

Chapter 50

Free Public Wi-Fi and E-Planning: The Use of Online Planning to Build Better Networked Public Places

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ABSTRACT

Networked media are increasingly pervading public spaces and influencing the way we behave in public. Australian municipalities and cultural institutions have begun deploying free Wi-Fi services hoping they will attract more visitors to public places, aid in curated events, galvanize communities and enhance local economies. In this article we present multi-method research aimed at understanding whether such services can enhance public space and culture, and hence contribute to the public good. We identify multiple forms of positive use which certain kinds of ‘user-centric’ services enable. However, many public institutions face problems to do with funding, network models and choice of place which prevent the actualization of these positive outcomes. We consider how e-planning can be mobilized to help such institutions develop virtuous networked public spaces.

INTRODUCTION

Public spaces are contested zones in modern society. In the past few decades we have seen a significant transfer of public assets into the private and commercial sector, as well as the emergence of a new

rhetoric on enhanced forms of civic inclusion and political participation. Public spaces are meant to be places for communities to come together to foster identity, belonging, culture and political expression (Carr, Francis, Rivlin, & Stone, 1992; Mitchell, 2003). Yet, because of issues to do with planning,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-7230-7.ch050

location, demography, and the amenities they provide, public spaces also produce forms of social stratification (Tonkiss, 2005). Socially diverse and inclusive public spaces are thus in keeping with an ideal of the public good based on participatory democracy and the respect of difference. Over the last decade it has become more common to find public spaces containing digital art, surveillance, sensors, and large public screens (McQuire, 2008). Moreover, with the proliferation of mobile internet devices such as smartphones, people are increasingly consuming digital media outside of the home. In order to support these wired and wireless media, public spaces have become increasingly integrated with ICT networks.

This article reports on aspects of a broader research project which aims to understand how such networked public spaces can serve the public good. Specifically, we look at how free public Wi-Fi services in Australia can enhance public spaces and cultures. We examine free services provided by Australian municipalities and cultural institutions, finding that a certain kind of ‘user-centric’ service can attract more people to a place and enhance its ‘atmosphere’. Moreover, such services enable positive forms of use which feedback into society. However, a range of problems prevent many public institutions from achieving these outcomes. We interrogate the degree to which e-planning can respond to these problems and help actualize virtuous networked public spaces, arguing that there is a need for more participatory e-planning in guiding the evolution of digital culture in local government.

THE VALUE OF FREE WI-FI

‘Wi-Fi’ refers to the 801.11 technological standards which allow devices to establish wireless networks via the usually unlicensed or class licensed 2.4 GHz spectrum. Since the turn of the millennium these technologies have been globally distributed in affordable wireless routers, PCs and mobile devices. Consequently, Wi-Fi has become

a ubiquitous form of local area networking, found in homes, offices, universities and commercial hotspots such as cafés, hotels and airports. Since the early 2000s municipalities in the United States began experimenting with offering free public Wi-Fi as an alternative to incumbent telecommunication monopolies which offer expensive and slow commercial broadband (Crawford, 2013; Gibbons & Ruth, 2006). Consequently places such as parks and squares have become networked, and Wi-Fi is being reconfigured into a digital amenity.

In an era where broadband connectivity is becoming increasingly central to everyday life, public Wi-Fi is coming to be regarded as an essential form of free, inclusive infrastructure, similar to public parks and libraries (Gibbons & Ruth, 2006). For this reason, research into public Wi-Fi projects has focused on their ability to address digital divide issues in local communities (Crawford, 2013; Shaffer, 2007). Yet, there is still relatively little known about how people actually utilize Wi-Fi for community oriented activities and how, more broadly, Wi-Fi influences the social and cultural practices which occur in public spaces (Hampton, Livio, & Goulet, 2010). Moreover, much of the rhetoric around public Wi-Fi suggests that because it is ‘free’ it will necessarily lead to positive social transformations (Schmidt & Townshend, 2003). This tends to neglect the contestation around ‘freeness’ - the fact that ‘freeness’ is itself a cultural construct enmeshed in broader political and technological changes which often carry hidden costs (Lovink & Scholz, 2007).

For example, Australia’s broadband environment is currently undergoing significant nationwide transformations. Since 2010 the Federal Government has begun rolling out the National Broadband Network (NBN), a predominantly fibre-to-the-premises internet backhaul which aims to multiply access speeds and radically enhance Australia’s ‘digital economy’ (Li, 2011)¹. Meanwhile, telecommunication companies have begun transitioning to 4G mobile technology, which offers significantly faster and more robust

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