



Selected Papers of #AoIR2020:
The 21st Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Virtual Event / 27-31 October 2020

QUEERING THE MAP: PHYSICAL TRACES AND DIGITAL PLACES OF QUEER LIVES

Ashleigh Watson
University of New South Wales

Brady Robards
Monash University

Emma Kirby
University of New South Wales

Brendan Churchill
University of Melbourne

Lucas LaRochelle
Concordia University

QueeringTheMap.com, launched in late 2017 by designer Lucas LaRochelle, is a 'community-generated mapping project that geo-locates queer moments, memories and histories in relation to physical space'. In a Google Maps-style interface, users can locate pins anchored to physical locations. Attached to each pin is a story. Collectively, there are tens of thousands of stories about being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming: coming out stories, stories of first kisses, sexual encounters, break-ups, pride marches, assaults, traumas, and realisations. These stories digitally layer physical spaces with anonymous individual and collective stories; they locate queer life and they queer the map.

In this project we seek to document these experiences, improve understandings of community archiving and digital storytelling practices, and expose the potential for reconfiguring forms of resistance and solidarity through new platforms for collectivity

Suggested Citation (APA): Watson, A., Robards, B., Kirby, E., Churchill, B. & LaRochelle, L. (2020, October). *Queering the map: Physical traces and digital places of queer lives*. Paper presented at AoIR 2020: The 21th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Virtual Event: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

and community-making. In this paper, we consider how these narratives may be understood at scale to provide insights into the digital architecture of queer lives. We focus our analysis on the 1,941 posts pinned to Australia, to consider how QTM reaffirms contemporary understandings of the physical-digital continuum and queers how we conceive of traces and places in this context.

Methods

Working with Canadian-based founder and director of the project, Lucas LaRochelle, we collected these 1,941 posts tagged to coordinates within Australia where the researchers live. The scraped posts consist of a) a numerical post ID; b) the post text; and c) latitude and longitude coordinates. We are conscious that these posts were not made with the intention of being collected for research. However, the anonymous nature of the posts - they are submitted for moderation without a name or any contact details - prohibits us from contacting post authors and seeking consent to include them in this study. These posts were also made with the intention of being 'publicly' consumed. We acknowledge that the difference between public and private is not a neat binary, but a complex and nuanced spectrum. Nevertheless, the intended audience can generally be interpreted as any visitor to the site. We are conscious that this data includes coordinates, sometimes to a home or other private dwelling, and sometimes sensitive identifying elements such as the name of a person or a school. Where we do use direct quotes, we anonymise such details.

Findings - Digital & Physical Entanglements

A range of themes were evident in our sample of posts. Many stories document diverse 'first' experiences such as 'first 100% trans house I ever lived in... we used to have jam sessions until the early hours' (ID 2928); and 'my primary school where I had my first crush on a boy' (ID 10088). Coming out stories are also common, such as 'drinking lots of port on the balcony with my bestie and us both coming out to each other' (ID 18727). Our focus here, however, is on posts that variably reference digital media. We break these posts down into two categories: a) records of moments where a relationship moves from a digital space to a physical one ('Going Physical'); and b) posts documenting encounters in physical spaces that explicitly referenced digital media ('Digital Tracing'). Both categories of posts point to how the digital and physical are entangled on Queering the Map, and in modern queer experience more generally.

Going Physical

The posts in this category document meeting people in physical spaces with whom relationships had previously been established in digital spaces. Such posts centre on meeting someone through an app or a social media platform, such as 'thank you grindr for allowing me to meet this boy and his cat' (ID 33351) or 'this is where you lived when i visited you from the states for the first time in 2014 after we met on tumblr in 2012. who ever said tumblr wasn't a dating website?! <3' (ID 24787). In these examples the references to digital media, like Grindr and Tumblr, are explicit. These posts locate on the map that first physical encounter. For other posts in this category, the digital mediation of a relationship is more implied. For example:

The first time we met in person, I was shaking as my feet propelled me up the tarmac and the airport terminal ramp. Our eyes met as soon as my head was above the glass barrier. I haven't looked away since. (ID 35)

The vivid details in the retelling of this encounter are powerful and poetic, but our interest here is on the implication in the first phrase - 'the first time we met in person' - and the emotion in the anticipation of that first meeting, hinting at a pre-existing relationship. We do not know who this person is - their age, gender, sexuality, nationality - but that meeting resonates, and hints at a (presumably) digitally mediated history.

Digital Tracing

Posts in this second category are not about 'going physical', but further evidence the complex entanglements between digital mediations and physical encounters. For example:

at 13, my mother told me that being in a facebook relationship with my female friend would make people think i was a lesbian, thinking it was fake. im 20 and she still doesnt know (ID 22266)

I came out to my main friends through facebook and then saw them all at school the next day, i was a nervous wreck (ID 45002)

In both cases, digital traces of life - a relationship, and a coming out - are mediated through Facebook, but are articulated, felt in, and inscribed onto physical locations: a family home in Frankston, and a school south of Perth.

We draw out this theme - of social and other digital media mentioned on Queering the Map - specifically because of the double entanglement at work. These posts are a digital record of a physical encounter that was initiated or at least partially mediated in a digital space. While comparatively few posts in our sample explicitly document this kind of encounter or movement, the enduring significance of the internet in the lives of LGBTQIA+ people (Robards et al. 2018) provides important context for all the connections and relationships (digitally) storied on the site.

We focus on this entanglement between the physical and digital in order to point towards a narrative about relationships initiated in digital spaces being fully realised in physical places, revealing stories of 'queer realness' (De Ridder & Van Bauwel 2015). There is a history in internet research of discussions about doing away with online/offline dichotomies, such as Jurgenson's (2012) rejection of digital dualisms and attendance to the enmeshed forming of 'augmented reality', or Tuszynski's (2008) arguments about the 'breaking down' of the binary between online and offline interactions. Our data, and Queering the Map itself, further evidence complicated entanglements between the digital and the physical, and reveal rich stories marked out across physical geographies but encoded and shared in a digital, communal project.

References

- De Ridder, S., & Van Bauwel, S. (2015). The discursive construction of gay teenagers in times of mediatization: youth's reflections on intimate storytelling, queer shame and realness in popular social media places. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 18(6), 777-793.
- Jurgenson, N. (2012). When atoms meet bits: Social media, the mobile web and augmented revolution. *Future internet*, 4(1), 83-91.
- Robards, B., Churchill, B., Vivienne, S., Hanckel, B., & Byron, P. (2018) 'Twenty years of "cyberqueer": The enduring significance of the internet for young LGBTIQ+ people', in P Aggleton, R Cover, D Leahy, D Marshall & M L Rasmussen (eds), *Youth, Sexuality and Sexual Citizenship*, Routledge, pp. 151-167.
- Tuszynski, S. (2008). IRL (In Real Life): Breaking down the binary between online and offline social interaction. Unpublished PhD Thesis.