

Chapter 16

Online Opportunities for Mobile and Visual Research

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ABSTRACT

The recent surge in interest in both mobile and visual methodologies reflects an increasing awareness of mobility and visualization in shaping our social worlds. The 'mobilities turn' in social science draws attention to the significance of a range of mobilities, from everyday to global. In tandem, visualization of virtual and lived spatial and social contexts is increasingly central to daily life and wider social processes. Both mobile and visual methods have evolved to reflect the epistemological changes that accompany these realizations, leading to a mobility of method as approaches draw from a range of disciplines. Online resources present particular opportunities for the expansion of these methods. For example, video methods can be adapted for online use in collecting visual data; this data can then be disseminated in video form through the Internet. However, this interrelationship between online, mobile, and visual methods has not been fully explored. This chapter explores the ways in which these methods can be combined to create knowledge in a unique way. It assesses the efficacy of these methodologies and methods by reviewing existing research and draws out key themes for analysis and further development.

INTRODUCTION

The urban landscape is shaped by mobility, through the movement of people, objects, information and ideas, as well as the meanings ascribed to these

mobilities in everyday life. The city is increasingly mobile and increasingly visual. The visual cacophonies that are negotiated in cities situate our experience of the urban in a global as well as local context. Glimpses of worlds beyond the city are available through static devices such as television and computers that give access to a world beyond;

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and mobile devices such as mobile phones, laptops as well as a growing range of handheld devices. These technologies are both visual and mobile, and are productive of the social world. Much of the increased mobility and visualization is therefore 'online' as the virtual world acts as a conduit for textual and pictorial information and ideas, as well as a 'place of being'. It is considered that this increased virtuality could threaten the notion of cities as we know them. It is therefore critical that we develop a way of knowing the mobile, visual and virtual aspects of urban life.

Acknowledgment of these changes, and the theories that seek to make sense of them, gives rise to new epistemologies. For example, the 'mobilities turn' (Urry, 2007; Cresswell, 2006) in social science suggests that we cannot create knowledge about the social world without recognizing the centrality of mobility, including virtual mobility. Mobile methodologies represent a 'new approach to excavate and access the meaning of human constructions of the world' (Anderson, 2004, p. 254). Similarly, visual epistemologies incorporate an understanding of distinct forms of knowledge that can be created through visual methods, including online visual methods. However, this does not necessarily imply a disregard of previous methodological approaches, but rather presents opportunities to mobilize and visualize existing ones. This means that we may not be able to adhere strictly to any singular established paradigm but instead need to draw from a number of research traditions and philosophical approaches, in a 'bricolage' (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 4).

Along with a rethinking of methodological approach, research methods and tools need to be developed to adequately explore these changes, some of which will necessarily be online. Mobile and visual methods allow the creation of knowledge of both the global implications of changes in mobility, and the everyday lived experiences of mobile practices and cultures. Although it is argued that this necessitates a divergence from more traditional research methodologies and

methods (Sheller & Urry, 2006), this chapter approaches this as a mobilization of current more static research such as existing ethnographic approaches (Fincham, McGuinness, & Murray, 2010; Murray, 2009a).

BACKGROUND

There is a vast array of research tools available to the mobile researcher, and the complexity of the social world often necessitates a multi-pronged approach that mixes a number of methods (e.g., Freudendal-Pedersen et al., 2010). As discussed, the virtual realm is an important aspect of this complex social world, particularly in urban contexts. In order to explore virtual spaces, we need online tools. The recent surge in interest in the field of mobile methodologies and methods (Fincham, McGuinness, & Murray, 2010; Büscher, Urry, & Witchger, 2010; Adey, 2010), has not yet fully embraced this notion. This chapter therefore seeks to explore the capacity both to continue the development of online and mobile methods, and to examine nuanced ways of integrating them. There are already clear intersections, as online methods inhabit a virtual and inherently mobile realm. Online methods are already on the move.

Mobile and online methods are also needed to explore virtual spaces as significant spaces of mobility. Social networking sites, blogs, micro blogs, internet discussion forums, e-mails and list serves can be used to investigate both virtual and imagined mobilities as well as other forms of mobility. Other more established methods could also be said to be, to a degree, 'mobile', and present similar opportunities in exploring urban experiences. The application of visual methods, which have witnessed a similar but more established surge in interest, in unison, can further enrich the research process and outcomes. These methods are not only complementary but together provide a toolkit of methods, both tested and innovative, for the study of urban spaces.

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