

Chapter 8.7

Embedding an Ecology Notion in the Social Production of Urban Space

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ABSTRACT

This chapter defines, explores and illustrates research at the intersection of people, place and technology in cities. First, we theorise the notion of ecology in the social production of space to continue our response to the quest of making sense of an environment characterised by different stakeholders and actors as well as technical, social and discursive elements that operate across dynamic time and space constraints. Second, we describe and rationalise our research approach, which is designed to illuminate the processes at play in the social production of space from three different perspectives. We illustrate the

application of our model in a discussion of a case study of community networking and community engagement in an Australian urban renewal site. Three specific interventions that are loosely positioned at the exchange of each perspective are then discussed in detail, namely: Sharing Stories; Social Patchwork and History Lines; and City Flocks.

INTRODUCTION

The intersection of urban and new media studies is a dynamic field of practice and research. There are a number of reasons why this is so. Technically these are both highly innovative domains, and the rate of change is significant and challenging. Urban life and

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media platforms are both in the midst of paradigm shifts. Theoretically, both fields can be understood as sites of signification and structuration of the social field—and because they both evidence such change they are potent laboratories for advancing understanding. The pragmatic corollary is that policy makers and corporate investors are also highly engaged in the intersection.

Apart from the complexity of maneuvering through the often differing agendas of researchers and practitioners and of private and public sector agencies that operate at this intersection, the objective of advancing understanding is also challenged by a plethora of different and sometimes differing theories. Yet, universally useful contributions to knowledge can be achieved if urban cultural studies, urban sociology, urban technology and human-computer interaction, urban architecture and planning, etc., overcome language and conceptual barriers. A cross-disciplinary approach requires effort to create models which help to overcome phenomenologically isolated attempts at explaining the city. Such models would ideally be cross-fertilised by the findings and insights of each party in order to recognise and play tribute to the interdependencies of people, place and technology in urban environments. We propose the notion of ecology (Hearn & Foth, 2007) as a foundation to develop a model depicting the processes that occur at the intersection of the city and new media.

In the context of the field of urban planning and development, the promise of digital content and new media has been seen as potentially serving new urbanist visions of developing and supporting social relationships that contribute to the sustainability of communities. As Carroll et al. (2007) have argued, recent critiques of assumptions underpinning this vision have pointed to the following outcomes as ‘most in demand’, and simultaneously most difficult to deliver:

- Community (Anderson, 2006; DeFilippis, Fisher, & Shragge, 2006; Delanty, 2000; Gleeson, 2004; Willson, 2006);
- Diversity (Talen, 2006; Wood & Landry, 2007);
- Participation (Hanzl, 2007; Sanoff, 2005; Stern & Dillman, 2006);
- Sustainability (Gleeson, Darbas, & Lawson, 2004; Van den Dobbelsteen & de Wilde, 2004);
- Identity (Al-Hathloul & Aslam Mughal, 1999; Oktay, 2002; Teo & Huang, 1996);
- Culture and History (Antrop, 2004; Burgess, Foth, & Klaebe, 2006; Klaebe, Foth, Burgess, & Bilandzic, 2007).

It is critical that the emergence of urban informatics as a multidisciplinary research cluster is founded on a theoretical and methodological framework capable of interrogating all these relationships and the assumptions that currently underpin them. As Sterne has warned in relation to research pertaining to the field of technology more generally,

the force of the ‘preconstructed’—as Pierre Bourdieu has called it—weighs heavily upon anyone who chooses to study technology, since the choice of a technological object of study is already itself shaped by a socially organized field of choices. There are many forces in place that encourage us to ask certain questions of technologies, to define technology in certain ways to the exclusion of others, and to accept the terms of public debate as the basis for our research programs. (Sterne, 2003, p. 368)

In this respect, if we are to promote an analytical focus on the capacities and possibilities of digital content and new media to meet the challenges of community, participation, sustainability, identity and so on, it is important to employ frameworks that permit systematic study of these relationships. We agree with Grabher (2004) who points to analytical advantages in resisting assumptions around passive adaptation to environments, and permitting a focus on networks, intricate interdependencies,

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