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Chapter 6

The Infraordinary or the Ordinary as Extraordinary? Expertise (and not global) Production Networks and Ordinary Towns and Cities

Stephen Williams and John R. Bryson

The term 'ordinary' is perhaps 'extraordinary'. This word comes with different connotations. On the one hand, the ordinary can be considered as related to the usual rather than the exceptional. The ordinary is something that is not distinguished and is common. On the other hand, ordinary can be used in a derogatory manner implying something that is inferior as it might be considered as mediocre or commonplace. The extraordinary is the everything that the ordinary is not – it is unusual and, in some ways, must be exceptional.

Social science should focus predominately on understanding the ordinary rather than the exceptional. The paradox is that as social scientists we tend to focus less on the ordinary and more on exploring the extraordinary. There are many reasons why this would be the case. First, the exceptional and the extraordinary are more visible and are often considered more interesting. Second, to develop a research agenda based on the ordinary would perhaps be considered as extraordinary. Third, there is perhaps the paradox of the ordinary – the ordinary is perhaps too commonplace and well-known and is harder to observe. And yet, the ordinary is about everyday living and about the day-to-day activities of firms and their employees. Thus, a concern with understanding the ordinary should be central to the social sciences.

Perec, the French novelist, essayist and filmmaker was interested in trying to explore what he termed the 'infraordinary' or that "which is not noticed, that which has no importance: what happens when nothing happens other than the weather, people, cars, and clouds' (Perec, 2010: 3). This infraordinary world represents the everyday taken for granted routines of people as they live their lives through multiple encounters with place and space. This focus on the infraordinary is highlighted in two of Perec's works. On the one hand, during one overcast weekend in October 1974, Perec documented everything that he could see in his field of vision whilst observing Place Saint-Sulpice. The outcome is an account of "tens, hundreds of simultaneous actions, micro-events, each one of which necessitates postures, movements, specific expenditures of energy" (Perec, 2010: 10). On the other hand, in his novel, *Life: A User's Manual*, Perec explored the life histories of the inhabitants of a Paris apartment block (Perec,1987). The emphasis is on the exact details of each apartment, person, and object. This account highlights the diversity of lifestyles and histories that can be found juxtaposed on a small site, but also engages with 'thing theory' by stressing the importance of the interrelationships between people and things and of the thingness of things and the roles objects play in everyday living (Brown, 2004). Perec's work has only recently been discovered by geographers (Phillips, 2018). There is much to learn from his understanding of place, space and life, but perhaps two of the most important aspects of his work is the emphasis he places on understanding the interrelationships between pieces and patterns combined with an appreciation of the importance of the infraordinary.

There are some interesting tensions here between the extraordinary and the ordinary. In publication terms, a distinction must be made between ordinary papers that represent incremental additions to existing debates and papers that are extraordinary as they provide a radically different approach. Ordinary papers are much easier to publish compared to extraordinary papers. Papers must make incremental additions, but the expectation is that there must be some methodological or theoretical contribution. Academic publishing is more about incremental additions but with additional innovation. The history of publishing in the academic journals is one based on initial rejection, often multiple rejections, of papers that when eventually published changed debates. A paper published by Gans and Shepherd, (1994) is particularly interesting in this respect as it charts the experiences of economists, including 20 Nobel Prize winners, regarding papers that had been rejected by journal editors. The publication of this paper resulted in a debate in economics regarding conservatism and a discussion that centred on the relationship between early novelty and rejection (Gans, 2000: viii). In this case, extraordinary papers are too often rejected for being extraordinary and perhaps too many ordinary papers are published. The difficulty here is defining extraordinary in the context of academic publishing compared to the ordinary. Perhaps extraordinary papers dramatically change debates by altering the ways in which the world is perceived. Given this, extraordinary papers will be exceptional, but they might initially experience problems with acceptance.

The Business and Professional Services (BPS) sector has created many new firms and employment opportunities and has contributed to a sectoral shift in developed market economies over the last 40 years (See Beyers and Nelson, 1999; Bryson and Daniels, 2015; Bryson *et al*., 2020). This chapter explores the ordinary and everyday experiences of a sample of marketing and public relations firms established in ordinary town and cities located in the West Midlands of the UK. This region is dominated by the United Kingdom's second city, Birmingham; a multicultural city that was once heavily dependent upon manufacturing but since 1966 has undergone a gradual process of economic restructuring and diversification to include, for example, designer retailing, tourism and BPS (Daniels and Bryson, 2005). Manufacturing remains important, but Birmingham has tried to transform itself into an attractive, diverse, and culturally rich city. Creativity and consumerism based on experiences and brands have been used as economic tools to enhance economic development and to soften the longstanding association of the city with industrial decline (Bryson, 2007a). Marketing and public relations have played an important part in this on-going process of city and regional re-branding.

The research focused on very ordinary research questions including: Why had these firms been established? Why had they been established in a specific location? How did these firms interact with other BPS firms and client companies? These are unexceptional questions, but critical questions for the lives of the owners and employees of these firms. These are not firms that will perhaps save lives or make extraordinary contributions, but they are perhaps still extraordinary as these are firms that impact on the lives of their founders, employees, and clients whilst also creating local, regional and national economic multipliers. Thus, our object of study is 'ordinary' BPS firms located in smaller towns and cities.

The chapter is also perhaps extraordinary. The majority of research projects on BPS firms and their employees focus on global cities or large agglomerations (Taylor, 2013) whilst there are comparatively few papers that explore this sector in rural areas or in small towns or cities (Hitchens *et al*., 1994; Beyers and Lindahl, 1996; Beyers and Nelson, 1999; Bryson, 2007b). The established, dominant, or ordinary debate on BPS has revolved around global cities and the identification of global cities by counting the presence or absence of BPS firms. This approach to ranking cities was part of Robinson's critique of the world cities literature, or the global cities debate, with the argument being that this approach ignored the variegated nature of the relationships that exist between cities and the global economy (Robinson, 2006). Ranking and developing a typology of global cities based on counting and classifying BPS firms is only one approach to assessing the contribution a city makes to the world economy. This chapter adopts a very different approach to understanding BPS firms as the focus is on understanding the complex networks of BPS firms and professionals that are located within a city-region. This is an analysis of 'ordinary' places that have extraordinary geographies which are too often ignored or overlooked.

In 2019 Birmingham had 215 advertising agencies and 35 market research and public opinion polling companies (ONS, 2020). Some of these firms no doubt contributed to the creative marketing and public relations intended to re-position the city of Birmingham's brand but they are not the focus of this paper, rather it explores the activities of firms located outside Birmingham. In 2019, the county of Warwickshire was the location for 155 advertising companies and 40 market research and public opinion polling companies whilst the county of Worcestershire had 140 advertising firms and 25 market research and public opinion polling firms (ONS, 2020). Most of these firms were in smaller market towns and cathedral cities. Whilst these firms are not located in Birmingham, they are simultaneously partly of the city and partly connected with other places and spaces in which marketing and public relations are created and consumed.

The research that informs this chapter was completed in 2007. The geography of BPS firms is one that is dispersed across the region rather than being predominantly focused on the Birmingham conurbation and this was the case in 2007 as it is now in 2020. The methodology involved three phases. First, a detailed analysis was undertaken of national statistics including the British Annual Business Inquiry (ABI) survey. Second, a telephone survey using a random sample of 184 marketing and public relations firms with a response rate of just over 28% (80 firms) (Figure 6.1) and third 40 in-depth semi-structured interviews were undertaken during the summer of 2007 with a response rate of 53.3%.

Reflecting on this research from 13 years in the future raises some interesting COVID-19 related research issues. The ongoing pandemic has challenged accepted wisdom regarding BPS. The global cities literature was part of a debate that celebrated urban agglomerations. Cities were considered to be the core sites for innovation and creativity (Salder & Bryson, 2019). The future was urban, and one based on increasing density and land use intensification. We begin by considering the impacts of COVID-19 on BPS firms.

COVID-19 and the Emergence of New City-Region Geographies

COVID-19 has placed biological risk management (BRM) back on the urban planning and business management agendas (Andres *et al*., 2020). During the nineteenth century, engineering solutions emerged intended to limit the transmission of gastrointestinal pathogens. Deepening global connectivity has enhanced the risks related to the rapid global spread of respiratory tract pathogens (Ali & Keil, 2006). This is further complicated by increasing urban density providing opportunities for cross-species transmission (CST) (Dietz *et al*., 2020; Horton, 2020).

One response to COVID-19 was the rapid adoption of homeworking by BPS firms. This has destroyed assumptions regarding the importance of face-to-face relationships and copresence and has opened up possibilities for a major process of corporate organisational restructuring. One implication will be a new balance between office working and homeworking leading to a reduction in the size of offices required by BPS firms in central locations. Another implication will be the dispersion of BPS employees to smaller towns, cities, and villages. In May 2020, Twitter announced that the last few months have demonstrated that homeworking could be effective and that "if our employees are in a role and situation that enables them to work from home and they want to continue to do so forever, we will make that happen" (Bock, 2020). A survey undertaken in May 2020 of 2,800 residents across Silicon Valley, New York and Seattle found that 62% would be willing to work remotely and to relocate outside these metropolitan areas and that 20% of those based in the San Francisco area would be willing to accept a pay cut of 20% (Sherr, 2020). Facebook is planning to open new hubs in cities like Atlanta, Dallas and Denver that will be targeted at supporting predominantly employees who are working remotely (Ortutay, 2020).

COVID-19 has accelerated the adoption of technological solutions to office-based tasks and one implication is that the economies of metropolitan areas will become much more complex as they come to rely on a much more geographically dispersed workforce. But it is important to recognise that in 2007, there was a dispersed geography of BPS firms across the West Midlands and that this sector's geography was much more complex than had been highlighted in the geographical literature. One response to COVID-19 is that the role of the city is changing as larger metropolitan areas are turned inside out or experience a process by which the centre is flipped to the edge or towards smaller towns, cities and rural areas. Central offices may become the training grounds for new employees and the coordinating centres for teams working remotely. There is perhaps a paradox here that requires further research. On the one hand, centrally located offices may be the training grounds, but also the location for more standardised office-based processing activities. Employees undertaking these more standardised tasks do not necessarily need to interact with other employees to perform these tasks. For this group, office-based interactions are more social rather than work orientated or focused on providing and receiving on the job training. Such employees may prefer to be office based to benefit from social encounters. On the other hand, more senior employees are continually participating in work-based social encounters. These can be face-to-face or through virtual meetings. The implication is that these types of employees may prefer to work from home as their work is very much a social activity. The paradox is that workers who do not need to interact with other colleagues to perform their work prefer to work in offices to avoid social isolation whilst employees whose work is based on social encounters may prefer to work from home.

The existing literature on the creative class has emphasized the importance of hip or bohemian locations as the core sites for creativity (Florida, 2005; Pratt, 2008). This literature ignored more ordinary towns and cities and focussed on much larger cities. This was unfortunate as this led to a distorted reading of the relationship between creativity and location. This was partly a problem with the selection of the object of study that placed 'extraordinary places' at the centre of the analysis and marginalised other locations. It was also a reflection of the research design and related methodology that failed to explore the interrelationships between place, space, and creativity.

Creativity and 'Branded' Capitalism

COVID-19 has challenged the emphasis placed on city-first, city-region and core-periphery models that has emerged across the social sciences. This takes the form of city-regionalist approaches that emphasise the importance of concentration-agglomeration effects (Sadler and Bryson, 2019: 3). The global cities had been conceptualised as the command and control centres of the global economy (Sassen, 2001). These are the global cities that shape consumer desire through the activities of advertising agencies and other BPS activities. We live in an age of 'branded' capitalism; brands and the process of branding matter (Klein, 2001; Twitchell, 2004: Pike, 2009a & b). Public places and private spaces are saturated with references to branded products while individuals create and shape their identities through' branded' conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1970). Such creative consumption, or the display of designer and branded casual clothing, handbags, watches, and smartphones, goes together with creative production. Products reflect creative moments and the activities of creative professionals, including brand managers, marketing, public relations, and advertising agencies. Branding, marketing, and public relations provide client firms with various forms of non-price-based competitiveness whilst advertising is a tool deployed by firms as part of their marketing strategy (Bryson and Rusten, 2011). Consumers discriminate between products on the basis of price, design and brand which are created and deployed by marketing professionals employed to construct stories and images that are wrapped around and through products, firms and places (Bryson and Rusten, 2011). Advertising contributes to this story of creativity (Leslie 1995 & 1997; Nixon, 2003; Thiel, 2005; Faulconbridge, 2006 & 2007) and is simultaneously an art and a profession that attracts 'individuals, entrepreneurs and talented misfits . . . [and is] informal, unpredictable and dependent on individual skills and creativity' (Mayle, 1990: 118).

There is another aspect of branding and the link with the construction and projection of individual identity. COVID-19 has highlighted differences in the ways in which participants in virtual meetings project their identities. The selection of their backgrounds for virtual meetings and their location within their homes requires further research. Thus, some participants refuse to use the camera function, others project an artificial backdrop, and some are happy to display their homes to colleagues and clients.

It is no surprise that understanding the activities of advertising agencies has attracted much attention across the social sciences. The globalisation of advertising, and its position as a key BPS, located in global cities has been prominent in these accounts (Faulconbridge, 2006 & 2007). Advertising is considered to be an activity associated with creative cities or global cities (Thiel, 2005), but it is only one element in the mix

of creative occupations contributing to the development of branded capitalism. Marketing and public relations agencies as well as advertising agencies are associated with creative cities, but they have much more complex geographies that are explored in this chapter. This geography includes rural areas, ordinary towns and cities and large conurbations.

Companies increasingly compete on brands by packaging and presenting a portfolio of often intangible assets that includes a firm's history, designs, images, identity, and its name and that of individual product lines (Koehn, 2001: 5). Marketing, which is a strategic planning process, provides companies with the ability to research and develop products and to meet the needs and requirements of customers and is critical to successful brand development. A brand is part of a firm's marketing strategy; a long-term process that is embedded within all facets of a business. It provides an overarching framework incorporating market segmentation, brand management and specifies the role that advertising will play in the firm's stakeholder engagement. Marketing and public relations are important creative processes that have been considered by academics working in business schools but have been largely ignored by other social sciences. Sociologists and geographers have explored the activities of advertising agencies (Grabher, 2001a & b, 2002 a & b; Nixon, 2003; Thiel, 2005), but have largely overlooked the activities of marketing and public relations professionals. This needs to be rectified, given the central role they play in the construction of branded capitalism.

Creative Cities, Creative Places and Creative Hinterlands

The idea that cities are central places (Christaller ([1933] 1966) is not uppermost in contemporary accounts of their role in shaping economic activity. This is especially the case for the adjacent (hinterland) areas around cities. Yet the key global cities that are considered to be information/expertise/knowledge/creative rich places at the centre of command and control over the developing global economy are central places (Sassen, 2001; Taylor and Walker, 2001). The arguments that are constructed resonate with earlier research questions and processes even though the terminology has changed; in 1915 Geddes coined the term 'world city' (Clark, 1996), in 1991 Sassen introduced the term 'global city' and in 2002 Florida identified the creative class as important actors in the competitiveness of cities. Global cities have been identified as the preeminent location for advanced BPS; those services that provide creative expertise as an input into a variety of different production processes (Sassen, 1991, Florida, 2005). The global cities can be defined as being a form of 'super league' in terms of central place.

It is worth speculating on the ways in which old concepts have been replaced by new terminology. Thus, spatial divisions of labour have become global production networks (GPN) (Bryson and Vanchan, 2020). Perhaps a GPN reflects a specific production network's configuration of central places or blended spatial division of expertise and labour (Bryson and Rusten, 2005, 2006, 2008). The GPN approach has not been applied to services to any great extent. In any case, there would be major problems given the manufacturing orientation of the GPN approach. For BPS, the primary source of value is founded upon expertise and this implies that these firms are involved in the configuration of *Expertise Production Networks* (EPN) that have a

very different set of motivations, drivers, configurations and values compared to GPNs. For example, the concept of a "cost-capability ratio", defined as the ratio between costs and a firm's capability (Coe and Yeung, 2015), is meaningless in the context of firms in which there might be no direct relationship between costs and the monetary value based on inputs provided to clients (Bryson *et al*., 2020).

While the idea of world or global city may be a re-packaging of earlier central place concepts, it may have overlooked one key dimension of the latter. Christaller's central place model, for example, was predicated on the idea that the size and function of central places was founded upon consumption behaviour not just within a central place but between that place and its hinterland. Contrast this with the global cities' literature which is based on a set of assumptions regarding consumption *and* production. On the one hand, the growing service intensity in the organization of all industries has led to an increase in demand for a complex array of BPS functions – finance, insurance, real estate, legal services, accountancy, advertising, management, public relations, industrial design and a range of technical inputs. The increase in demand arises from intermediate consumers (private and public sector firms) as well as final consumers. On the other hand, Sassen (2001, 2002) and others have argued that since the 1980s the increasing service intensity of production systems has had significant growth impacts on cities (Sassen, 2002: 21).

The problem is that the global cities literature tends to highlight relationships between global cities rather than between city and hinterland. The focus was on understanding producer services in very large cities, notably London, New York and Tokyo (Warf, 2000; Taylor, 2003, 2013). The key point is that the debate has become fixated on these 'higher order' BPS and financial services and, in some cases, uses them as proxy measures to identify the global nature of a city's activities or even to define them. In practice, growth in service employment and in the number of service firms has occurred across a wider range of city sizes, not just in the global cities (Rusten *et al*., 2004). This means that the growth of creative services, for example, is also taking place in cities at different levels in the urban hierarchy and that 'some of these cities cater to regional or sub-national markets; others cater to national markets and yet others to global markets' (Sassen, 2002: 22). Thus, there has been a growth in home-based creative firms located in rural areas that reflects lifestyle choices by their owners and employees. These are the lone eagles and high fliers identified by Beyers in his work on American rural producer services (Beyers and Lindahl, 1996, Beyers and Nelson, 1999, 2000; Bryson, 2007b) and are also perhaps symbolic of Pahl's well-known concept of 'urbs in rure' (Pahl, 1965).

The neglect of detailed research into the role played by lesser cities, or more ordinary cites, for the production of services persists (Markusen, *et.al*, 1999; Scott, 2002; Robinson, 2006; Taylor, 2013). The global cities literature shifted to include places beyond the confines of the premier cities to explore the ways in which other (lesser?) places are linked into the global city network. Conceptualising a network of globalised urban centres (Sassen, 2001) does extend the definition of global cities to embrace other key 'global' urban arenas. It also begins to explore the neglected relationship between, on the one hand, the centralisation of activities within key urban centres and, on the other, the geographically dispersed nature of production. The recognition that there are networks of interaction provides a valuable opportunity to adjust the research focus away from global cities as the primary site for analysis

towards a more balanced approach based on understanding the geographic organization of the production of creative expertise or towards understanding the configuration of EPNs. This more balanced account requires a research focus that includes the role played by BPS firms in all types of urban locations – from the very smallest towns to the largest global cities.

We do not dispute the importance of global cities, but it is difficult to understand their role in the global economy without exploring the wider organization and geographies of production, in this case of creative services, more generally. The starting point for the analysis should be on the organization, geographies and developing division of labour of creative service firms, rather than on an analysis of global cities. This could be the call for a GPN informed analysis of BPS, but the problem with the GPN approach is that it prioritizes the global over other spatial scales as well as being an approach developed to understand more manufacturing-oriented production processes. Thus, the approach needs to shift towards understanding the configuration of EPNs.

Not only has the global cities literature focused on major concentrations of BPS and on the relationships between firms located in global cities at the expense of other BPS activities in other geographic settings, it has largely ignored edge city economies or city hinterlands. Many creative people live outside large cities in smaller towns and cities and in rural environments but work in the city and many creative people live and work on the edge of cities and beyond. In the UK, these are individuals who have established BPS firms in their homes or in small country or market towns that are distinct from, but within the hinterland of, large cities. These firms work with clients who are final users of their services, but they may also be employed as subcontractors by other BPS firms located in smaller urban areas and by larger city-based providers.

Marketing and public relations are therefore created through the development of relationships between firms distributed across a city region rather than just within a large urban agglomeration. A 'city region' must be defined by its functional economic geography; an understanding of the ways in which expertise and wealth is created though interactions between firms and people located in many different places (Bryson and Taylor, 2012). BPS expertise is embodied in people and clients may access this expertise from an office based in a city, but the expertise may be partially or even completely created by professionals located in a city's immediate hinterland or by professionals located elsewhere and connected via ICT. Alternatively, clients may access BPS expertise that is located in smaller towns and cities using third party referrals or established relationships. For extremely creative professionals, including designers, their location reflects their choice of residential environment. A study of design consultancy firms found that 'star-based' design studios could be located anywhere as clients were more interested in persuading a star-designer to work with them then with the location of the studio (Abecassis-Moedas *et al*., 2012). It is important to appreciate that client-based encounters with BPS professionals have shifted away from a focus on face-to-face meetings towards relationships which may be completely or predominantly online.

Our contention is that city-regions should be conceptualised as extended regions comprising many interlinked distributed production systems; systems of wealth creation that blend different types of creative expertise together to create value. These distributed EPNs combine expertise located in larger cities and their extended regions

with expertise and productive capabilities located in other places. Such an approach mirrors that developed by Cronon (1991) in an analysis of Chicago and the Great West in which his starting point was central place theory. Cronon also makes use of von Thünen's thought experiment in which he imagined an isolated world with a single city surrounded by zones of different types of economic activity (Von Thünen, 1966) to remind 'us that city and country are inextricably connected and that market relations profoundly mediate between them' (Cronon, 1991: 51). Nevertheless, BPS employees may initially begin working for firms located in large cities and eventually decide to live outside the city in smaller towns, cities, and villages. This leads to opportunities for BPS professionals to establish home-based businesses that may then become important providers of BPS expertise in their own right. In this case, the larger city may ultimately be included in a process that leads to firm formation elsewhere within a city-region economy. Initially, these new BPS firms remain linked to the larger city, but for some firms "a process of dislocation and detachment" occurs as their client base expands beyond the confines of the city-region (Salder and Bryson, 2019: 12).

Like Chicago's Great West, cities and their distributed production systems should be conceptualised as diverse, complicated, multifunctional and multilayered landscapes that include relationships between cities and small towns, cities, and villages within their hinterlands and vice versa. Christaller's hinterland was immediately adjacent to the city, but in the twenty-first century a city has many hinterlands – many further away places in which companies, non-firm actors and individuals are engaged in translocal exchanges and sometimes in interactions that become trust-based relationships. The key point is that an analysis of a city that ignores the diversity of its hinterlands results in a radically distorted or incomplete account. Central place theory produced an oversimplified account of the relationships between a city and its hinterland, but it highlighted the market relationships that link a city with adjacent rural areas and vice versa, and it is these relationships that transform regions into complex, multi-layered spatial economies. The stretching of cities into their hinterlands, including extended hinterlands, can be conceptualised as a process of coupling, decoupling and recoupling in which connections are configured into temporary project-based EPNs along which information, expertise, money, components, goods and people flow. These are temporary or transitory compared to GPNs configured to produce tangible goods rather than intangible expertise. Decoupling and recoupling are as important here as coupling. This process of stretching, dislocating, detaching or decoupling BPS transactions from their place of production has been facilitated by BPS professionals and firms being able to locate in places that are integrated into the web of interconnected global networks and into the evolving cyber-communication nexus. This degree of connectedness facilitates new process and product innovation, but that risk "is an intrinsic part of connectedness – because connectivity connects individual risks into a system of risks" (Letwin, 2020: 116-117). The latter is an important point as a 'cyber-energy plexus' forms based around network convergence in which individual risks are magnified with the possibility for systemic failure. COVID-19 is one example of connectivity magnifying individual risks.

The emphasis in Cronon's, Christaller's and von Thünen's work is on city and country or rural relationships, but in our analysis the emphasis is on city and hinterland and our hinterlands are not necessarily rural (Pahl, 1966). This approach

provides us with a conceptual framework to explore the activities of marketing and public relations agencies located in smaller towns, cities, and rural areas across the West Midlands.

Expertise Production Networks: Beyond the city, but still of the city?

When this research was undertaken, it was difficult to explore the geography of marketing and public relations firms in the UK as these activities were distributed across two Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) codes: 74.13, market research and public opinion polling, and 74.14, business and management consultancy activities, including public relations, financial management and other business and management consultants. In Birmingham in 2005 there were 918 firms in these SIC codes employing 4,050. Warwickshire, an adjacent county, was home to 1,429 firms employing 6,269 while Worcestershire was the location for 1,112 firms employing 2,504. Between 2000 and 2005 employment in this sector in Birmingham had grown by 1,381 (51.7%), in Warwickshire by 2,670 employees (74.2%) and in Worcestershire by 1,095 additional employees (77%). The growth beyond Birmingham was surprising, unexpected and was perhaps an extraordinary finding. The geographical literature had over-emphasized the relationship between global cities, large cities and extraordinary cities and BPS (Taylor, 2013) and in doing so had marginalised or overlooked BPS firms located in more ordinary smaller towns and cities and in rural areas (Bryson, 2007b). An analysis using postcodes revealed a distinct agglomeration of 52 marketing and public relation agencies focussed on a triangle whose apexes correspond with the towns of Warwick, Leamington Spa and Kenilworth. There were further concentrations in Stratford-upon-Avon and Coventry (all outside Birmingham). Most of these businesses (55 of the 79 firms interviewed during the telephone survey) were based in urban locations with populations over 10,000 and only 7 were located in isolated dwellings or in small hamlets (Figure 6.1). Firms located in Birmingham and Warwickshire employed an average of 4.4 staff while Worcestershire firms employed 2.3.

INSERT FIGURE 6.1

An analysis using location quotients (LQ) highlights the relative importance of BPS service employees in Birmingham's hinterland (Figure 6.2). Birmingham has important concentrations, but the counties of Warwickshire and Oxfordshire (a county outside the West Midlands administrative area) have high LQs, indicating that they have more business and professional services than would be expected when compared to the English average. This 'unexpected' geography of creative BPS illustrates the importance of exploring their distribution in areas beyond cities and to engage in research that investigates the relationship between firms located in rural areas, villages and market towns and major cities. The LQs for BPS raise a series of interesting questions: Are the businesses involved in some way marginal? Do these firms only engage with clients located outside Birmingham or are these firms connected to BPS firms and clients located only in Birmingham? Do these firms collaborate with BPS firms located in major cities or are these standalone businesses with their own clients? It may be, that these firms have their own client base as well as provide additional capacity to BPS firms located in Birmingham and elsewhere. These are questions that highlight the interrelationship between a city and other adjacent places as well as suggesting related questions about the geographic reach of the functioning economies of small towns and cities and larger urban agglomerations.

These are more than just academic questions as the answers would inform the formulation and application of policy intended to enhance local economic development. If policies and strategies are targeted at the level of the city rather than the city *and* hinterland, then they would perhaps distort rather than enhance local economic growth.

INSERT FIGURE 6.2

Within the West Midlands, marketing and PR services are amongst the fastest growing activities in the region. They are services that are heavily involved with all stages of client production processes. They export inter-regionally and overseas. For clients, the reputations of individuals and their EPNs, based on their relationship networks, are more important than the reputations of firms (Grabher, 2002a & b; Faulconbridge, 2007). This, combined with low barriers to entry (capital and equipment), means that marketing and public relations professionals can easily establish their own firms. These new firms tend to be established in the founder's home and many of these homes are located beyond the city in smaller towns and cities and rural areas. This is reflected in Warwickshire and Oxfordshire and to a lesser extent in Worcestershire, and has a number of drivers including quality of life and access to excellent infrastructure (the M40, M42 and M5 motorways, rail and air); a location that is south of Birmingham means that London can be reached by train within an hour. Marketing and public relation creatives located in Warwickshire can maintain close contact with London's marketing and media cluster (Keeble and Nachum, 2002). Warwickshire is also the location for important cultural attractions of which the most famous are perhaps the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) (Stratford-upon-Avon) and the Warwick Arts Centre. Accessibility to this cultural infrastructure is part of the lifestyle attraction of living in this part of the West Midlands. The potential for individuals to work alone as freelancers, as sole proprietors and as small firms from home produces distinct geographies and expertise relationship networks, or EPNs, that are dispersed across the West Midlands (Baines and Robson, 2001; Ekinsmyth, 1999; 2002; Leslie, 1997) and beyond.

Most of the firms in the telephone survey were home-based businesses (46 or 58%) with the remainder being office-based. Within home-based businesses there were an equal number of businesses providing public relations services and a mix of marketing and public relations client inputs. Home-based businesses were able to provide a full-service agency to clients by sub-contracting specialist activities to other firms. Home-based freelancers may appear isolated, but they were part of intricate EPNs of niche workers in marketing and public relations. The flexibility to form task focused project teams – EPNs - demonstrates the dominance of personal relationships and reputations which transcend the firm (Grabher, 2002a; 2002b).

Three types of businesses according to turnover were identified. First, businesses with a turnover of up to £99,999, of which there were 26 in total; 24 were home-based and accounted for 61.5% of all home-based businesses and two were located in leased offices. Second, firms with turnovers between £100,000 and £999,000. There were 26 of which 14 were home-based (35.9%), 11 in leased office space and one was in an owner-occupied office. Third, 12 firms with turnovers greater than £1m. Only 1 was home-based with 7 leasing office space and 4 in owner occupied offices. Home-based marketing and public relations consultants are part of dispersed EPNs. They come

together as and when required to co-deliver services to clients and as some specialists leave the supply network, because of retirement, others join. New firms are constantly formed as home-based businesses close with the retirement of the founder; new firms are, however, constantly being formed as professionals relocate from London and as employees of larger agencies based in the Birmingham region establish their own businesses close to their place of residence.

Home-based businesses can be grouped into those businesses that grow and employ more workers and those that continue as sole proprietorships. Twenty-one home-based businesses were sole proprietorships, whilst 24 were employers. Employees included employed and contracted fee-earning members of staff and support staff. These firms engaged in various forms of subcontracting. Clients may consist of other agencies in which case they will undertake back office production functions (Ekinsmyth, 2002; Leslie, 1997) and the provision of niche creative expertise. Home-based businesses located outside Birmingham often worked together to form a temporary project team – an EPN - to deliver a specific client contract.

Twenty-nine home-based businesses did not employ freelance fee-earning staff. Many home-based firms work as freelancers for other agencies that offer a 'full service'. The remaining home-based agencies (16 firms, 36%) worked with between one and five freelance specialists. Freelancers often work for clients who were previously their employers. Just under two-thirds of office-based businesses employed freelance staff (21 firms, 63.6%). The evidence suggests that a complex distributed *expertise production network* has developed in the West Midlands for the production of marketing and public relations expertise. This production system is targeted predominantly at local clients (49% of business) but 18.6% of the turnover came from clients based in London and the South East and 28.9% from clients located in the rest of the UK; only 3.5% of the turnover came from overseas. Three types of client-agency relationship can be identified. First, agencies working for clients in their own right, but who needed to assemble project teams by sub-contracting project elements. Many of the subcontractors were small firms and were often home-based sole practitioners located in the West Midlands. Second, agencies working as subcontractors for other small marketing, public relations, and advertising agencies and, third, firms that were employed as subcontractors by larger firms. The location of these larger firms was determined by the relationships that have formed between individual professionals (Lawton Smith *et al.*, 2005; Madill *et al.*, 2004). Marketing and public relations firms located beyond Birmingham were heavily embedded in EPNs founded upon dyadic relationships; larger firms subcontracted work to former employees and the relationships between individuals bound hinterland- and city-based firms together. The larger Birmingham based firms subcontracted tasks to smaller firms to access additional capacity as well as to access specialist expertise.

All this highlights that the production of BPS expertise can be considered as being the outcome of the configuration of temporary EPNs with BPS firms located in different places working together. Projects may be awarded to firms located in more ordinary smaller towns and cities and an EPN formed to support project delivery. This may involve BPS firms located in smaller urban areas borrowing size from larger cities (Phelps, *et al*., 2001). Alternatively, this process can work in reverse with BPS firms located in larger cities, and even global cities, borrowing size from firms located in more ordinary urban areas and rural areas (Salder and Bryson, 2019).

Technology and the stretching of BPS client geographies

A home-based business location represents an important start-up phase in the establishment of marketing and public relations firms. The founders of these businesses have either lived beyond the city and commuted to work or have relocated. Their tacit knowledge, expertise, established reputations and existing contacts provide them with the capabilities and resources to establish a firm and to configure EPNs in their own right or to engage with a production network as a subcontractor. The location of these businesses is only constrained by accessibility to concentrations of clients and access to high-speed broadband.

Developments in information communication technologies (ICT) transformed the operational geographies of marketing and public relations firms. The firms can now be located away from concentrations of clients. Before these developments in ICT artwork was regularly despatched by courier or physically taken by staff to clients to be reviewed. By 2007, artwork and text were produced and delivered electronically, as one marketing company explained:

> Obviously in communicating with clients, email has absolutely revolutionised everything because … most of our work is both probably briefed and presented via email. It has cut down face-to-face meetings and it has dramatically speeded things up … you used to get a rough before and carry over to the client and the client would, change this, change this … it took five days to change it all but now with email, … things go over and then they're back within an hour.

ICT has transformed the type, form, and frequency of interactions with clients and this has enabled new geographies of EPNs to be configured.

INSERT TABLE 6.1 Here

Most businesses in this study highlighted the ability to transfer large files cheaply over the Internet as being an important method for servicing clients at a distance (Table 6.1). Email has played its part, but it has been enhanced by the availability of broadband Internet over a wider geographic area, which facilitated the exchange and transfer of much larger files (Table 6.1). The option to use functions such as FTP (File Transfer Protocol) or documents whereby a website with password access permits documents to be uploaded and independently downloaded by another party, also with password access, has been important (Southern and Tilley, 2000). FTP enabled individuals to transmit very large files with greater ease and efficiency alongside other electronic formats such as compressed digital images, the JPEG (Joint Photographic Experts Group) format or the PDF (Portable Document Format), facilities which have only been widely available since the early 1990s. Developments in cloud computing, and especially cloud storage, have further transformed the working practices of BPS firms and this has also played an important role in firm-based adaptation to COVID-19 and rapid adjustment to the imposition of a socially distanced economy.

The immediacy of electronic file transfer cannot be doubted, but to what extent does this lead to a reduction in face-to-face meetings? According to half of the businesses,

electronic communication had led to a reduction in the number of face-to-face meetings and this was confirmed during the in-depth interviews when three quarters of the respondents commented that ICT had led to a decrease in face-to-face meetings. Generally face-to-face interactions were important, but they are mediated and facilitated by telephone and computer-based interactions. This has been an on-going shift that accelerated with COVID-19 as companies were forced to adopt homeworking. On the one hand, across the West Midlands there has been a dispersed regional geography of BPS firms for some considerable time. On the other hand, COVID-19 will alter this geography encouraging more firms to form or to relocate to smaller towns and cities and for existing firms to embrace homeworking.

The type of work being undertaken, and the nature of the client relationship, affects the likelihood of face-to-face meetings. A small number of agencies were using teleconferencing and videoconferencing. By 2007, this had become a realistic option for more businesses as the Internet software providing this service had become more stable. Nevertheless, by 2020 there had been a major proliferation in online videoconferencing platforms with interactive capabilities including screen sharing and annotation of slides by all participants. It is possible to argue that by 2020 the ability to share documents and to co-create documents in real time, combined with telemediated face-to-face interactions, has added additional dimensions to business encounters that are impossible in face-to-face meetings. These innovations have displaced email, and to some extent face-to-face meetings, as the primary platform for telemediated encounters with clients and subcontractors.

One of the businesses interviewed in 2007 held a weekly teleconference with a client, with those taking part based in the UK and Europe. This permitted the interactive use of PowerPoint presentations:

> "This is a deliberate slot, so everybody knows where they are … there's an agenda written. From that, prior to it, everything's ticked off, progress is monitored, and then actions are put next to everybody's name, so everyone knows for at least a week who is doing what".

The meeting included up to seven people based in the West Midlands and Germany. This is an example of the ways in which the Internet enabled a West Midlands based agency to keep in regular contact with clients located across Europe in a way that was previously impossible. Thus, an already strong client relationship had been enhanced using ICT. This type of meeting in 2007 reflected an early adopter of a technology that by 2020 had become an everyday business practice.

For more than three quarters of the businesses (43 out of 79 firms) there had been a decrease in face-to-face meetings in general. There are factors, other than the need for face-to-face meetings, that influence an agency's ability to service clients at a distance: first, whether an agency specialises in a particular industrial sector; second, the size of the project undertaken; third, the client's expectations, because some clients prefer to use a local agency, while for other clients the available budget was the deciding factor when selecting a BPS provider. Larger clients were likely to have more sophisticated marketing and PR operations with larger budgets, allowing for a national or international team to be assembled. Lastly, the strength of the relationship

and the agency's policies regarding taking on clients at a distance was a consideration. These factors were not mutually exclusive.

During the interviews it became apparent that the firms were experiencing some friction between e-business and traditional face-to-face contacts. If strong face-to-face relationships were not formed with clients, then it was very difficult for a BPS firm to become embedded within a client firm. However, once the BPS provider had developed a form of client-based embeddedness then ICT communications could be used to maintain the relationship. The importance of personality is indicated within this study because some of the largest clients had been obtained by the founder. As the businesses grew then some of these firms tried to oversee all client accounts from a distance. But this resulted in some problems with clients as the founder was unable to attend some of the less important face-to-face meetings. On-line interactions with clients could substitute for some face-to-face encounters, but personal relationships were still important for maintaining client relationships.

Discussion and Conclusions: From Part to Pattern and from Pattern to Part?
This chapter has explored marketing and public relations firms located in smaller towns and cities, or more ordinary places, in the West Midlands, UK. Robinson's (2006) account of ordinary cities included a critique of the global cities literature and the emphasis placed on ranking cities by BPS. Our chapter engages with Robinson's critique of the global cities literature by revealing the complex 'expertise production network*s*' that exist that bind BPS professionals and their firms located in ordinary cities with other providers of expertise and with clients located across the UK and elsewhere. Thus, the geography of BPS is much more complex and perhaps more interesting than has been documented in the geographical literature. Ordinary cities are not just dormitory towns or commuter settlements but are the locations for professionals and firms that provide expertise that supports the on-going configuration of national and international economies.

EPNs provide expert inputs that support the configuration and evolution of GPNs. This is an important point. EPNs have different drivers and configurations compared to GPNs. It is important not to confuse the drivers behind the configuration of an EPN with that of a GPN. EPNs support the activities of GPNs and EPNs draw upon products produced by GPNs. Nevertheless, EPNs are predominantly national with some involved in relationships that span across national boundaries (Bryson and Rusten, 2011). A key issue is that the focus of an EPN is on delivering 'value-in-use' to clients (Bryson *et al*., 2020). This is a very different form of value to that delivered by, for example, a GPN involved in fabricating fast moving consumer goods (Bryson and Vanchan, 2020).

The introduction to this chapter engaged with the work of Georges Perec and, on the one hand, the emphasis that he placed on understanding the infraordinary or the mundane. Activities, processes, and routines that are infraordinary play a critical role in shaping place and space. It is the infraordinary that leads to the extraordinary as the extraordinary is a reflection or an outcome of the place-based incremental accumulation of infraordinary human activities. On the other hand, to Perec it is important to consider the interrelationships between parts, elements or pieces and patterns. His user manual to life begins with an account of jigsaw puzzles and he noted that 'you can look at a piece of a puzzle for three whole days, you can believe

that you know all that there is to know about its colouring and shape, and be no further on than when you started. The only thing that counts is the ability to link this piece to other pieces" (1987: 189). The point is that "in isolation, a puzzle piece means nothing … the parts do not determine the pattern, the pattern determines the parts" (1987: 189). This is a complex process. The incremental accumulation of the infraordinary results in the formation of patterns or routines that contribute to path dependency and this then provides a structure that shapes, or partly shapes, human agency. In geographical terms, there is no such thing as a *tabula rasa* as previous human activities distort current and future outcome. The interactions between part and pattern are central for understanding geographical relationships. Thus, both ordinary and extraordinary cities can only be understood in relationship to the patterns of which they are apart. This process applies to both inter- and intra- urban activities and processes. Problems occur when a part of a pattern is isolated from its wider context. Urban geography, and urban studies, has for too long focused on what are defined as the most important parts and neglected or completed ignored the more ordinary and this has produced a distorted account of the BPS sector.

This chapter has provided another approach to understanding BPS based not on emphasising the role played by conurbations, but by exploring the more complex geographies of EPNs. The key question concerns the object of study. Should this be focused on a place, a process, or an activity? There is a danger that a place-based focus isolates one element of a puzzle from a wider pattern. There is a real danger that a part isolated from the whole may contain little information but it might also carry "false information" and act as "types of traps" (Perec, 1987: 191).This critique applies to studies that focus on larger cities as well as those that focus on smaller towns and cities. The key is to try to understand the relationship between a part and a broader pattern, but also to remember that, in some contexts, there may be no pattern.

The starting point for this chapter was a focus on two BPS sectors and on understanding these in the context of the West Midlands rather than on Birmingham. This regional focus revealed that the geography of BPS is much more complex than existing studies suggest. There are many aspects of this research that were surprising. Perhaps the most surprising was the number of marketing and public relations firms that exist in smaller urban settlements. This is an extraordinary and very revealing finding that is counter to the dominant account of BPS firms as being knowledge-intensive business services that tend to be located within major urban agglomerations. One perhaps might have assumed, that public relations and marketing firms would be very much activities predominantly located in major urban agglomerations. The problem is that the existing literature has placed too much emphasis on BPS firms as businesses rather than as firms that are established and managed by people. For the founders and owners of the BPS firms located in smaller towns, cities, and village the quality of their residential lifestyles was an important factor determining the location of their businesses. Here it is important to appreciate that 24 were home-based businesses with turnovers of less that £99,999. Some of these were more lifestyle orientated business. Nevertheless, 15 home-based businesses were not lifestyle business and 23 were office-based businesses of which 11 had turnovers of over £1m. This suggests that the provision of marketing and public relations activities in smaller towns and cities is segmented between those more orientated towards lifestyle businesses and those that are more orientated towards growing a business. Nevertheless, all types and sizes of BPS firms were involved in EPNs.

Much of the research devoted to understanding the relationship between the rise of advanced producer services and the role and growth of cities has focussed too much on the latter as discrete entities. In so far as advanced services are part of the creative capacity of places and their human resources we advocate a more inclusive analysis that recognises, first, that creative activities are not confined to global cities but are equally important to understanding the economies of smaller towns and cities and even of villages. Secondly, the creative production system of cities includes complex EPNs of mutually beneficial interactions with their near and more distant hinterlands and these include interactions with BPS firms located in more ordinary towns and cities.

While there is a clear need for more research, the empirical evidence suggests that city economies should not be conceptualised as isolated from their hinterlands. Indeed, to isolate the city from its wider economic, social and political environment is to partially replicate the principals underpinning von Thünen's model of the isolated state. In the West Midlands, at least, it has been shown how marketing and public relations, two key creative activities, are produced via complex relationship-driven or enabled EPNs. These EPNs take many forms and have many drivers. It is useful to briefly consider some of these. First, dyadic relationships are fundamental to the activities of creative businesses; the geographies of these relationships shape the activities of these firms. Second, referral networks based on reputations and dyadic relationships provide BPS firms with new clients and subcontracting relationships; BPS providers and clients need to be situated within, and regularly engaged with, communities of individuals. Third, ICT provides marketing and public relations firms with a mix of labour and time saving capabilities that make many non-strategic face-to-face meetings with collaborating firms or with clients superfluous. This has altered the geography of creative services and contributed to the formation of more geographically dispersed EPNs.

This chapter perhaps raises many more questions than it answers. The primary argument is that cities must be conceptualised as having many hinterlands. The boundaries of the city have altered so that creative services are produced by blending creative expertise together that is formed in many different places to form project focussed EPN. This has led to the development of creative services with unusual or extraordinary geographies that are based on dispersed dyadic relationships. Dyadic relationships are formed through face-to-face encounters, but once formed can be maintained through less frequent contact supplemented by more intensive use of ICT. Relationships formed in one place underpin potential encounters when both parties are no longer co-present. The geographies of creativity are, in part, founded upon dyadic relationships and these require further elaboration.

The key lesson from this research is not to become too focused on major urban agglomerations as the primary locations for creative expertise, but also to focus on other locations which are the location for BPS firms and creative expertise. Every company, or firm, has developed, through everyday practice, its own configuration, or assemblage, of companies/experts and places that matter. These assemblages represent that firm's and its clients' spatial divisions of expertise and/or labour or EPNs. It is important to focus on understanding this configuration process as dynamic and multi-scalar. One implication is that smaller towns and cities – ordinary places -

can be the locations for extraordinary firms with extraordinarily complex translocal geographies.

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