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RE-PLACEING THE CITY: DIGITAL NAVIGATION TECHNOLOGIES AND THE EXPERIENCE OF URBAN PLACE

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The ways in which urban form is understood and valued, how populations navigate urban environments, and how people experience and understand cities is more reliant on digital media technologies and practices than ever before. Digital media researchers have allotted vast attention to the ways social and mobile media and ubiquitous computing create networked publics, reorganize interpersonal and group interactions, foster new forms of publicity, and blur boundaries between public and private contexts. However, among these investigations, less attention has been given to the relationships between digital media and physical interactions with place and space. While digital media platforms help shape how people interact with each other in public, they also influence the ways that people physically and digitally interact with public space and place.

Scholars of mobile, locative, or location-based social media have considered the role that digital media play in reorganizing public space (Gordon and de Souza e Silva, 2011; Humphreys, 2010), re-conceptualizing and analyzing the social structures that define physical spaces (Sheller, 2004; Cranshaw et al., 2012), coordinating activities or face-to-face interactions (Ling and Yttri, 2002), exhibiting geo-coded texts and images as identity performance (Schwartz and Haleboua, 2014), encouraging certain types of mobility (Frith, 2013), which are sometimes playful or creative (de Souza e Silva and Sutko, 2009; Cramer et al., 2011; Farman, 2012; Licoppe, 2010). While the proliferation of geo-coded digital traces, the utilization of GPS coordinates in locative media projects and games, and the disclosure or sharing of location within social media systems tends to be the focus of scholarly and industry research, more research is needed on the relationship between experiences of place and the use and non-use of navigation technologies in particular (such as GPS, digital maps, and mobile navigation systems) as well as digital practices and strategies of wayfinding more generally. One of the most common uses of GPS, particularly among smartphone users, is online mapping tools and portable navigation technologies (Zickuhr, 2013), yet we know very little about how these technologies are incorporated into everyday life, how they shape spatial relations, and how they contribute to the formation of a sense of place.

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Many scholars and critics have understood digital navigation technologies as enacting processes of alienation, abstraction, and disembedding or distancing of the digital media user from space and place. In contrast to popular assumptions about the distracted sense of space and place encouraged by digital navigation technologies, I illustrate and analyze the ways in which the exact opposite processes are observable: that navigation technology users are developing wayfinding strategies to re-embed and imagine themselves within urban space and to cultivate a sense of place within urban environments. This case study is an example of a process I describe as “re-placemaking” the city: the subjective, everyday practices of assessing and combining physical, social, and digital contexts in order to more fully understand one’s embeddedness within urban places, and to produce a unique sense of place. I will briefly define and discuss placemaking and “re-placemaking” the city before presenting research on digital navigation technologies specifically.

This paper combines media and cultural studies, science and technology studies, geography and urban studies approaches in order to investigate navigation technology users’ understandings of their own spatial relations and conditions of mobility. Through interviews and questionnaires with 132 navigation technology users, this paper identifies the ways that people actually use digital navigation technologies, why they use these technologies, how these technologies influence their physical movement, and how navigation technology users cognitively map and understand their embeddedness within urban space. In addition to interviews and surveys with members of this group, this paper also analyzes the ways in which digital spatial navigation has been constructed in popular culture, press releases, advertisements, and legal documents and how these texts contribute to users’ understandings of digital navigation technologies and placemaking. Through the intersections of marketing campaigns, popular discourse, regulation, and actual practices I investigate how the social and technological construction of place is experienced and understood through services and practices of digital navigation. Ultimately, I analyze the ways in which digital navigation technology use encourages pedestrians and motor vehicle operators to re-place the unknown, unfamiliar space of the city as a manageable, organized, bounded space and how this understanding of space allows for a deeper sense of place on the part of digital media users. Although navigation technology non-use is not directly addressed in this paper, I will present some preliminary findings regarding non-use that were gathered as part of the questionnaire process. The findings presented in this paper urge researchers to rethink what we know about the use of navigation technologies in urban space and to reconsider how these technologies help users cultivate a sense of place, rather than distract them from their surroundings.

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