Reconceptualizing Public Space and Place Through Social Media

Participants: Germaine Halegoua, Nadav Hochman, Jessa Lingel, Raz Schwartz
Moderator: Louise Barkhuus

Description of Panel:

Internet studies researchers have allotted vast attention to the ways social media create networked publics, reorganize interpersonal and group interactions, foster new forms of "publicity," and blur boundaries between public and private contexts. Among these investigations, less attention has been given to the relationships between social media and physical interactions with public space. While social media platforms help shape how people interact with each other in public, they also influence the ways that people interact with public space and place, and in fact help disambiguate between space as a set of geographic coordinates and features, and place as a set of social *and* spatial relations (Massey, 2007; See also Tuan, 1977).

For decades, urban design theorists and practitioners have often discussed the importance of presence and interactions with other people in shaping the use, value, history, and character of public spaces (Whyte 1980; Lehtonen and Mäenpää 1997; Lefebvre 1974). More recently, researchers have begun to document and analyze the ways that people use social media to reorganize and/or re-embed themselves within public space (Sutko and de Souza e Silva 2012; Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011, Humphreys 2007, Farman 2013). And yet, other scholars have expressed concern over the privatization of public space and the role that digital technologies might play in fostering private or disembedding experiences in public (Bull 2007). The papers in this panel expand on this research through a series of case studies that investigate everyday use of social media and recent transformations or reconceptualizations of public space and place.

This panel consists of four papers that interrogate the ways in which social media users create and rely on user-generated data in order to augment their connection with public spaces, participate in the social construction of public space through online activities, produce and engage with hyperlocal representations and knowledge, and publicly express individual or collective experiences within particular places. Through a variety of qualitative and interpretive research methods we expand on previous conversations around social media by investigating the experiences of those who use digital media to re-conceptualize, re-organize, coordinate, and enrich or filter their relationship to public space. From the point of view of consumers, performers, and pedestrians, we aim to understand how physical space is produced,

represented, and understood through a variety of social media data and how researchers and members of various publics might utilize social media data in order to connect and engage with public, local spaces and places in new ways.

Bull, M (2007). Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience. New York: Routledge.
Farman, J (2013). Mobile Interface Theory: Embodied Space and Locative Media. New York: Routledge.

Gordon, E and de Souza e Silva, A (2011). Net Locality: Why Location Matters in a Networked World. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Humphreys, L (2007). Mobile social networks and social practice: A case study of dodgeball. Journal of Computer-mediated Communication 13(1) Available at: http://jcmcindianaedu/vol13/issue1/humphreyshtml

Lefebvre, H (1974). The Production of Space. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Lehtonen, TK and Mäenpää P (1997). Shopping in the East Centre Mall. In: Falk P and Campbell C (eds) The Shopping Experience. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 136–165.

Massey, D. B. (2005). *For space*. London: SAGE.

Sutko, D and de Souza e Silva, A (2012). Location-aware mobile media and urban sociability. New Media & Society 13(5): 807-823.

Tuan, Y. (1977). *Space and place: The perspective of experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Whyte, WH (1980). Social Life of Small Urban Spaces. New York: Project for Public Spaces.

Abstracts & Bios:

Moderator:
Louise Barkhuus is an Associate Professor at Stockholm University, department of computer science, and the director of the Location eXperience Lab where she explores location-based social media and social artistic experiences. Her research focuses on areas such as how social media can support off-line socialization and how location can be used as material for designing novel artistic experiences.

Germaine Halegoua
"I was aware of her existence in this world only because of Foursquare": Examining Foursquare users' experiences of public space and street sociability
(Not submitting full paper)

Lehtonen and Mäenpää (1997) employed the concept of "street sociability" to explain the public practices of interaction and engagement among people in urban shopping malls. As the authors explain, "The culture of street sociability is born out of the tension of anonymity and intimacy, the tension in which encounters are dictated by chance". The authors observe that street sociability is maintained by the excitement and pleasure of being together with strangers in public, who have the potential to interact with one another, as long as everyone adheres to certain norms of interaction. In this paper I revisit the ideas behind street sociability as they relate to location-based social media use in urban settings. I present findings from an ethnographic study that sheds light on how vendors and customers understand street sociability and public interactions via the location-based social media service, Foursquare. Through interviews with local, regional, and national vendors and their customers in Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts this paper analyzes Foursquare users emerging norms of street sociability, the meaning of location online and offline, perspectives on "publicness" and visibility via Foursquare, and changing perceptions of what it means to be "present" and collocated in public space.

Germaine Halegoua is an Assistant Professor in the Film and Media Studies Department at the University of Kansas. She received her PhD from the Media and Cultural Studies program at the University of Wisconsin. Her research interests focus on relationships between urban environments and networked technologies, social media and location, emerging technologies, and cultural geographies of digital media.

Nadav Hochman
On Hyper-locality: Performances of Place in Social Media
(Not submitting full paper)

In this paper I theorize, visualize, and analyze the relation between physical places and their social media representations, and describe the characteristics of hyper-locality in social media. While the term "hyper-local" has been recently used to describe social media that is produced in particular locations and time periods, existing research has not raised important questions about representation and experience. How is the physical place performed through social media data? How do we experience locality via social media platforms?
I start by historicizing the hyper-local, drawing parallels between conceptualizations of "site-

specific" artworks created in the 1970s and current organization of geo-temporal social media images. Next, I exemplify the hyper-local using the case study of the famous street artist Banksy's month-long residency in NYC during October 2013. I analyze and visualize 28,419 Instagram photos of these artworks to explore how these photos represent space and time specific events, as well as add new meanings to Banksy's original images. Finally, I offer a theoretical analysis, proposing what I see as some of the key characterizations of hyper-local social media data.

Nadav Hochman is a doctoral student in the History of Art and Architecture department at the University of Pittsburgh, and a visiting scholar at the Software Studies Initiative (The Graduate Center, City University of New York). His research intertwines media theory and computational methods for the analysis of massive online visual cultural data sets. Using data visualization techniques from a digital humanities perspective, he examines how and what can we learn about local and global cultural patterns and trends by aggregating large amounts of user-generated visual materials.

Jessa Lingel
Out of the bars, into the profiles: The role of social media in shaping queer spaces in Brooklyn's Drag Community
(Not submitting full paper)

Online technologies have provided a means of storytelling, visualization, community building, and educational resources that have particular significance for groups that have been historically disenfranchised. Scholars in queer and internet studies have noted the extent to which online technologies shape the construction and documentation of queer lives (Gray, 2009; Hamer, 2009; Portwood-Stacer, 2010). Rather than focusing on issues of queer identity, this paper discussion how social media platforms mediate relationships to space. Drawing on qualitative interviews with Brooklyn's drag community, I examine drag performers' strategic uses of social media platforms to connect to other performers and audience members, as well as their relationships to the neighborhoods in which they perform.
Key questions guiding this research include:
-How are social media platforms leveraged not only for the production of individual identities, but spatial characterizations? How do social media users understand their relationships to both online and offline spaces?
-When thinking about shifts between online and offline contexts, what negotiations of queer identity transpire? How are relationships to physical spaces (re)constructed and (re)represented online?

Jessa Lingel is a postdoctoral research fellow at Microsoft Research New England, working with the Social Media Collective. She received her PhD in communication and information from Rutgers University. She has an MLIS from Pratt Institute and an MA from New York University. Her research interests include information inequalities and technological distributions of power.

Raz Schwartz
The Social Media Pulse of Public Places
(Not submitting full paper)

Pulse, rhythm and beat are just a few of the common adjectives that are thrown into the mix when researchers describe works studying social media data and cities. Considering the urban habitat has a live organism is not a new idea. Previous works in urban psychology, geography and architecture investigated the ways in which we can trace and better understand the ever changing social setting that the city creates. What happens however when researchers have live access to real time geo-tagged social media interactions from specific public spaces? What do the patterns and visualizations of real time people's activity on social media tell us about the actual activity of people at these venues? This paper explores these questions using a quantitative study of Instagram data from Times Square in comparison to pedestrian foot traffic count data. Based on my results, I examine the type of insights this data can provide researchers as well as the biases, shortfalls and information that is missing from this signal.

Raz Schwartz is a postdoctoral researcher at Cornell Tech NYC and a Magic grant fellow at the Brown Institute for Media Innovation at Columbia Journalism School. Raz studies social media usage in urban settings and focuses on examining local social interactions by applying computational social science methods. Prior to joining Cornell Tech NYC, Raz was a postdoctoral researcher at the Social Media Information Lab at Rutgers University. Raz completed his Ph.D. in the STS program at Bar-Ilan University and was a visiting scholar in the Human Computer Interaction Institute at Carnegie Mellon University. His research on location-based social networks was presented in various academic settings and was featured in media outlets such as the Wall Street Journal, Wired, Rhizome, and The Atlantic.