

Participatory Urban Media: Promises and Challenges

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Abstract. What vision of social interaction is sought and advanced through participatory urban media? In this workshop paper, I put forward two dominant ways that social interaction is characterized in the discourse around the design of participatory urban media, broadly construed as *material* and *political*. Each of these visions is illustrated through a recent case that reveals its strengths and limitations. I further draw on these cases to highlight the potentials and challenges of the kinds of social interactions that are sought and cultivated through the integration of digital media on physical spaces.

1 Introduction

More than thirty years of research on networking technologies has shown that the relationship between communication and community is broad and complex leading to more nuanced understandings of mediated social interaction. This is manifest, for example, in case studies of crowd-based and participatory digital applications with aims as varied as learning, civic engagement, journalism, or collective intelligence. This research has challenged the notion that social interaction and community engagement are unconditionally improved with access

and use of digital technologies and points to some of the challenges such as privacy, exploitation, groupthink, or alienation.

Participatory urban media are a relatively recent addition to the social media landscape. These applications enable people to share and access locally relevant information in situ, adding a digital dimension to the urban environments. In doing so, it is argued, they have the potential to change how people connect with their local community by raising awareness, and changing perceptions (e.g., Dalsgaard, and Halskov 2010; Foth 2008; Schroeter et al. 2009; Salim and Haque 2015).

Participatory urban media are gradually finding their way into the mainstream media partly due to the ubiquity of smart phones equipped with high-resolution cameras and wireless access. For example, German Green Party's Berlin chapter launched a mobile app that enabled people to see videos linked to political billboards throughout the city specifically related to the city's environmental issues (Kirkpatrick, 2011). People were encouraged to comment on these locations and engage in exchanges with the party on specific issues related to those locations. AR Occupy Wall Street (2011) is a Mixed Reality (MR) application that was developed during the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States, enabling users to post political banners in locations that were closed to protesters such as the New York Stock Exchange.

The above are examples of a range of experimental applications that seek to connect individuals, foster collective action or facilitate social interaction through the design and deployment of urban media. As expected, these applications advance a diversity of visions about what forms of social interaction are desired, ideal or worth cultivating. But are these applications part of the solution to the problems of communication and community? Or, do they instead suppress communication and further distance and disintegrate communities?

2 Material & Political Visions of Social Interaction

The approaches toward facilitating social interaction in urban participatory media are diverse with subtle differences that warrant careful consideration on a case-by-case basis. At the same time, finding similarities and mapping thematic connections of specific cases has the potential to reveal patterns and highlight what may be broadly missing or underrepresented in mainstream discourse. Looking closely, we might observe a grouping of design cases based on visions of social interaction that are central to their design. More specifically, in contemporary experiments the social is often framed in either *material* or *political* terms – broadly construed as illustrated in the following examples.

One understanding of social that animates many participatory urban media experiments is the possibility of connection and information exchange through urban networks; and the potential of crowds to contribute data in various forms to be then aggregated and used for multiple (local) purposes. In doing so, it renders it in material terms. This approach is exemplified in a project titled *Give a Minute* (2010) by *Local Projects*. *Give a Minute* launched in Chicago in November 2010 and subsequently extended to several other cities. *Give a Minute* is positioned as a *digital town hall meeting* but one that is *more accessible and efficient*. Through signs and billboards distributed in the city, the project invites citizens to respond to an issue or question using Twitter as the main channel of communication.¹ The campaign is promoted through transportation networks, newspapers, and public billboards, soliciting ideas from citizens about strategies that affect how they navigate the city in the future. The project's website describes it in the following manner:

Give a Minute is a new kind of public dialogue. It only takes a minute to think about improving your city, but your ideas can make a world of difference. Give a Minute is an opportunity for you to think out loud; address old problems with fresh thinking; and to enter into dialogue with change-making community leaders. (2010)

The dialogue envisioned by *Give a Minute* is minimal, with a focus on quick provocations for feedback and ideas. Questions such as “Hey Chicago, What would encourage you to walk, bike and take Chicago Transit Authority more often?” are posed. Viewers are encouraged to respond to these questions with the aim of informing the decision makers in the city. Aligned with an understanding of social interaction as connectivity, *Give a Minute* takes its starting point in the recognition of disconnect between city officials and citizens. This disconnect is framed as lack of time, access, and interest, and seemingly overcome through technological means.

Give a Minute is representative of a class of applications that seek to transcend the limitations of time and space, connecting individuals and groups networking and crowdsourcing mechanisms. In this model, locative participatory media are regarded as an extension of the networking infrastructure. The consideration of social interaction is left at the technical level, broadly understood as *connectivity* and remaining agnostic to specific applications and their social and cultural setting.

¹ To date, there have been no published reports documenting how widely this project was used by the citizens or whether or not the local governments found useful information or acted on any of the ideas submitted through the application.

Another common understanding positions the social as the capacity to voice individual and collective narratives; to form new alliances and question common beliefs or practices; and to facilitate encounters as a way to challenge hierarchical social and organizational structures and their practices. Here, it is argued that participatory urban media enable the recording and retelling of interpretative commentary about place, such as street corners, pathways, and communities that are generally hidden or underrepresented in the mainstream media or popular narratives of these locations. It is also a suitable medium for fostering new modes of encounter or even political dissent, especially ones that challenge common practices or foster critical reflection.

Yellow Arrow is one of the classic cases exemplifying this perspective. Created by Christopher Allen, Michael Counts, Brian House, and Jesse Shapins, its aim was to “give voice” to hidden stories and interpretations of a city, referred to by some as a platform for a kind of geographic blogging.

Originally introduced in New York, a series of arrow-shaped yellow stickers were placed on street signs, storefronts, buildings and monuments, each displaying a unique code. Viewers could post and retrieve messages, tagging locations with poetic or informational snippets with the aim of sharing and experiencing *the secret life of the city*. The stickers were regarded as an opportunity for people to shift their and others’ relations to the urban space by engaging with those who experience the same spaces in ways that are both similar and different. The collection of annotations sought to re-imagine the urban landscape as a living site of reflection and storytelling about the many ways that the urban environment interacts with individual and collective histories and stories, while at the same time enabling new ways of touring and experiencing the city.

Yellow Arrow is illustrative of a class of urban participatory media that seek to capture, collect, and share diverse voices and/or provide the occasions for encounter with others who are the same and different. The aims of open interpretation, critical reflection, encounter, and political dissent continue to be seen throughout the multiple variations of artistic practices of urban participatory media applications.

3 Questions and Challenges

The examples in part 2 are by no means exhaustive of the range of ways that participatory urban media have been positioned in relation to social interaction. However, they are illustrative of two interpretations of social interaction that are dominant in discourses around them: The first has a broadly technological focus and posits social interaction in terms of extending networks of communication to enable crowd-sourced data and applications. In so doing, it renders social

interaction in material terms. The second views social interaction in political and critical terms, focusing on giving voice and fostering critical reflection with the aim of challenging dominant structures of power and facilitating more egalitarian, even non-hierarchical social forms. It is clear that each of the above visions has limitations, some which are surfaced in the above examples. However, each of the two visions can also be seen as a starting point for opening up the discussion of participatory urban media in more nuanced and engaged ways.

More specifically, the material interpretation of locative participatory media, I argue, positions it as an extension of networking technologies, thus pointing us to the ways that it can be understood as *infrastructure* linking it to the body of literature in STS. As infrastructure and not unlike roads and bridges it has the ability to both *fragment and recombine* the social fabric of neighborhoods, communities, and cities. In doing so, the understanding of participatory urban media as infrastructure foregrounds questions related to access and equity. For example, we might ask how this new infrastructure relates to the existing terrain and other infrastructures already in place and in what ways the introduction of this new infrastructure disrupts and reinforces existing patterns of connectivity and interaction.

The political interpretation of locative participatory media views it as an instrument for voicing alternate views and facilitating critical reflection. In so doing, it positions it as a *medium* to bring marginalized voices, themes, and stories to the center of attention while at the same time decentering those themes, stories and voices that are most common, powerful, or mainstream. This understanding of participatory urban media foregrounds questions related to framing, transparency, and (digital) literacy. For example, we might ask how the form and placement of the artifact shapes who participate in the content creation and how, bringing to fore many issues that have been well-researched and recognized in the context of other non-locative applications such as Wikipedia.

4 Moving Forward

Locative participatory media are a new addition to a range of digital products that aim to facilitate social interaction through the use and deployment of networking technologies in location. However, conception of social interaction vary significantly from case to case, with stark contrast in what is achieved socially, for whom, and toward what purposes. A close reading of cases confirms that location-based technologies do not unconditionally produce social ties or foster the desirable qualities often associated with social connections such as learning, civic capacity, or the will and the way to participate in collective action and problem solving. There is indeed no simple recipe for cultivating democratic ways of being and working together.

With this understanding, the key question at the forefront of design and criticism as we deploy and employ such technologies is: **What vision of social interaction is sought and advanced through this design and does this vision appropriately characterize and address the problematic situation at hand?**

Foregrounding the above question compels us to derive insight from the plurality of conceptions of social interaction developed in other spheres to advance the design and criticism of locative participatory media. Moreover, we might view them as rich sites of discovery and inquiry about community engagement and participation. Viewing locative participatory media as such is also an invitation to devise and adapt methodologies that we employ to study them, especially those that enable us to ask questions about both their short and long term effects to engage their social, political, and cultural impact.

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6 References

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