Trans–Urbanites and Collaborative Environments in Computer Networks

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INTRODUCTION

Since the first manifestations of what was agreed to be called civilization, humanity has been considering cities and urbanity relations the main centers for socialization and political interaction in people's lives and daily activities. The birth of cities allowed the formation of cooperation groups, which despite being created from shared work and urban social duties, got together for the same objectives in their communities and were interdependent. Nevertheless, many times such groups were under tension and conflict as contingent residence places and shared geographic centers were rarely based on interests in social interaction, or sharing projects and affectivity. Therefore, cities were consolidated as centers for socialization, and manifestations of interests and collective interrelations, as well as privileged stages for social constructions, disputes, conflicts and witnesses of social histories.

Thus, cities were born for politics and have always had administrative roles as their main vocation. The first cities were always capital cities, centers for decision-making and power. And today it is not different: population, production and service concentrations create the conditions for power and governments to be in them. Therefore, cities have the role of capitals in empires, countries, states, departments, or at least of administrative headquarters in municipalities. Cities became notable, and mingled as centers for decision-making and administration in the most diverse human groupings.

The roles of cities as centers for socialization and decision-making have never been questioned or thought of as being possible in other settings other than in an urban one. Since their emergence, the first cities have always been the centers of everything. By the end of the 20th century, however, the birth of a computerized society, as well as social interaction network environments have produced several communities assembled in virtual centers and electronic environments, but able to construct real relationships and make decisions with concrete influences, which ended up in extrapolating the classical model of urban socialization and politics, creating possible trans-urban communities for the first time in history.

Although in a preliminary way, this article covers the analysis of these trans-urban centers, socialization and common interests communities, whose motivational formations are based on interests, desires and willingness for socialization by their members, instead of on contingent geographic territories, physical region of residences and shared productive resources.

Therefore, an investigation of the transformations and possibilities of these new centers for socialization, power and human administration, network communities, is proposed.

BACKGROUND

There are many studies on urbanity and its role in human society. In principle, it is admitted that cities have been the center of human social relations since their birth sometime between 5,000 to 10,000 years ago.

According to Milton Santos, a city is an organization aimed at collective production (Santos, 1994). Even though apparently disorganized and confusing, cities are always well-articulated sets of equipment and urban-productive solutions.

In this sense, interests and temporalities overlap. Neighborhoods and older structures coexist with the addition of new urbanities and productive roles. Anyway, it is not difficult to perceive the existing contraction in the cities: on one hand it is a matter of collective historical constructions, organized sets of landscapes, and equipment that aim at the accomplishment of community social interactions. On the other hand, it is a matter of competitions among groups and the same sets of landscapes for conquering spaces in urban settings (Souza, 2000; Pedrão, 1993; Zajdznajder, 1979).

Since the very beginning, it has been within this contraction between cooperation and competition that urbanities have been building their fundamental roles of political debate and administrative and productive direction.

Urban settings became spaces for privileged forums of debates and social constructions. It is not difficult to demonstrate that the main debates on Science, Education, Hygiene and Health, as well as on Legal issues and

Law or on any other social aspect have always been held via debate forums and urban social practices. Not only official forums and formal government spaces are included here. It is necessary that we have Gramski's view on urban institutions and their role in social construction (Gramski, 1978). Thus, a hospital, a school, a bus station, are all centers of social interaction and political debate, not only those that are explicit but also, and especially, those resulting from the social interaction and daily use of urban equipment and landscape. Each attitude, each group or individual move, each choice, is an element of debate and socio-urban construction.

The city has remained almost absolute as a privileged stage of these debates and constructions of history until recently. The emergence of new information technologies, new communication media and techniques, and especially new technological environments of network interactions since the end of the 20th century, has fostered the appearance of alternative ways of social construction and debate, which are almost close to a conspiration capable of offering differently located communities supra-urban and supra-local social construction environments, yet influent in each location.

Urban debate, with rare and weak exceptions, has always been situated in the context of urbanity itself. What happens is that the interaction and coexistence capable of legitimating social constructions always take place in the community of immediate contact of each subject. The rare contacts through mail, telephone or telegraph, in travels, or even recently after television, are neither frequent, nor continuous, nor updated, nor do they have the possibility of continuous and daily multi-participation necessary for the involvement in debates and social constructions, properties which were only obtained in the context of urban quotidian. Network societies manage to produce these essential characteristics for network social construction, making a certain trans-urbanity possible, formed by communities composed by non-territorial or city identities, which allow debate and social constructions at other levels, not urban, and are capable of fostering the many current examples of politics and electronic government.

NETWORK COMMUNITIES

In the last 50 or maybe 60 years, humankind has witnessed the overwhelming growth of computer and information technologies. This growth, besides resulting in the insertion of these technologies in almost all human relations and actuation, has enabled an electronic network social environment to provoke some novelties as for the possibilities of social interaction and communal organization of human beings (Matta, 2001). Pierre

Levy very properly identifies the functioning of network society by calling it the knowledge society and working from the material basis prompted by the network environment (Levy, 1993, 1998).

Many experts state that people nowadays experience the emergence of a post-modern period. We do not really espouse this idea, for we believe that modernity is characterized by the hegemony of a capitalist society, of its specific mode of production, and of the set of ideas that support such a society. However, it is undeniable that some changes provoked by the new environment have split with the classical relationship and interaction patterns lived mainly in the urban community environment in order to reach new ways and dimensions, making possible new social constructions and even new productive relationships.

The Internet, worldwide popular thanks to an installed computer base, has made possible the construction of great series of communities that meet and work virtually. The Internet was created, since the beginning, with a communal vocation. Although the first community has been created for military purposes, the Internet quickly evolved to reach scientific, commercial, educational, entertainment and other communities (Negroponte, 1996; Canton, 2001). In fact, in very few years, millions of societies and communities, not virtual at all, were formed, yet meeting in the virtual environment.

It is important to notice that even though they meet virtually, not simultaneously and independently from their geographic position, these communities are real and not virtual, and their effects and influence are concrete. Therefore, a group of supra-urban and even supra-national communal organizations is created. It is evident that each learning community, or each praxis diverse community, or any other community that takes place "inside of" computer networks, is capable of aggregating participants who are apart even by continents or oceans, but who nevertheless manage to interact, exchange ideas, in an instantaneous way in real time, or asynchronously with time lapses, or discuss and make decisions, build something in common, as if they were at the same place.

This power has exceeded the classical capacity of interaction and debate formerly only exclusive of urbanity, provoking themes and discussions to take place in regional or worldwide community environments. In turn, discussions tend to return, under the influence of a wider network interaction, to the local context, translated then by the citizen of urbanity, who lives their local problems, but who now manages to take part in many trans-urban communities, gathering diverse views and realities, different from that in which he/she lives, to finally influence his/her local environment based on those new experiences.

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