

Reviews

Mobile Interfaces in Public Spaces: Locational Privacy, Control, and Urban Sociability by Adriana de Souza e Silva and Jordan Frith. New York and London: Routledge, 2012. 224 pp, ISBN – 978-0-415-88823-3

In the age of smartphones, Wi-Fi zones and data plans, many of us experience connectivity wherever we go. A smartphone user may simultaneously experience the digital world of Google Maps, e-mail notifications, Facebook messages and the physical tangible world of people, streets, trains, offices and restaurants. *Mobile Interfaces in Public Spaces* is a timely investigation into such experiences, and looks into how mobile and location-aware technologies are used in interaction with public spaces. It also explores how mobile communication challenges established social norms, affects perception of privacy and sociability, and enables new forms of relationships to public spaces.

The book is divided into two parts, with each chapter connected through a fictional account of a girl called Johanna who makes use of different mobile technologies in her daily life. Her account provides a real-life backdrop to the theoretical analysis of the respective chapter. In Part One, the authors trace the historical lineage of the modern-day smartphone to the 19th century paperback book, and demonstrate that such objects have long been used to shape and control social interaction within public spaces, and have challenged the public/private divide. In Part Two, the authors delve into the thematic concerns of privacy, power relationships and identity formation.

Authors Adriana de Souza e Silva and Jordan Frith caution against technological determinism and address the commonplace belief that the use of mobile technology withdraws users from public spaces and provide counterarguments and evidence against this claim. They achieve this through contextualising ‘new’ media technologies like the smartphone and juxtaposing them with their historical antecedents like the book and the Walkman.

The discussion on the use of the book in the 19th century as a prototypical interface for controlling social interaction in public spaces is a most interesting and refreshing take on the subject. The authors argue that the desires of managing and controlling our interactions with people around us are much older than the technology of the smartphone. They make refer-



ence to Georg Simmel's discussion of the blasé attitude. Writing in the 1950s about early 19th to 20th century urbanites, Simmel discusses how the metropolitan individual in a growing city has to reconstitute his psychic state and reformat his attention in order to filter out overwhelming amounts of sensory stimulation in public space. Termed a blasé attitude, this may be seen as a form of mental interface, not unlike the later interface of mobile technology which is used to manage personal interaction with people and things in public spaces. The book, for instance, is used to divert attention from surroundings as a visual filter, while a Walkman (and later an iPod) is employed as an aural filter.

The authors then discuss how mobile phones and location-aware technologies complicate the ways in which people could interact with public spaces with these new interfaces. For instance, the phone has the potential to privatise public space with personal conversations, but is nonetheless a strategy for users to selectively interact with their surroundings. Some may even pretend to talk on the phone, so as to avoid strangers who might approach them. Location-aware technologies like maps, games and social networking applications enable interaction on other levels. They also give rise to opportunities for location-based commercial advertising, educational walks and games, and social networking through connecting with other checked-in users.

In the field of media studies, the authors' conceptualisations of 'interface' and 'location' may be useful for other theorisations on the subjects. Interface in its simplest definition refers to something that lies in between two parts or systems, helping them communicate with each other. The Graphic User Interface, for instance, stands between the user-friendly visual representation and the binary language of 1 and 0 of the computer code system. Surveying different literature on the subject, the authors come to their own definition for the purpose of the book. In particular, they note that Lev Manovich in *The Language of New Media* (2002) has extended the use of the word to cultural interfaces, referring to how interfaces also function as 'new sets of conventions used to organise cultural data' (Manovich 2002: 115), simultaneously defining and influencing how people interact with the world around them. In other words, interface is not simply the sheet of glass dividing the mobile screen from the finger swiping on it, but rather a system of material devices, people and spaces, entities that interact, influence and transform each other. It frames everyday sociality for the people who use it and connects to the physical space under which it operates. It is at once a filter, a control device and an information access platform. This thick definition of interface guides readers along the analysis the authors offer in the rest of the book.

For scholars working with theories of spatiality within media studies, the definition of 'location' may be of interest. The authors make passing references to formulations on space/place distinctions by Michel de Certeau, Yi-fu Tuan and Edward Casey, and subsequently focus upon defining location as a specific term, related to but not sub-ordinated to the concepts of space or place. 'Location' refers to a spot on a map with fixed geographical features but includes an extra layer of dynamic meaning inscribed through location-based information. It is important to note that locations are 'not merely subsets of places' (de Souza e Silva et al. 2012: 10), but places do become locations when they are layered with location-based information, and become relevant when social and spatial interaction occur in relation to the use of location-aware technologies.

Location is in no way distinct from the technologies that reference it. People who utilise the devices, the applications and the embedded information are also all part and parcel of the location-based system as an entire interface. This conceptualisation offers a dynamic understanding of what the term ‘location’ could mean. The authors continue to develop the term in Chapter 6, where they suggest that locations are also relational. This means that ‘their meanings derive from connections to other locations’ (de Souza e Silva et al. 2012: 163). The way locations are linked and connected to each other through personal narratives and experiences may shape the way other users approach these locations. For instance, user histories and trails of movement across a city could attach new meaning to previously unrelated locations. A location thus encompasses physical, digital and social elements.

In location-aware technologies, the social element in location-based social networking applications like *Foursquare* and *Latitude* plays a strong role in adding an extra layer of meaning that is built through interaction of users who make connections with others’ check-in histories, comments, photographs and blog-entries. This perhaps extends upon de Souza e Silva’s previous work on hybrid spaces in her paper ‘From Cyber to Hybrid’ (2006), where she conceptualises hybrid spaces as connected, mobile and social spaces. Location is an example of a hybrid space where both the physical and the digital construct what the location is.

Carefully illustrated with an international range of examples, *Mobile Interfaces in Public Spaces* provides a survey of notable cases of location-based advertising, social networks and gaming platforms. Issues of privacy, power, identity formation, and sociality are discussed in close relation to these examples, acting as pivotal entry points. De Souza e Silva and Frith discuss the possibilities of top-down and collateral surveillance through database and tracking technology, and how the use of location-aware software influence perception of location-al privacy and social norms. They also note that location-aware technologies expand the forms of control and power into the spaces of everyday lives. Power asymmetries are created when one party exerts power over the other through an awareness of their locations. This happens for instance when parents maintain constant surveillance over their children through GPS tracking, or when parole officers monitor their parolees’ activities with online maps. These topics of privacy and power are discussed in separated chapters while bearing reference to each other, rather than taken in conjunction with each other. Although the book might benefit from a closer consideration of these interlinking concepts, it nonetheless offers plenty of food for thought on the subjects.

In the concluding chapter, the authors raise a salient question—‘How do we discuss mobile technologies when there seems to be new mobile technologies released every month?’ (de Souza e Silva et al. 2012: 188) Indeed, how does scholarship keep up with the pace of technological advancement? While the authors are right in suggesting that it is impossible to predict with certainty how the developments will play out, this book is certainly on the right track in contextualising and pointing out that technology, no matter how new and unexpected, is always embedded within the larger social, political and economic framework where they are adopted and used. The authors invite readers to investigate newer technologies with the backdrop of former socio-political and technological developments, and recog-

nise the shifts that newer technologies bring. These technologies complicate and shed new light on existing configurations of sociality, power and control.

Overall, the chapters are linked together with the fictional narrative of Johanna, a student who just moved abroad to begin her graduate studies. The day-to-day experience of Johanna reminds readers of the ubiquity of mobile technologies, and how one may make use of them to manage interactions within unfamiliar public spaces. Such a lively style of engagement also makes this book accessible for junior students as an introduction to the body of research on mobile and location-aware technologies. *Mobile Interfaces in Public Spaces* is a valuable contribution to a growing field of literature on interface studies, and the studies of mobile technologies, location-based applications and social media in public spaces.

Works Cited

- de Souza e Silva, Adriana (2006). 'From Cyber to Hybrid: Mobile technologies as interfaces of hybrid spaces.' *Space and Culture*, 3: 261-278.
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