
Shared Encounters

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Abstract

Our everyday lives are characterised by encounters, some are fleeting and ephemeral and others are more enduring and meaningful exchanges. Shared encounters are the glue of social networks and have a socializing effect in terms of mutual understanding, empathy, respect and thus tolerance towards others. The quality and characteristics of such encounters are affected by the setting, or situation in which they occur. In a world shaped by communication technologies, non-place-based networks often coexist alongside to the traditional local face-to-face social networks. As these multiple and distinct on and off-line communities tend to carry out their activities in more and more distinct and sophisticated spaces, a lack of coherency and fragmentation emerges in the sense of a shared space of community. Open public space with its streets, parks and squares plays an important role in providing space for shared encounters among and between these coexisting networks. Mobile and ubiquitous technologies enable social encounters located in public space, albeit not confined to fixed settings, whilst also offering sharing of experiences from non-place based networks. We will look at how to create or support the conditions for meaningful and persisting shared encounters. In particular we propose to explore how technologies can be appropriated for shared interactions that can occur spontaneously and playfully and in doing so re-inhabit and connect place-based social networks.

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Introduction

Interactions through communications technologies such as the telephone, tv, and internet no longer require physical co-presence and have broadened the range of possible interactions. These media have over the last decades changed the significance of space, time and physical barriers of communication [4]. Physical distance no longer prevents many of the types of interaction that has been confined to face-to-face contact. As a result, there has been much discussion on the role of spatial setting and interaction mediated through technologies; such as that on the role of space and agency on the quality of the interaction [2], and also the broader concept of the situated behaviour and actions [20]. A good deal has been written on the subject of social collaboration among individuals using communication devices, and what conditions or features are required to enable such activities [3, 17, 7, 15]. Further discussion has been focused on the technologies themselves, assessing the social impact of emerging forms of behaviour, such as the activities of ad-hoc communities enabled through mobile technologies [18] or the patterns of mobile phones use [9]. Finally numerous applications and locative media projects [6] have been developed and which explore interactions through realization. These projects and research offer many useful insights, but there often remains the issue of how to create the conditions for

meaningful and persisting shared interactions. A gap consequently exists in the debate about how to effectively and creatively assess, evaluate and implement sustained shared encounters in public space.

Situated Interaction

Our conception of the world is fundamentally spatial and the idea of 'space' is essential to our everyday experience [13]. The way in which we communicate with others also bears a strong relationship with space, and our interactions with others can be considered as situated in that they are shaped by both the physical setting [3], as well as being guided by a rich unarticulated background of social experiences and circumstances [20]. Consequently people behave differently in different situations depending on both where one is and who one is with, and this is influenced by the degree to which they are present in the situation. But communication technologies overcome the limitations set by such physical boundaries and situations, and in so doing they not only offer more effective or comprehensive access to environments and behaviours but also they provide new opportunities [14]. Spatializing these communication technologies and thus reconnecting them to spatial settings requires new views on the inter-connectedness of location and behavior. Mediated situations can provide shared connections to overcome the "lost advantage" of the independence of a physical spatial setting.

Encounters

Social behaviours are differentiated by many different factors; whether public or private, individual or group, planned or chance. But imagine that many of the walls that separate rooms, offices and houses were suddenly removed, and that many once distinct situations were

suddenly combined. In such situations we still manage to act differently with different people, but our ability to distinguish between encounters is no longer guided by the physical setting [14]. Mobile phones for instance have changed the nature of meeting places, such that they have become indeterminate, fluid territories rather than precise spots [5]. Communication technologies, like physical places, create structures which include and exclude participants, and in so doing they can create social boundaries equivalent to the walls and windows in physical space. These boundaries define the nature of social access to situations, and also help to frame an awareness among individuals of whether an encounter is accessible to them or not. Put simply this affects whether they feel welcome, and can clearly identify and develop a role for themselves and others in the interaction, a factor which is often necessarily based on existing social conventions with clearly differentiated roles. Once the basis for an encounter has been established the subsequent process of exchange also needs to have a dynamic quality with a system of feedback where participants can mediate their interaction and develop a sense of persistent, shared space [15]. This shared setting does not need to be explicit and it can be passive as well as actively experienced, but it will involve some negotiated factors; for instance there will be a shared sense of 'there' even when participants are quiet or absent. The dynamic exchange can only be sustained into a sharing community when there are suitable conditions for learning [12], which provide opportunities for temporal or other type of continuity.

Networked Communities

Social spaces are characterised not just by multiple one-to-one interactions, but also by people's interaction

within groups. Such groups can disperse as rapidly as they are created, but others can become more established and exist for a period of time. For most people the sense of identity which they draw from their interaction in such shared social spaces is key to the way they relate to the world. This is differentiated by whether they are experiencing it as an insider or outsider, whether they have a 'sense of belonging'. The definition of community used to refer to social spaces grounded in physical settings, such as that described by the book 'A Nation of Strangers:

" a social network of people of various kinds, ranks and ages who encounter each other on the streets, in the stores, at sports parks, at communal gatherings. A good deal of personal interaction occurs... all recognize it as a special place with ongoing character. It has a central core and well understood limits. Most members base most of their daily activities in or near the community" [16].

However new communications technologies increasingly function in network type infrastructures, where access and membership is defined not by entering and leaving a physically bounded space, but instead by the making and breaking of nodes and links. When compared to conventional forms of interaction, computer-mediated communication can be seen to have four distinct features: an absence of regulating feedback, dramaturgical weakness, few social cues, and social anonymity [10]. Inhabitants of such communities are separated physically and interact strictly through computer systems, such that users are aware that their virtual lives will rarely intersect with their real lives. However the very characteristics of anonymity and physical separation in online communities create

tensions with place-based communities, and they tend to exist in isolation of one another.

Content Sharing as Social Glue in Public Space

The connectivity of communities can be reinforced through new mobile and ubiquitous technologies, which lend themselves to content sharing. For instance, the use of mobile phones, which have been readily adopted by youth cultures, reinforces and extends existing social networks and drives them towards a higher level of networked sociability. Face-to-face interaction is equated with mobile-based communication, and a 'full-time intimate' community takes shape [1]. In addition technologies such as Bluetooth enable people to engage in more intimate and timely information exchanges dependent on proximity, whereas WiFi technologies can provide the infrastructures for neighbourhood-wide communication [18]. The types of ad-hoc and encounters practiced through the use of mobile technologies are widespread, but this sharing is often limited or 'minimal sharing' [21] such as showing of on-screen photos within a peer group, and practiced within a context that can be referred to as 'selective sociality' [8]; sharing within small, selectively insular social groups.

Ubiquitous technologies such as situated interactive public displays in the city enable an interplay between large displays and mobile end-user terminals. These media offer a different model of sharing; joint and widespread reception of media content. Screen based content, such as TV has often been criticised due to the quality of the content and on the passive nature of the watching activity, but on a social level the shared viewing of content creates a strong mutual experience

[11]. In fact shared viewing and discussion concerning mass media content can provide a valuable common reference point in everyday life. The possibility of rethinking fixed screens in ubiquitous contexts lies in the use of content enriched communication to enhance awareness and human connected-ness in public spaces. By connecting large outdoor screens with experiments in online worlds, the culture of collaborative content production and networking could be brought into a wider context [19]. In investigating the opportunities for shared encounters an integrated approach is required which considers the role and activities of mobile interpersonal communication together with the shared experience of ubiquitous integrated technologies.

Conclusion

Our everyday encounters are increasingly mediated by communications technologies that free up our social interaction from fixed spatial settings. We propose that content sharing through mobile and ubiquitous technologies, consciously situated in public space is a new valuable social practice. It can contribute towards redefining boundaries of access between communities, and contribute to more fulfilling sustained encounters in spatial settings. In this context we propose to search for a clearer idea of the diverse types of encounters that can occur, and gain a better understanding of the specific characteristics of situations which influence these encounters. Finally we will investigate how sharing through personal media and mass media provide ways for people to communicate and engage with others in networked communities, and the corresponding role of situated technologies in sustaining encounters.

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