

Chapter V

Networking Serendipitous Social Encounters in Urban Neighbourhoods

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ABSTRACT

In Australian urban residential environments and other developed countries, Internet access is on the verge of becoming a ubiquitous utility, like water or electricity. From an urban informatics perspective, this chapter discusses emerging qualities of social formations of urban residents that are based on networked individualism and the potential of Internet-based systems to support them. It proposes that appropriate opportunities and instruments that are needed to encourage and support local interaction in urban neighbourhoods. The chapter challenges the view that a mere re-appropriation of applications used to support dispersed online communities is adequate to meet the place and proximity-based design requirements that community networks in urban neighbourhoods pose. It argues that the key factors influencing the successful design and uptake of interactive systems to support social networks in urban neighbourhoods include the swarming social behaviour of urban dwellers, the dynamics of their existing communicative ecology, and the serendipitous, voluntary and place-based nature of interaction between residents on the basis of choice, like-mindedness, mutual interest, and support needs. Drawing on an analysis of these factors, the conceptual design framework of an “urban tribe incubator” is presented.

INTRODUCTION

The area of technology and human computer interaction is cross-disciplinary and requires many different academic fields and design practices to work together effectively to generate a better understanding of the social context and human factors in technology design, development and usage. This chapter focuses on the social communication aspects of this field and hopes to establish a greater awareness for the contribution community media and communication studies can make to the field of human computer interaction. It seeks to build a theoretical foundation for an analysis of two interrelated issues which are discussed in turn.

First, the importance of place and the continued purpose and relevance of urban neighbourhoods is established. New media and networked information and communication technologies have not led to the diminishment of local place and proximity. However, they have given rise to new types of social interaction and to new emerging social formations. Understanding the nature and quality of interaction in these new social formations can inform the successful animation of neighbourhood community and sociality in them.

Second, appropriate opportunities and instruments to encourage and support local interaction in urban neighbourhood networks are not limited to technology, but technology can be a key facilitator. Thus, system designers and engineers are crucial allies to social scientists in the search for hybrid methodologies that integrate community development approaches with technology design. This chapter questions whether it is sufficient to appropriate tools originally designed for dispersed online (that is, virtual) communities in the context of 'community networks' (Schuler, 1996) for urban neighbourhoods. Purpose-built tools and instruments are required that afford (a) interactive linkages between the resident's communicative ecologies of cyberspace and lo-

cal place; and (b) personalised social networking between proximate neighbours *of choice*. Such an approach would allow the non-virtual and place-based assets in a resident's portfolio of sociability to become more attractive. It would establish an opportunity to create and maintain local social ties, and ultimately to find out who is living next door and who is socially compatible.

From the discussion of these issues, some of the key factors influencing the successful design and uptake of interactive systems to support social networks in urban neighbourhoods are derived. Drawing on an analysis of these factors, the conceptual framework of an 'urban tribe incubator' is presented.

This chapter seeks to set up the interdisciplinary conceptual foundation necessary to drive a thorough theoretical and empirical investigation into the interaction of people, place and technology and the way they function together to facilitate access to the social and cultural life of cities. The purpose of this chapter is not only to introduce and illustrate the issues at stake and to present a design framework but also to stimulate transfer and exchange of knowledge across academic disciplines and especially to invite discussion and comment from a broader interdisciplinary audience. Supporting efforts to build bridges between the social and the engineering sciences is paramount to the field of technology and human interaction, and this chapter contributes to the development of a dialogue between these disciplines. An interdisciplinary approach that brings together views and expertise from sociology, urban studies, interaction design and related disciplines will assist with efforts to facilitate urban neighbourhood community building, social inclusion, public consultation and debate, fair access to local information and services, urban sustainability and stronger local economies.

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