

Foursquare and the Parochialization of Public Space

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Abstract

The mobile social network Foursquare has gained popularity in the last few years among both users and businesses. This article explores how the use of Foursquare changes and impacts people's sense of place. Drawing on the work of Lofland (1998) on the social production of space, we argue that as new socio-spatial information (i.e. who checks in where) is introduced via the mobile social network, it can change the way people experience a place. Based on qualitative in-depth interviews with active Foursquare users, we explore person-to-person and person-to-place connections and argue that Foursquare promotes parochialization of public space.

Keywords

mobile social networks; public space; parochial realm; Foursquare; social interaction

Background

There is a growing body of literature around mobile social networks and locative media. This research aims to explore social interactions occurring through these systems (Cramer, Rost & Holmquist, 2011, de Souza e Silva, 2006; de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2010, 2012; Frith, 2012; Wilken & Goggin, 2012), the impact of mobile social systems on the urban environment (Bilandzic, Foth, & deLuca, 2008; Foth, Forlano, Satchell, & Gibbs, 2011; Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011; Satchell, 2009; Sheller & Urry, 2006; Wilken, 2008), and the overall changing mobile media landscape (Farman, 2012; Goggin, 2011; Goggin & Hjorth, 2009; Ling, 2008; Sheller, 2012). One of the goals of this area of research is to critically explore and understand the roles and impacts that mobile media have on individuals' everyday experience of place (Wilken, 2008). The current study seeks to contribute to this body of scholarship.

Literature Review

Previous mobile social network research has suggested that these services can lead to the parochialization of public space (Humphreys, 2010). Parochialization is the process by which people share socio-locational information with one another through communication technologies such as check-ins on mobile social networks, such that the public realm, where people had previously encountered strangers, starts to feel more familiar due to the social exchanges through the network. Places that would have felt public could be experienced as parochial because mobile social network users were socially connected to others in the space (Humphreys, 2010). For example, mobile social network users could coordinate congregation by broadcasting their location, so they would have familiar social relations in the public realm and thus experience it as parochial.

The original observation was based on how friends and friends-of-friends used mobile social networks to coordinate meeting up in public places (Humphreys, 2010). It is unclear how the sharing of social and locational information amongst strangers on a mobile social network could encourage the same process. More specifically in the case of Foursquare, it is unclear how the promotion of other users (e.g. Foursquare listing who has recently checked in to a location, who wrote a tip about the place, and who the current mayor is), the competitiveness of mayorships, and the 'nearby check-ins' influence one's sense of commonality among others in a particular location.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the following research questions:

- 1) How does the use of Foursquare influence one's sense of commonality amongst others in a particular location?
- 2) How do the competitive features on Foursquare impact how users come to think about and experience urban areas when using this application?

Methodology

We used on a naturalistic, interpretive framework for data collection and analysis (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006) and focused our recruitment efforts on communities or forums online and off where Foursquare users gathered to discuss the service.

We conducted 18 semi-structured in-depth interviews during the summer of 2012. Our participants included 6 women and 12 men, ranging in age from 20 to 60, with the average age around 30. Our sample was geographically diverse with participants across 10 different states in the US and from cities of various size including New York, Los Angeles, Boston, Houston, and Atlanta. The participants in this study ranged in mayorships from one to 89, with a mean of 24. The interviews lasted between 25 to 60 minutes and were conducted by either Skype or phone. We audio recorded and transcribed the interviews. Participants are referred to by pseudonym throughout the article.

Findings

Overall we found evidence that Foursquare use could contribute to the parochialization of the public realm by facilitating person-to-person and person-to-place connections. Lofland (1998) argues that even though the urban public realm is primarily made up of strangers that does not mean they do not interact. Indeed our study suggests that users on Foursquare can interact and can experience increased person-to-person connections with strangers using the mobile social network as well as person-to-place connections, which can both lead to the parochialization of the public realm.

Person-to-Person Parochialization - Browsing profiles, spotting users

A majority of participants reported looking at strangers' profiles, mostly when they were made aware of other users around them. Some participants had seen a person check in at a location or had been alerted that they lost a mayorship to someone and wanted to find out more about them, and some did it out of sheer curiosity. The sharing and reading of Foursquare profiles suggests a transitory sociality or relatively brief social interaction among users which can contribute to the experience of a parochial realm. Reading others' profiles and tips about a location moves beyond categorical knowledge of strangers, which characterize the public realm.

Mayorship battles, creating personas

Mayorship battles are a common form of social interaction on Foursquare among our participants, where people competed to check-in earlier in the day and more frequently at a particular location to maintain or earn the Foursquare title of mayor. Often mayorship battles often occurred among people who were already friends, but many participants also reported not knowing the person against whom they were competing. In addition to seeking out information about a person who had just ousted them as mayor, users reported strong emotions about these strangers, ranging from curiosity to annoyance to ambivalence. In many instances, the participants engaged in these battles mentioned investigating profiles, the creation of personas for their competitors, and occasionally attempts to see or meet these strangers.

Person-to-place parochialization- Mayorships as personal claims to space

Lofland (1998) explains that defending territory is one of the principles of stranger interaction, one which signals to others displeasure or hostility over spatial invasion. When someone threatens a Foursquare mayorship, one of the principles that prompts a defense of that territory is whether the

competing mayor is perceived as having a legitimate claim on the place. A kind of territoriality is made visible through the Foursquare interface and the mapping of check-ins. Foursquare also notifies people and makes explicit when and where others are challenging territories, which can invoke territoriality and defense of these places as “home territories”.

Conclusion

It is important not to romanticize the interactions that are facilitated through mobile social networks. Lofland (1998) notes that the parochial realm does not always engender positive feelings or connections. We found that some participants in our study did not have overwhelmingly positive things to say about those with whom they had competed for Foursquare mayorships. In these cases the increased interactions among strangers led to a negative emotional response rather than positive.

This isn't to say that all Foursquare interactions with strangers are negative, indeed we found substantial evidence for positive and neutral responses to other users. Just like various kinds of interactions are found in the offline urban public realm, so too do we see a myriad of responses to strangers on and around Foursquare.

In conclusion, this study suggests that unlike those of early mobile social networks (Humphreys, 2010) Foursquare users may be more likely to be aware and interact with other users. These interactions vary in degree, valence, and intimacy, but can be broadly characterized as ‘transitory sociality’ (Lofland, 1998). Participants used the network to build and reinforce not just person-to-place connections but person-to-person connections as well.

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