Chapter 9
Checking in at the Urban Playground: Digital Geographies and Electronic Flâneurs

Martin Berg
Halmstad University, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Taking its point of departure in a critical discussion of the imagined dividing line between physical and digital spaces, this chapter demonstrates a socio-spatial turn in Internet studies and sets out to explore the meaning of locative technologies as an illuminating example of how such spatial boundaries increasingly collapse. Being empirically grounded in an analysis of twelve qualitative interviews with users of the applications Foursquare and Gowalla, this chapter focuses on the interplay between what is termed electronic flâneurs and digital geographies, and demonstrates in what ways the use of locative technologies provokes changes at two levels in the social realm: first, by adding a communicative digital layer to the spatial organisation of physical space, and second, by adding a spatially bound layer to interactions in digital space.¹

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the early days of Internet studies, a problematic detachment between physical and digital spaces has been a recurring theme, often conceptualised in ontological rather than practical terms. Even though the conceptual division between “online” and “offline” could plausibly refer to the practical conditions of social interaction (which is how it is used in this chapter), it has often been understood as designating a difference between “virtual” and “real”. Having operated as the dominant assumption for several years,
Checking in at the Urban Playground

predominantly through the trope of “cyberspace”, this imagined dividing line is nowadays rarely regarded as a feasible construct. On the contrary, it has become a widespread assumption that physical and digital spaces increasingly merge thus blurring the boundaries between online and offline modes of interaction, which in turn renders the overused dichotomy between “real” and “virtual” terminally obsolete. The last few years have witnessed significant changes in the nature of online communication, not the least because of the proliferation of (mobile) social network sites (SNS) which points at the de-domestication of Internet use as well as a fundamental intertwining of physical and digital spaces. Taking these changes seriously and further elaborating an understanding of their social implications, this chapter considers the emergence of what could be termed the “socio-spatial turn” in Internet studies. Particularly focusing on the possible relationship between digitally mediated social interactions and physical (urban) space, the initial parts of this chapter deal with earlier perceptions of the Internet as a facilitating factor in the articulation of identities and social relations without necessary interdependence on either temporal or spatial boundaries. As will be demonstrated, the previously prevailing era of online anonymity and thereby associated corporeal absence was altogether forgotten and substituted by a regime of personally centred networks by the early 2000s. Significantly, in 2006, Time Magazine tapped into these processes of change when awarding “You” the honour of being the person of the year (Han, 2010). This example from popular discourse does not only suggest that the era of anonymity had ended but also, in consequence, that the Internet had gone through a fundamental make over. Much has happened since the birth of “the social web” and nowadays, traversing the informational highway is no longer confined to take place from the security of domestic spaces but is increasingly performed through mobile devices. In conjunction with the increment of mobile Internet access, the development of “locative technologies” and the use of “locative mobile social networks” (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2010; de Souza e Silva & Sutko, 2009) have experienced a nearly immeasurable upsurge which has troubled predominant perceptions of interactions in digital space profoundly.

As of today, there are a handful of locative technologies and among these, Foursquare and Gowalla are the most widely used. Substantially, these are mobile applications that allow users to engage in location-based interaction by means of mobile devices through which place-specific information can be created, consumed and shared. Although these applications are different regarding graphical user interface and basic functionality, they are both promoted as a facilitator of interaction through a communicative layer intimately bound up with physical spaces and places. Foursquare as well as Gowalla are said to make it possible for users to share their location with friends by “checking in” at digital spots (i.e. a digital representation of places), provide commentaries on others’ locations and urban activities while at the same time receiving rewards of different sorts. Their basic functionality is thus a question of adding different forms of metadata to geographically identifiable places for distributing social interaction in digital spaces to various sites in physical space and vice versa. Locative technologies such as Foursquare and Gowalla are often depicted as providing a platform for exploring the city, establishing interpersonal relations and keeping up with current events in the urban landscape.

Gowalla (2010) is presented as a service through which it is possible to “[k]eep up with your friends, share the places you go, and discover the extraordinary in the world around you”. The core graphical user interface consists of the “Passport” in which it is possible to collect stamps from visited places. Gowalla informs that “[j] it’s pretty much like stamping your passport in real life. Only without the jetlag and customs forms”. One of the crucial features is the possibility to interact with the places and the information posted from your
Related Content

Press C to Play the Ocarina: Rhetoric and Game Music
www.igi-global.com/chapter/press-play-ocarina/72639?camid=4v1a

One of Many Tools to Win the Election: A Study of Facebook Posts by Presidential Candidates in the 2012 Election
Ashik Shafi and Fred Vultee (2016). (R)evolutionizing Political Communication through Social Media (pp. 210-228).
www.igi-global.com/chapter/one-of-many-tools-to-win-the-election/145987?camid=4v1a

Antecedents of Consumer Trust in B2C Electronic Commerce and Mobile Commerce
www.igi-global.com/chapter/antecedents-consumer-trust-b2c-electronic/6891?camid=4v1a

Language as Social Practice on the Chinese Internet
www.igi-global.com/chapter/language-social-practice-chinese-internet/55574?camid=4v1a