertise in massaging and synthesising data, in working with missing data, in data estimations and then would move to a substantive and model based analysis of changes over the period. A model would be constructed which could then be used predictively to suggest ways in which the town centres system of England a Wales is likely to change, thus providing a much richer way of examining the dynamics of the central place system than conventional and traditional methods. The interests to planners, developers and retailers are obvious. We would assume that the model would be piloted and managed by the NRPF, the project's sponsor.

The Methodology to be Employed

Data from a variety of different data sources will be integrated into a seamless Oracle database using a common geographical gazetteer. The data sources are available in a variety of different formats. Paper based data sets (such as the 1971 Census of Distribution) will need to be digitised using Optical Character Recognition techniques and digital data sets will need to be modified into a common data structure.

The integration of these data into a single geographical database will enable a variety of different spatial analytical techniques such as geographic cluster analysis to identify how different parts of the country have fared during the rapid evolution of the retail sector over the past three decades. New analytical techniques such as Geographically Weighted Regression will also be employed to aid the development of a model of retail change over this period and to help develop a predictive model (Fotheringham et al, 2002).

Anticipated outcomes

The major outputs from the thesis would be threefold: new data sets relating to the retail hierarchy and retail boundaries in town centres over the last 30 years, new software and model predictions for UK town centres, and a detailed analysis and discussion of the spatial dynamics of retailing. This is seen by NRPF as essential to their mission in developing new retail statistics and a better understanding of the country's retail hierarchy.

Dissemination

The student will become part of a vibrant research culture in CASA, in which PhD Students are expected to present at important relevant conferences and to establish a sound publishing record – the latter with the help of the academic supervisor. It is envisaged that the student would produce new data, and new spatial econometric style models, which could be used immediately by various actors such as developers and planners to predict changes in town centre performance and the retail hierarchy. The work would be publicised through the CASA and the NRPF web sites but NRPF are themselves an organization which is at the forefront of dissemination (part of their mission) and thus this project would be high profile in their portfolio of events and research commissions.

References

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