

Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association

Volume 2009 *Proceedings of the 67th New York State
Communication Association*

Article 3

5-6-2012

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Recommended Citation

Geyer, Victoria; Allison, Mary Ann PhD; Berman, Suzanne N.; and Gumpert, Gary (2010) "Roundtable Discussion Examining Ritual, Technology, and Community in Urban Communication," *Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association*: Vol. 2009, Article 3.

Available at: <http://docs.rwu.edu/nyscaproceedings/vol2009/iss1/3>

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Roundtable Discussion Examining Ritual, Technology, and Community in Urban Communication

**Mary Ann Allison, Suzanne Berman, Susan Drucker,
Victoria Geyer and Gary Gumpert**

Pervasive technologies that now exist in the urban setting have greatly improved the ability to connect on a macro-level, but have minimized the intimate shared experience of community on a micro level. This paper explores how technology has changed rituals within the global community and has contributed new methods to the process of human interaction. Technology's influence on civic engagement, business meetings, shopping and socializing are examined to assess the impact technology has on human connections.

The study of urban communication is based on the notion that cities are inherently about people communicating. In recent years the city has been brought to the center of communication scholarship so that urban/suburban/rural issues are seen through the prism of communication.

This work utilizes established communication studies approaches and methodologies to examine cities as communication spaces, places and texts (Drucker and Gumpert, 2008). There is evidence that the rapid development of technology is lessening the meaningful exchange traditionally found in interpersonal communication in the urban setting. This is witnessed by the breakdown found in the inherent desire one has for recognition in their community. Because of this deterioration of meaningful social exchanges in the public sphere, new communication networks have emerged enabling large numbers of people to interact and connect, providing a new definition of the ritual of recognition. These new technologies have found ways to bring individuals together that create a more empowered voice that can influence change when introduced into the public sphere. With the convergent use of traditional and digital communication methods, the intersection of traditional and online human communication experience has been discovered.

In examining urban communication, the rituals of traditional geographic community and the newer virtual multimedia-constructed communities coexist and can define one another. James W. Carey's, emphasis on rituals of communication reflect a cultural approach to communication. With the repetition of ritual people are bound together, identity forged, traditions created and maintained and community formed.

The Role of Ritual—Gary Gumpert

The daily ritual of shopping poses a good example of the breakdown of social behavior in the urban setting. From the cold technology of the bar codes that are imbedded onto every

merchandised item, from individual oranges to any small or large purchases, the social connection of shopping is lost. The intimacy of shopping has surrendered to mammoth emporia and sullen cashiers unable to count, who mindlessly swipe away at the zebra-like bar codes and let the computer itemize and total the transaction for them. The cashiers are unwilling to speak, except to mumble the formulaic, "Have a nice day." There is no time or reason to talk, even for the lonely.

Daily shoppers in the U.S are often limited to the impersonality of superstores, as the smaller more intimate places of daily convenience dwindle. But for many other cultures there is an expected ritual associated with shopping as presented in Julia Child's *My Life in France*.

The French are very sensitive to personal dynamics, and they believe that you must earn your rewards. If a tourist enters a food stall thinking he's going to be cheated, the salesman will sense this and obligingly cheat him. But if a Frenchman senses that a visitor is delighted to be in his store, and takes a genuine interest in what is for sale, then he'll just open up like a flower. "The Parisian grocers insisted that I interact with them personally; if I wasn't willing to take the time to get to know them and their wares, then I would not go home with the freshest legumes or cuts of meat in my basket"(p. 75). In southern France there are unspoken rituals associated with entering the butcher's establishment, the grocery, and *boulangeries* (bakeries) in smaller towns. People are expected to greet one another and interact at least on a superficial level.

In a Tokyo department store a more formal greeting is extended to all the customers upon daily opening whereby they are greeted by a group of young women, carefully coifed and dressed, bowing to the awaiting crowd. The customers are guests welcomed into the store by the representative of the management.

Similarly, in small stores throughout France, a small sign is affixed to the door saying "*entre libre*." The translation is ambiguous ranging from "enter freely," to "enter without charge." But why is it necessary to proclaim the obvious—that the customer is invited into the store? One interpretation is that potential customers need to be aware that they are guests of the establishment. It is the disequilibrium of being a guest that is essential to establishing the proper relationship between customer and proprietor. It is a matter of turf. In order to feel at ease, to feel oddly at home in a shopping environment, it is necessary to distance oneself from being too close, to not confuse ritual from reality.

Back in the village however, the transaction, be it the buying of a loaf of bread or a bottle of wine, is concluded with expected pleasantries once again. The relationship is opened and closed between the lilting exchange of *phatic* communication—communication that sets the tone and sense of sociability allowing for more purposeful communication. There is a sense of comfort in the rituals of shopping that transforms a transaction into something more—a transaction packaged, enveloped into an atmosphere of civility.

Rituals of Recognition: traditional and new—Susan Drucker

In rural, or even suburban environments, in which populations are smaller, one might expect a degree of recognition, interaction and familiarity. However, in urban settings, what are the rituals of recognition? In order to achieve recognition they seem to require more work in a large city. Recognition in urban areas can simply exist with the nod of the head in Paris, or even the Barista at Starbucks in New York who recalls the uniqueness of one's specific order. These simple acts of recognition help add to a sense of place attachment.

Attachment is based upon on an undeniable emotional and physical bond between person and place inherent in the concept of place attachment (Low and Altman, 1992). The literature of people/environment studies emphasizes the significance a person's sense of identity and is associated with a sense of belonging to a place, of place making, and place attachment. James Carey's view of ritual and communication is significant with regard to urban communication. If the archetypal case of communication under a transmission view is the extension of messages across geography for the purpose of control, the archetypal case under a ritual view is the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality.

These "rituals of recognition" certainly draw people towards a sense of community. Innovative Danish architect Jan Gehl has emphasized the significance of the spaces between buildings and opportunities to "meet our fellow citizens face to face and experience directly through our senses"(Gehl, 1987). Gehl's work supports the notion that public space functions as a medium of communication by suggesting that the three purposes of public spaces are: meeting, market and connection. All of which support the rituals of recognition and attachment. Yet, the role of media connection in the lives of those inhabiting physical spaces is often neglected. Of increasing significance is the issue of what effect does the media saturation of modern day life have on rituals of community. Technology has afforded masses the ability to connect on the macro level, yet the personal intimacy of one-on-one communication is minimized.

Increasingly, lives are lived disconnected from place. Place is disconnected from communication behavior. Our experience and perception of space is changed through our experience of mobile and wireless networks (Willis, p. 11). An individual's state of consciousness can be redefined through media use and in so doing, there is a remaking of the person/environment relations in urban settings. Mobile media of communication have the capacity to alter perceptions of time and place. The term 'presence' is used to describe the feeling of being in a situation. Media use can distribute the experience of presence between parallel interactions, creating absent presence in the face-to-face interaction, as presence is diverted to the media interaction. Blascovich (2002) defines presence as "a psychological state in which the individual perceives himself or herself as existing within an environment" (p. 129). Presence when online, or in phone space, reduces presence in physical environment in which one may be interacting with people, or the physical environment, which is co-present (Rettie, p.21). Gergen (2002) described this phenomenon by the term "absent presence" (p. 227). Mobile phones provide the

quintessential medium encouraging “absent presence” as one moves through the urban environment.

Physical spaces are now augmented by ubiquitous and pervasive mobile computing and wireless connectivity. These media filled spaces are experientially different physical environments. The introduction of media into physical public spaces brings with it remarkable change in our experience of space (Willis, 2008, p. 11). In public spaces, walks down the street, sitting on the bus, or grabbing a strap on the subway is a routine of ritualistically entering an acoustic environment of choice severed from surroundings.

Divergent rituals characterize communicative behavior in cities. The more one can connect, the more one can also disconnect. Humans need interaction, connection, and community. Urban communication rituals can fulfill those needs. The outstanding question is whether the rituals of recognition or rituals of detachment (and connection of choice) are preferred to fulfill those fundamental and very human needs.

Shared Experience—Suzanne Berman

In today’s society, sense of place has moved from physical to virtual. The rituals of recognition and the human need to be part of a community still exist but the rituals have changed to accommodate mass interactions. Social networks are taking over as the new public space and social media like Twitter are increasingly shaping society’s shared experience. With social media there is increased collaboration, connection and sharing enabling people to be part of a community regardless of geography. Now community is virtual, built upon shared experience.

Before social media existed, shared experience was primarily shaped through the medium of television. Society enjoyed not only watching television together as a family but also enjoyed having similar shared experiences. Today, with the pervasiveness of computers and the Internet, social networks are taking over as the media with the greatest ability to impact the shared experience. Last June for example, 30% of all tweets on Twitter contained Michael Jackson, signifying a mass connection to this event. Twitter has the power to amplify a message with a function known as re-tweeting and by doing so, it elevates the importance and directs the masses to focus on that information.

Media theorist Jean Baudrillard foreshadowed a world where communication was influenced by network connectivity. “In this universe we enter a new form of subjectivity where we become saturated with information, images, events and ecstasies. Without defense or distance, we become a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence” (1987, p. 133). In the social media world, the shared experience is truly shared, a form of connectedness. The notions of privacy, subjectivity and inner thought are often replaced with voyeurism, transparency and overexposure of information.

Although Twitter makes a bad first impression with its brevity of thought, allowing only 140 characters per communication, Twitter can have positive influences on human interaction. Communication consultant, Lisa Reichelt coined the term “ambient intimacy” when referring to the positive effects of Twitter and described it as “an antidote to

loneliness, a type of social warmth” (2007). What has emerged in the social media environment, is a ritual of interaction built on the need for connection and dialogue. This point was illustrated in the 2008 Obama inauguration, which demonstrated the intensity of emotion brought on by sharing experiences online. “The Obama inauguration brought home that people all over the world were sharing their opinions and feelings. I was sharing this moment with everyone I knew even though I was sitting alone in my office” (Dybwad, 2009).

Technological networks have transformed many rituals within the business environment as well. Social networks have brought people together to work in more collaborative ways in what is now known as crowd-sourcing, whereby a request for information is sent out and then ideas and insights are collected in a network of shared thought. Utilizing Twitter in a conference brings in another level of engagement and opens up the meeting to more ideas and a wider audience from outside the room.

Social networks have transformed communications, news and personal interaction. They have expanded ways for interest-driven people to find real world connections, but more significantly, they have allowed for a public environment that is socially driven (Boyd, 2007). Fragmentation of content and conversation has disrupted the traditional notion of shared experiences. Where television events like landing on the moon, once marked our shared experience now mass interactions on Twitter define them. Despite this fragmentation, the need for rituals of interaction and engagement continue. Although new technology has significantly changed urban communication, it is still questionable as to whether or not it has reduced the need for physical interaction or merely enhanced the ability to locate people with shared interests online to then connect later with them offline.

Connection and Community—Victoria Geyer

Younger generations, also known as the millennial generation have grown up using social media to connect and communicate. The millennial generation feels comfort and shows ease communicating in digital space. Generational researchers categorize and label young people born in the 1980’s and 1990s as millennials, generation Y and generation next (Alsop, p. vi). According to The Pew Research Center, more than half of 18-25 year-olds have used social networking sites and more than two-thirds believe new technologies make it easier to find friends (Alsop, p.138). When younger generations log on to their laptop or smart phone and tune out of their physical community or space, what does this behavior do to the level of attachment to place both physically and virtually?

Today, in the urban neighborhood of Crown Heights, Brooklyn, there are young professionals edging into the neighborhood, many with the need to communicate—communicating online. In order to connect online, one must have the necessary hardware (smart phone or laptop) and resources (Internet connectivity) to communicate. In neighborhoods witnessing gentrification, such as Crown Heights, Brooklyn, this necessity for the hardware and software required to communicate only amplify underlying socio-economic issues already prevalent in the community. In Crown Heights not only is there a potential generational divide with the comfort-level of using online communication, but

there also exists a socio-economic divide between those who can afford the means to communicate online and those who cannot.

Despite the socio-economic divide inherent in technology access, the need for attachment remains strong. This communication and socio-economic divide is best examined by reviewing an issue that affects all Crown Heights residents—crime. Brooklyn has led all boroughs, since 2003 in the number of homicides. In 2009, the bloodiest block in Brooklyn was in the 77th precinct in Crown Heights (Lehren & Baker, 2009). Young newcomers to Crown Heights have turned to local blogs like Brooklynian.com to voice concern about crime in the area and discuss their personal safety online.ⁱ Topics on the Brooklynian.com message board for Crown Heights display posts from residents concerned with crimes such as shootings, drug dealings, police activity, and muggings. Accompanying these online discussions are interactive maps on Google and Gothamist.com (a local blog), which update crime activity in the borough of Brooklyn and particular neighborhoods, such as Crown Heights. Graphics on these maps indicate the location of a crime, and in some cases a brief description of the nature of the crime, allowing online users to locate crimes that happened in the community that otherwise go unreported by a very busy police precinct.

A post on Brooklynian.com from user “mockernut” demonstrates one’s curiosity of candles lit along a nearby sidewalk.

As I was walking along St. John’s Place Sat morning, on the block btwn NY Ave and Nostrand, I noticed that a row of white candles, the ones in tall glass jars, had been places lit all along the sidewalk, up against the gates of two row houses. Does anybody know if this was a memorial or had any special significance?ⁱⁱ

Posts specifically discussing crime in Crown Heights are active posts with many page views and lively discussion. Online posts display acts of concern for fellow neighbors, words of advice, or caution of witnessed crime. However, online posts also openly discuss issues residents are witnessing as a result of gentrification. Reading through the posts, it appears that young residents moving into Crown Height are from locations where there was less crime and a greater sense of personal safety. Meanwhile, long-time residents of Crown Heights have most likely witnessed a high crime rate over the last forty years and have unfortunately come to expect acts of crime in the community. While newcomers are demonstrating concern with engaged, lively discussion online, their long-standing neighbors may mistakenly view these young gentrifiers as apathetic and unattached towards the Crown Heights community. Long-standing residents do not physically see the young gentrifiers participating in the same place, or community. Instead, these newcomers, or gentrifiers are seen continuously connected to a different space, outside communities via their laptops and smart phones.

Many long-standing Crown Heights residents cannot hear the concerned discussions occurring online, simply because they lack the resources required to communicate online, or simply prefer the traditional one-on-one urban communication often found on one’s stoop. The divide between digital communication and traditional communication methods

helps construct misconceived perceptions of attachment to the community between long-standing residents and newcomers to the Crown Heights community.

The ability to organize and mobilize online can assist in helping motivate online users into offline action. But how is this done in a community with a distinct socioeconomic divide, one that drives resentment towards the “haves” and generating a fear of the “have nots”? In an attempt to start building a bridge between the online and offline conversation of crime in Crown Heights, New York State Senator Eric Adams provided an online response to an active discussion about a well-loved neighborhood old-timer who was murdered in the neighborhood. Adams addressed the online discussion, by asking for people on the Brooklynian.com site to stop blogging about crime in the neighborhood, and, instead, join a planned community board meeting to discuss stopping the violence. This call for action by Senator Adams recognizes that a true sense of community requires physical shared experiences, in order to bring community together. Adams’ attempt to bring an online community into a physical community demonstrates the need for the ritual of recognition and need for attachment.

Converged Engagement—Mary Ann Allison

Because digital technologies have the dual effect of distancing one from one’s physical community by filling one’s life with busyness, new social techniques are becoming increasingly prevalent. This need to connect in the physical sense is witnessed with the practice of “checking in” at the beginning of a meeting, gathering, phone or video conference. This behavior is a disciplined process in which each person in the group speaks for one to two minutes before the group proceeds to the purpose of the meeting. During the check-in, each person focuses on what is going on in his or her life and gives the group a brief update. This helps to set a shared context for the group and enables a more effective group presence. It also enables each person to acknowledge other events in his or her life and to place them in the background, generating more powerful attention for the meeting at hand. This process is a ritual that helps establish a physical sense of community or temporary place of attachment, while also providing needed rules of recognition for a shared group or community.

A second social technique being practiced in response to digital technology is the large number of social technologies being developed and used to facilitate in-person participatory governance and planning meetings in urban settings. As was clearly demonstrated during many of the *Town Hall* meetings recently convened in the United States to discuss health care, some meetings produce more positive outcomes than others, regardless of the level of agreement among those attending the meeting. There are many groups now actively testing and documenting various methods that enable people to discuss in a constructive way their differences while in a public forum. Examples include: America Speaks (US-based), the Public Conversations Project (US-based), the Art of Hosting (global), and the World Café (global). These attempts demonstrate the desire for converged practices of traditional and new rituals of communication and place.

Conclusion

Whether it is the social interaction of a shopping exchange in France or the sharing of experiences online, we continue to see the need for rituals within today's urban environment. So powerful is the need for human connection that it cannot be transplanted or replaced. Instead society adapts by finding new rituals that address the changing digital world. These social technique behaviors help illustrate new ways in which both online and physical community can converge and provide the need for the ritual of recognition and one's physical sense of attachment to community in both micro and macro levels of urban communication.

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Endnotes

- i Local blogs include: <http://ilovefranklinave.blogspot.com>, <http://www.brooklynian.com/forums>.
ii Retrieved September 10, 2009 from <http://www.brooklynian.com>