

Available online at www.jmle.org

The National Association for Media Literacy Education's
Journal of Media Literacy Education 5:1 (2013) 362-363

Professional Resource:

Net Locality: Why Location Matters in a Networked World (2011)

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Net Locality: Why Location Matters in a Networked World by Eric Gordon and Adriana de Souza e Silva. (2011). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Location-based services, such as Foursquare, Google Latitude, and Facebook Places, ask users to share information about where they can be found. In their book, *Net Locality: Why Location Matters in a Networked World*, Eric Gordon and Adriana de Souza e Silva describe how these and other location-aware technologies are impacting the ways people learn, socialize, and change institutions, communities, and spaces. However, the authors argue, “as people become more comfortable with letting devices track their longitude and latitude coordinates” (11), they open themselves up to commercial and political surveillance.

Media literacy educators will find *Net Locality* accessible and useful as a tool to help students navigate this new hybrid landscape. The authors write, “This book is about an emerging form of location awareness we call *networked locality* (or net locality). It is about what happens to individuals and societies when virtually everything is located or locatable” (2). And, as the authors explain, location-based services are also quite profitable:

Location-based services (LBS) comprise the fastest growing sector in web technology businesses with a forecasted profit growth from \$515 million in 2007 to \$13.3 billion in 2013 (ABI Research, 2009). And within LBS, personal navigation—services that allow users to access and share location and information with friends—is the fastest growing area. (9)

Gordon and de Souza e Silva discuss how this growth indicates a larger trend towards user personalization and control of digital information within geographic

locations. This convergence of virtual and physical engagement has also influenced how youth and adults learn to “access, analyze, create, reflect, and act” (Hobbs 2010, 12) in networked localities.

The first part of the book begins with a history of social mapping and geographic information systems (GIS) to show how the rise of geolocated information provides both “the context and content for social interaction” (Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011, 28). For example, mobile social networks, such as Dodgeball (now Google Latitude), allow users to broadcast their physical locations to, and receive digital updates from, nearby friends. GPS (Global Positioning Systems) enabled phones have made it possible for game developers to design new location-based services that let people hide and find information in physical spaces through the use of “geocaching” (65).

In chapter 4, Gordon and de Souza e Silva explain that mobile users alter actual locations as they introduce networked information within urban spaces. Drawing from environmental psychology, sociology, and critical theory, the authors provide a theoretical framework to help readers understand how our virtual lives are increasingly influencing our behaviors in and beliefs about physical spaces. And, as the authors argue, public spaces should assist users in being able to use digital tools to engage in civic life (102). Net locality also symbolizes the technological affordances that enable youth and adults to gain an awareness of how local, state, national, and global politics impact their local social settings. For example, in chapter 5 the authors ask, “How does net locality motivate civic action? How does it invest people in their neighborhoods and in their communities? And, importantly, what are the threats associated with it in terms of ossifying existing gaps in information?” (106). To answers these

questions, Gordon and de Souza e Silva illustrate how digital media tools are activating civic engagement.

“Participatory Chinatown” is one example in the book that shows how online games can help players use “networked information, role-play, and immersive visualizations” to “create meaningful experiences based in, and organized around, physical location” (117). As the authors explain, the game provided community members in Boston’s Chinatown with an opportunity to assist local officials and urban planners in designing more meaningful community projects. From immersive visualizations to hyperlocal news sites and government 2.0 platforms, Gordon and de Souza e Silva show in *Net Locality* how residents can use digital networks to become more connected to their local communities. As a result, mobile and location-based services are shifting users’ expectations about how local, state, and federal governments should (or should not) engage with their citizenry.

In chapter 6, Gordon and de Souza e Silva discuss the privacy and security implications of an increasingly location-aware society. The authors explain that the “paradox of net locality” is defined by the “personalized relationship to a physical location that at the same time threatens and secures one’s control of physical spaces” (134). Gordon and de Souza e Silva argue that while the media often emphasize stories about our loss of privacy, they pay less attention to the ways in which location-based technologies blur “the distinction between public and private” (143). As a result, the authors suggest that people are having a more difficult time perceiving just how much control they actually have, or do not have, over their personal information in networked environments.

Net Locality shows why location still matters in the digital age. In chapter 7, the authors describe this phenomenon by first reviewing how 1990s-era commentators proclaimed that the emergence of the World Wide Web made “physical distances irrelevant” (155). Using Castells (2000) work as an example, the authors explain how many people during this time believed that the value of localities depended on their ability to “belong to and exchange information with a global information network” (155). However, as Gordon and de Souza e Silva detail in great length, the local is increasingly impacting global information flows, as the example of Geocaching (<http://www.geocaching.com/>) makes clear. The authors then take readers on a brief tour of location-based technologies in Japan and China to underscore the ways in which net localities remain

specific to the geographic areas in which they exist. The use of location-aware tools by political protesters in Tiantongyuan, Manila, and Tehran are provided as recent examples to show how net locality can have a powerful impact on the world.

The book concludes with a final chapter that explains why technological infrastructures, such as 4G networks, as well as social infrastructures, or “the social context of technology use” can help people to understand how net localities “shape one’s experience of space and social life” (178). In addition, Gordon and de Souza e Silva remind readers that local knowledge and culture will continue to play an important role in helping youth and adults learn to make sense of the convergence of networked information within virtual and physical spaces. Media literacy educators should find *Net Locality* to be an instructive guide for helping students to navigate the technological and social aspects of mobile and location-aware devices.

References

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