

## More-than-Human Contact, Conspicuous Mobility, and the Digital Frontier

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**mother:** "Who's Tyler?"

**daughter:** "That's my new boyfriend."

**mother:** "When were you going to tell me?"

**daughter:** "Well, I put it on Facebook!"

Not only have social networking technologies provided alternative modes of interaction among individuals, but these technologies are increasingly shifting more traditional ways in which individuals interact in everyday life. This has implications for human contact, and therefore impacts all aspects of contemporary social life—government, politics, the interpersonal, kinship, work environments, artistic expression, health and wellness, informational media, entertainment, etc. A "more-than-human contact" has emerged, where mediation has become the norm, where the concept of "human-computer-human interaction" is excessively repetitive. Human interaction is always already digitally mediated.

My interest in more-than-human contact is, of course, rooted in my own implication in these new mediations. I entered the academy as the "GIS Wars" were cooling, and the question of the role of GIS in Geography was seemingly answered, resolved. My graduate study worked to design and develop an Internet-based public-participation spatial decision-support system. My dissertation research examined the use of mobile, spatial technologies in the mapping of community interests, by community residents. And my more recent work examines the emergence of spatial media—more specifically the tensions around framing this emergence as neogeographic and/or as volunteered geographic information.

A materialist-turn within social-cultural geography leaves GIScientists well-positioned to demonstrate how spatial data about everyday life can be utilized to better understand spatial practices, specifically mobility. By drawing the concept of the "more-than-human" from recent work within non-representational theories<sup>1</sup>, a reinvigorated critical GIScience can examine spatiotemporal interaction as mediated by digital, spatial technologies. More-than-human contact assumes that contact is always already interdigitated—that the technological and the social are fused in contemporary society. Informed by the figuration of the cyborg and broader literature in technoculture<sup>2</sup>, the concept of more-than-human contact enables our recognition of the multiple objects that, according to Sherry Turkle<sup>3</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> Whatmore, 2006; Lorimer, 2005; see also, Anderson and Harrison, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson, 2009; Haraway, 1991, 1997; Hayes, 1999, 2005; Halberstam and Livingston, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Turkle, 2007.

evoke the human condition. These digital objects have become part of our everyday lives, whether we like it or not. Our ability to have contact with others—to respond—necessitates their inclusion.

Spatial media have provided a more recent spatial twist on social networking. Online information from the crowd can be georeferenced; photo-sharing sites and micro-blogging tools enable their users to attach their current location to posts. And with the introduction of location-based services, networking giants like Facebook (with Places) and search giants like Google (with Latitude) are finding new ways to connect people with and through place.

These spatial media developments are generally not originating from departments of geography within the academy. These activities, of individuals producing geographic data and applications, have fallen under the term: neogeography<sup>4</sup>. Where 2.0, an O'Reilly Media Inc. conference is one such gathering of self-described neogeographers that has held six meetings since 2005. In a 317-person sample of the over 900 registered attendees of the Where 2.0 conference in 2010, nearly 72 percent represented private business, including behemoths like Microsoft, Google, and ESRI as well as recent start-ups. The prospect of developer announcements that might change the face of social media businesses attracted a number of attendees from news organizations. Nearly 12 percent of attendees were journalists or media managers. Less than 5 percent was from the government sector and nearly 1.5 percent was from nonprofits. Only 8.5 percent of attendees were academics, a third of which were students. Critical GIScientists must remain attentive to the pulse of these developments, particularly as they invoke a kind of locational awareness that is primarily motivated by corporate profit.

The question becomes, then, how do academic geographers enter in to these developments? How do we re-implicate ourselves? My own approach has been to continue to invest in what I have termed a "vigilant openness" towards this technology—to approach it in non-deterministic ways while remaining cautious of the multiple co-implications. In doing so, I want to develop two concepts to help understand the spatio-temporal constraints on social networking. The first, "conspicuous mobility," recognizes that many location-based services (LBS) for mobile devices cater to those who want to make known, or publish, their location and movement to those in their social network. However, the second, "digital frontier," notes that the use of LBS for social networking is a limited activity. Those at the margins of this movement in social-spatial networking constitute a digital frontier—where opportunities exist to alter the motivations and practices of mobile spatial data collection and publishing. It is at this digital frontier that I see great promise for a potentially radical neogeography—to leverage the increasing proliferation of Internet-based social media towards important social-economic and environmental objectives.

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<sup>4</sup> Turner, 2006.

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