Chapter 4.10
Technosocial Space:
Connecting People and Places

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ABSTRACT

The chapter is based on a study of Internet cafés in Norway, and interrogates the way space and place is produced in interconnections between people and technology in the Internet café. Drawing on actor-network theory and practice-oriented theories of place and space, the Internet café is understood as technosocial spaces producing connections between people and places at different levels. Firstly, the Internet café can be understood as a hybrid, a site where users and technologies as well as space are coconstructed in entwined processes where gender, as well as other identity markers, are central in the way the technology, as well as the cafés, develop and are understood. The next level looks at the production of Internet cafés as technosocial spaces. Despite being perceived as an "urban" and "global" phenomenon, Internet cafés are configured based on local circumstances, in urban as well as rural communities. Differing images of what the cafés want to achieve, as well as material constrains, are at play in this process. Finally, the chapter shows how Internet cafés are places of connections, producing space beyond the walls of the café, linking the local into a translocal sphere.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, we have seen several studies exploring the intersection of space and new information technology. Much of the early generation writings about the Internet suggested a placeless character in which electronic media implied a loss of sense of place (e.g., Meyrowitz, 1985), where the online experience gave a feeling of being "nowhere" or "everywhere," independent of the place you are located physically (Negroponte, 1995), and where you could live a "life on the screen" separated from "real life" (Turkle, 1995). Manuel Castells (1996) argued for an emergence of a network society structured around a bipolar opposition between the "Net" and the "Self," and in which "spaces of flows" will replace "spaces of place." These studies may serve as examples of what Daniel Miller and Don Slater (2000) call the "early generation" studies of the Internet, which talked of cyberspace

and virtuality and how the Internet was built up by spatial metaphors. However, there was as Stephen Graham noted in 1998 (p167): "little conscious thought put [in]to thinking conceptually about how new information technologies actually relate to the spaces and places bound up with human territorial life."

Although recognizing that virtual communities may exist based on shared interests and feeling of community independent of geographical location, this chapter will argue against the placeless character of electronic communication. To understand the uptake and use of new technologies, it is important to study the variety of places and social circumstances in which it is used. Most studies on the use of ICTs in particular places have focused on computers in the home or office or among young people in schools. Few studies have gone out of the home and work spheres and looked at how computers and the Internet are integrated in public leisure places. This chapter takes us to the Internet café, a contemporary meeting place resembling any other café, where at the same time new forms of socialities develop in the intersection of the technology present and the clientele. The study is based on ethnographic studies of four Internet cafés in Norway conducted from 1999 to 2002.

In line with other recent research on the Internet (e.g., Miller & Slater, 2000: Valentine & Holloway, 2002; Woolgar, 2002), I will show how the Internet, as well as Internet cafés, are integrated in practices taking place in the spaces of everyday life and thus must be understood according to local context. This is, however, not just a study about technology "in space." Following Henri Lefebvre (1991), I shift the focus from *things in space* to the *production of space,* where the Internet café is seen as a mediator in different ways within the local community, as well as reaching out of the local community through the Internet. To understand this process, a concept is required that sensitises us to the need to integrate space, social relations, and the materiality of technology, when studying

phenomena like the Internet café. The point is to emphasise that technical or material, social, and spatial aspects need to be analysed, not as causal relationships, but as intersecting and transgressing moments. This will be developed in the following, drawing on theories from cultural and social geography and science and technology studies (STS), in particular, actor-network theory (Latour, 1987; 1999; Law & Hassard, 1999).

STS is founded on the idea that the social and the technical/material must be seen as part of the same entity rather than as opposites in a causal relationship to each other. Social and cultural geography, on the other hand, challenges common conceptualisations of space as frame in which social practice occurs, but sees the social and spatial as integrated in practice. I take my point of departure from an understanding that merges all these elements together; technology, the social and the spatial are entwined or interwoven in a "seamless web." From an STS point of view, this implies a greater awareness of the spatial aspect in the study of socio-technical relations, an awareness of how place and space matters in the design and use of technology, but also how design and use of technology do not just occur in space. In fact, technological artefacts and agents are forces or mobile actants that produce space. From the view of social and cultural geography, on the other hand, this approach implies a greater awareness of the role of technology in the production of space, not as a more or less determining structure, but as actants that, through relations to other human as well as nonhuman entities, are actively involved in the production of space.

PRODUCING SPACE IN THE INTERSECTION OF THE SOCIAL AND MATERIAL

From the 1990s, there has been an increased focus on space in social theory. This is partly related to the increased focus on globalisation, but also prevalent

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