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Traversing urban social spaces:

How online research helps unveil offline practice

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Abstract

This chapter presents a discussion of methodological considerations in urban informatics research. As an exemplar, we examine a health communication research blog set up to produce insights into the choices made by residents of a master-planned development affecting their health and well-being. It served both as a repository for collection and a tool for the strategic selection and analysis of internet research data. We reflect on the nature of the online data contributed by an urban demographic about their physical activity practices within this particular neighbourhood. The blog provided a forum for detailed responses which allowed participants to reflect on their answers over a period of time, and write with the privacy and protection effects provided by the anonymity of contributions, coupled with the advantage of being able to view the contributions made by other residents. Opinions, stories, and discussions were instigated by questions and photographs posted on the blog about residents' levels of engagement with the neighbourhood for staying active and healthy. Residents reported on the social and physical aspects of the new urban environment that either encouraged or inhibited them from leading active and healthy lifestyles. In this context the blog provided insights into the role of both the planning rhetoric associated with a new urban village and the meanings attached to the lifeworld of the residents in their health practices. A total of 214 contributions to the blog were made by the residents, with the analysis and findings highlighting implications for urban design and health promotion research and practice.

Keywords: blog; urban informatics; health communication; internet research methodology; master-planned community

Introduction

The internet has advanced to become the prime communication medium that connects many threads across the fabric of everyday life. The increasing ubiquity of internet services and applications has led many scholars to question the dichotomy between cyberspace and real space. New media and information and communication technology afford an increasingly seamless transition between mediated and unmediated forms of interaction (Boase et al., 2006; Foth & Hearn, 2007; Mesch & Levanon, 2003; Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002). Emails are sent to friends at work to organise a night at the movies. Responses are received via email. After work on the way home, SMS (short message service) texts are exchanged to agree on the genre, film and venue. At home, friends might communicate last minute change of plans via instant messengers. And at the venue, they find each other without the need for a dedicated meeting place – a mobile phone call typically starts with the question: “Hey, where are you?”

The majority of emails, SMS texts and phone calls connect people who are proximate to each other (Wellman, 2001). Communication partners are most often collocated in the same physical area which is large enough to allow for socio-cultural diversity but small enough to be traversed easily by means of public or private transport. Additionally, the density of urban space increases. In 2006, the global share of people living in cities has grown larger than the share of people living outside cities in rural and remote areas. The continuing influx of residents into urban, peri-urban and metropolitan areas results in ecological and socio-cultural challenges. Governments at all levels are aware that the continuation of a low density urban sprawl is not sustainable and are looking at information and communication technology (ICT), and specifically the internet as the nervous system of the city (Townsend, 2008, in press), for answers. Urbanisation has global economic relevance and compact city policies are being developed and implemented in capitals around the world to deal with population pressures and urban expansion.

Urban informatics is an emerging cluster of people interested in research and development at this intersection of people, place and technology with a focus on cities, locative media and mobile technology. The research approach discussed in this chapter is designed to produce empirical evidence to help us analyse and better understand the impact of the digital and physical design of the built environment on the health and well-being of urban residents. In this chapter we describe how we expand the conventional toolbox of research methods (such as surveys, focus groups and interviews) to now also include internet research methods. We highlight how the results of the analysis of data collected via a blog allowed us to understand and traverse urban social spaces.

Internet Research Methods

With the growing popularity of the internet and associated new media applications, scholars such as Jones (1999) – the Founding President of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) – came up with research methods for studying internet use and online behaviour. Miller and Slater (2000) present how an ethnographic approach helped them understand the political economy of the internet in Trinidad and Tobago. And similarly, Hine (2000) proposes ‘virtual ethnography’ as a way to study the social aspects of information provision and consumption on the internet. She later followed up with a volume which presents a set of virtual methods to examine social science research on the internet (Hine, 2005) which echoes the efforts of Jankowski et al. (2008, in press) in the context of new media research. Ethnography is also the underpinning principal method of choice for Howard (2002) in his attempt to explore organisational forms built around new media and the internet.

These examples have in common that they are concerned with researching the internet per se. And similarly, newer new media such as mobile phones have also sparked creative re-appropriations of research methods to understand their use and embeddedness in work and lifestyle contexts (Hagen et al., 2005). However, only relatively recently have internet-enabled or internet-supported research methods been receiving a wider level of attention and acceptance by academia beyond the core group of ‘internet researchers’. Internet research methods run on the internet but an increasing number of scholars appreciate that they are not limited to the internet as a subject or an epistemological field of study. They can in fact be employed to elicit responses from any study participants who prefer to interact and engage with the study online. Yet, the research questions are not necessarily about the internet. Dillman (2007) for example, has translated and further refined the traditional survey instrument into an online delivery mode. Dutton et al. (2006) discuss their experience of conducting social research with participants who co-exist in digital worlds and consider the challenges and opportunities that require a multidisciplinary engagement of research expertise and tools.

The use of blogs – short for, web logs – for the collection of research data from study participants has only recently been discovered although journals and diaries have long been used to store field notes and participant observations. Blogs enable a more participatory and real-time means to write up notes and research responses. Their use has been described in health and education as well as business contexts (Boulos et al., 2006; Bruns & Jacobs, 2006; Lee et al., 2006). Here we discuss the use of a blog for the purpose of encouraging urban residents of a master-planned community site to talk about their lifestyle choices and the

impact these choices have on their health and well-being. Before we delve into the main discussion, we present our case study site.

The Case of an Urban Village Development

The Kelvin Grove Urban Village (KGUV) is the Queensland Government's flagship urban renewal project. Through its Department of Housing, and in partnership with Queensland University of Technology, this 16 hectare master-planned community (see Figure 1) seeks to demonstrate best practice in sustainable, mixed-use urban development. By 'linking learning with enterprise and creative industry with community', the KGUV (www.kgurbanvillage.com.au) is designed to evolve as a diverse city fringe neighbourhood. Situated 2 km from Brisbane's CBD, it is based on a traditional village design, with a town centre and shops on the main streets. Since planning for the Village started in 2000 and construction started in 2002, AUD 1 billion have already been committed to deliver a heterogeneous design that brings together infrastructure with educational, cultural, residential, health, retail, recreational and business facilities within one precinct.



Figure 1: Aerial shot courtesy of the Kelvin Grove Urban Village development team

The following numbers and statistics illustrate the progress and development trajectory of the KGUV:

- When completed, there will be over 8,000 sqm (GFA) of retail space and in excess of 82,000 sqm (GFA) of commercial space located throughout KGUV.
- In 2007, there are 375 residential units (including 7 townhouses and 155 affordable housing units) in the KGUV. This is anticipated to exceed 1,000 two-bedroom equivalent units once the Village is complete (including student and senior accommodation).
- In 2007, there are 10,800 students and 1,800 staff based at the Kelvin Grove campus of QUT, and a total of 1,663 students and approx. 150 staff at Kelvin Grove State College.

Our diverse research interests are positioned under the collective umbrella of ‘New Media in the Urban Village’. The Department of Housing acknowledges that the strategic design of the built environment and access to the ICT infrastructure are necessary but not sufficient neither to ensure ‘effective use’ (Gurstein, 2003) nor ‘social sustainability’. Therefore the master plan calls for the research and development of appropriate interventions, measures and systems which can provide mechanisms to help link the people and businesses that ‘live, learn, work and play’ at the KGUV, including residents of the KGUV and nearby areas (including affordable housing residents, seniors and students); university staff and students living or studying in the KGUV and nearby areas; businesses and their customers; and visitors. Our suite of research projects are aimed at responding to this call. We now introduce the main research methodology of one of these studies that forms part of this program of research – a study to produce insights into the impact of urban living contexts on lifestyle, health and well-being.

Data Collection with a Blog

A blog was set up entitled ‘The Effects of a New Urban Context on Health’ (located at <http://theeffectsofanewurbancontextonhealth.blogspot.com/>) as an online, qualitative data collection mechanism for gathering information about the everyday, local influences on the amount of physical activity residents achieve in this new urban neighbourhood. It contained five posts by the researchers which were comprised of photographs of the Village, questions for participants to answer about their lifestyles and activities in this neighbourhood, as well as links to other websites on urban life and physical activity. One of the key goals of the research was to tap into the everyday lives and situations of the Brisbane Housing Company

(BHC) residents, a lower socio-economic demographic living within the village. It is well-documented in the public health research that lower socio-economic living contexts, such as households and neighbourhoods appear to exert a powerful influence on the types of health-related behaviours that can be observed there (Dunn & Cummins, 2007; Monden et al., 2006; Parkes & Kearns, 2006) with lower socio-economic environments being significantly connected with lower amounts of physical activity and poorer health (Galea et al., 2007; Giles-Corti & Donovan, 2002; Kavanagh et al., 2005; Wright et al., 2007).

The Blog as an Internet Research Tool

A blog is a form of website that is typically used as a personal diary or log, with entries and postings made primarily by the author of the blog. The appeal of the blog is said to be due to the creation of a space where people can ‘express their opinions and views on different topics without fear of censorship’ (Bachnik et al., 2005, p. 3179) and have been found to ‘generate a sense of community’ among people with shared interests (Nardi et al., 2004). Some of the many reasons for blogging include documenting one’s life, a commentary, catharsis, a muse, and as a community forum. Blogs have been used among academic and research communities to share experiences and processes, or to share knowledge or resources, such as the case of a blog created for learning and sharing knowledge about research methods (Giarre & Jaccheri, 2005, p. 2716), or to investigate how a blog aided collaboration in learning about health impact assessments amongst practitioners and researchers (Harris-Roxas et al., 2006). However, little has been written about the potential for blogs to provide an online location for the collection and storage of qualitative data. While the blog is a recognised, valid way of communicating in business, art and research contexts (Bruns & Jacobs, 2006; Fischer, 2001; Herring et al., 2004), we found no examples of research that used a blog as a *data collection tool* in our review of the literature. In noting the rarity of blogs in research generally, it is widely established that email is now recognised as a useful digital mechanism for gaining in-depth information on various research topics (Meho, 2006).

The ‘Effects of a New Urban Context on Health’ blog was set up to act as an interface between the real-time, everyday lived experiences in the Kelvin Grove Urban Village, and the reflective contemplations and insights created by the residents about their neighbourhood. This online communication mechanism provided a way to collate individual, online contributions to our research questions within an open, visually accessible, community-centred forum. It gave participants an opportunity to write their own stories, opinions, and answers in a shared, virtual space where they were able to view anonymous input from other residents; and from where we could view and study their answers as a collective. Further, this gave the participants a quiet and reflective space in which to scribe accounts of physical

activity in the urban environment without the often complicated dimension of group dynamics and social or communicative noise present in face-to-face communication. It offered a unique opportunity to create a cyber-communal response to everyday life in the Kelvin Grove Urban Village by bringing people together online to generate a rich descriptive profile of the neighbourhood from different residential perspectives.

Study Participants

Only KGUV residents who occupied the Brisbane Housing Company (BHC) units were selected for participation in the study. Earning less than AUD 25,000 per year, BHC residents live in government supported, 'affordable housing' buildings in KGUV. The BHC residents were categorised as 'lower socio-economic' via both housing type and income. BHC residents who had indicated their willingness to participate in further research on the surveys mailed out for the quantitative phase of this research project were contacted by telephone, with 16 BHC residents accepting our invitation to participate in the research.

Access and Ability to Use the Internet to Generate Data

Due to the lower socio-economic demographic being studied in this internet research project, we anticipated a lack of access amongst participants to the technologies required to run the blog. The majority of participants did not have a computer in their own homes due to their poor financial situations, and were provided with laptops from the nearby university library. Participants were given assistance to set up the laptops and connect to the internet using the university's dial-up mechanism to avoid access fees by the local internet service provider. Brief instructions were given on how to post comments in response to the photographs and questions on the blog, and participants were encouraged to write as much, and as openly and candidly as possible. It was explained to participants that their answers were confidential, as they were assigned numbers as usernames on the blog that did not identify them in any way.

Procedure

Participants contributed to the blog over a six month period (July to December 2006) by addressing questions posted by the researchers about their relationship between their living context and their physical activity levels. The blog was divided up by posts into the following four themes:

- 1. Moving into a New Urban Environment*
- 2. Depth of Engagement with Neighbourhood Resources*
- 3. The Social and Psychological Aspects of Physical Activity*

4. Self, Health and Space: What moves you?

While themes one to three focused on questions about how the built environment and social and communicative processes influence their physical activity levels, the fourth post offered a space for free comments, opinions, incidence reports, and networking opportunities within the neighbourhood. For example, residents suggested activities that they were interested in pursuing to see if others responded, and to form walking groups and social gatherings offline. While the questions on each post were specific, they were designed to be open and to act as a catalyst for broader responses to their use of the resources and infrastructure in the community, and to generate insights into the attitudes of this socio-economic demographic towards health more generally. Further, we were interested in the networks that formed on the blog, and whether these were pursued and maintained between neighbours following their online contributions. Figure 2 shows how one of the posts appeared on-screen.



For this post, I am interested in finding out the degree to which you are aware of what is available in your neighbourhood, and which resources you are most interested in using or accessing for physical activity.

Q1. Are you aware of the public transport options available to you from the Village, and do you use them? If so, which ones do you use and why?

Q2. Do you ever use the parks or BBQ areas to socialise, rest, play sport, care for children, exercise or any other reason? If so, how often? What is your opinion of the local KGUV parks and green spaces? How could they be improved to make you use them more?

Q3. Do you use any of the pathways or bikeways? If so, what do you use them for, and do you find that they help you to walk or exercise more than you could where you were living previously?

Q.4 Are you aware of any other health-related resources that are near to the Village or that will be available to you soon, eg health clinic, GP, gymnasium, pool etc. Do you think you are likely to use these kinds of resources? Why/why not?

Q5. Overall, would you say that KGUV is a place that promotes or allows physical activity for residents? If so, in what ways does it achieve this or not achieve this?

posted by Julie-Anne @ [6:47 PM](#) [80 comments](#)

Figure 2. Depth of Engagement with Neighbourhood Resources for Physical Activity

Analysis: From Data to Insights

As described in the previous section, the blog data were collected by a series of posts, each of which involved a discussion topic under which specific questions were arranged. The responses to the blog questions provide an example of the way they enable collective sharing of personal stories. The responses accumulated on the website provided an opportunity to examine the ways in which participants related their housing choices to specific aspects of their biography in a shared space. The work of Lefebvre, a social theorist concerned with human practices in urban spaces, was used as an analytical framework for understanding the utterances in terms of the relationships identified by him as central to the conceptualisation of the production of space. A central differentiation in his model is between “representations of space” and “representational spaces”. “Representations of space” refers to “conceptualised space: the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers...all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived”. “Representational spaces” on the other hand refers to “space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols”, and hence the space of the “inhabitants” and “users” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 38). In terms of this conceptual distinction the object of knowledge in the study of urban space ...

... is precisely the fragmented and uncertain connection between elaborated representations of space on the one hand and representational spaces..on the other; and this object implies (and explains) a subject – that subject in whom lived, perceived and conceived (known) come together in a spatial practice. (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 230)

The analytical model thus provides a context in which urban experience can be understood in terms of differential levels and kinds of power and constraint in the production of space and the relationships between them. Inequities in fields such as health and, specifically, the role of local uses of space, can then be understood as involving different configurations of these relationships. Through this analytical framework, the 214 contributions to the blog ‘The Effects of a New Urban Context on Health’ revealed a subjective portrait by residents of both *representational spaces* and *representations of space*. That is, it illuminated the relationship

between what their expectations were of this new urban neighbourhood in light of the media and promotional material describing what their lifestyles might look like there, versus their everyday lived experiences and interactions with the physical and social aspects of design there.

The data provided insights about the social connections that had already formed in the community, as well as varying degrees of participation by residents in the events and services available with implications for health. The blog gave a chronological portrayal of residents' choices and intentions regarding their health and lifestyles as they moved in and adjusted to a new environment, their current activities, and their future intentions for their lives at KGUV. It also highlighted the ways in which they engaged with the marketing rhetoric around the concept of a 'new urban' environment, such as discourses around co-location with other services, and how this shaped their expectations of what life would be like moving to the KGUV. The following quote from the blog illustrates how their expectations of the place were shaped around the marketing rhetoric that accompanied this new urban development:

'I think the Village will promote physical activity as it is a new concept in living so I am looking forward to new ideas'

'The Village appears to promote a healthier lifestyle through its advertising promotions.'

Their comments about physical activity reflect both the degree to which they feel encompassed in a community that promotes, or comes 'pre-packaged' with incentives for more active lifestyles, and an assessment of their own ability to achieve this, given their individual constraints and circumstances. The data generated in response to the questions posted on the blog produced relatively pointed and focused responses, and this has been attributed to the lack of prompting or encouragement ordinarily given in face-to-face communication, and the amount of time participants had to reflect upon, and edit their answers. This data was delivered in a 'clean' and somewhat manicured form, and would require additional qualitative methods to further unpack the answers given in this online forum or obtain more in-depth responses.

However, the data produced in the fourth post '*Self, Health and Space: What moves you?*' gave rise to more open and uninhibited communication and interactions, wherein residents were vocal about some of the challenges they faced living in government supported housing, and their desires to create a more grass-roots community response of groups that met the needs and interests of different sub-groups within the BHC demographic. Social networks were inspired and established, and pursued off-line following contributions to this post,

including a walking group, and a series of morning-teas and community barbecues. The way in which the participants embraced the technology and used it to suggest ideas for a better quality of life there, and to connect with other residents, indicates the potential for ICT to be used in future action research concerned with the health and well-being of target demographics.

The key findings included an illustration of some of the individual and household barriers to pursuing a more active and healthy lifestyle, such as caring-roles, disability, illness, and fear of living alone.

'I have arthritis in both knees and find movement is restricted at times but feel better after exercise.'

'I am unable to leave Ted unattended even to take a quick walk around our pathways.'

'I would exercise, but I am too scared of what will happen to me out walking by myself.'

A general hostility and cynicism towards mass-media health promotion on physical activity was exposed, with residents expressing a preference for community interventions and opportunities that matched their circumstances and their neighbourhood resources.

'No. TV does not sell me on anything. I think there is too much said about diets and exercise.'

'I am not usually prone to just accept because TV or papers tell me this or that will benefit my health wise or physically.'

Aspects of the design principles inherent within *New Urbanism* were praised by participants, who expressed an appreciation for being close to a number of desirable destinations, including Brisbane CBD, having access to green spaces, and wide path and bikeways, and being in close proximity to what they referred to as 'respectable' venues such as the local theatre and university.

'The difference in living in a university area at the Village is the educational value.'

'I use the BBQ area to socialise with my neighbours. I love the Victoria park, if you walk there at night is it wonderful sightseeing, you can see the beautiful city.'

'I like the parks surrounding the area because they are so gorgeous and I feel comfortable and satisfied with the air. I just walk around and sit down and with the other people resting there.'

All of these factors contributed to increased confidence in the neighbourhood and a greater propensity to walk in local areas. However, the blog also revealed the complex social challenges living amongst other poorer people with similar difficulties and constraints, and this aspect of the data has implications for both urban designers and health promotion experts.

'Our neighbour next door – you couldn't wish to meet a nicer couple. And the lass with the baby she is fine now that the baby has a cot, but before she was crying alot. The smokers drive us mad, because they are chain smokers. And we had to call the police because a man was throwing shoes at our louvres at 4am in the morning. Most of our neighbours are good.'

What the blog revealed was an ongoing response to the physical and social aspects of a neighbourhood by a poorer demographic with implications for health and well-being. The data from the blog contains a collective narrative that is useful for a range of disciplines interested in the complex and highly inter-connected relationships between people and their urban living environments.

Conclusion

The use of a 'blog' as an online mechanism for the collection of qualitative data in a new urban setting was an effective means for gaining insight into the everyday responses of residents to their living environment in ways that affect their lifestyles and health. The different ways in which residents engaged with the resources in their neighbourhood and interacted with neighbours, as well as their responses to a master-planned community with specific lifestyles pre-packaged in the marketing rhetoric profiling the Village were captured and revealed in the comments and discussions posted on the blog. Uninterrupted logs and stories were scribed by participants, while still being able to 'hear' the views and insights of other residents regarding their everyday lived experiences in the Village since moving there. The shared virtual space gave a rich profile of different perspectives from residents about the kinds of interactions, social processes and engagements with resources such as health services, retail outlets, artistic venues, and public spaces they had undertaken in the time they had lived in the Village. In this sense, the blog as a specific kind of online forum provided access to the offline worlds of these residents offering crucial insights into their experiences and perspectives in relation to the represented space of KGUV. Further research is needed that employs data collection instruments on the internet as both a means for gaining in-depth insights into social contexts and urban settings, and as a type of action research wherein one can observe the networks and connections that form online in ways that both unveil and influence offline practice.

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