Urban Firewalls: place, space and new technologies in Figueres, Catalonia.

Abstract

Based on 15 months of fieldwork in the Catalan city of Figueres, Spain, my research investigates the social impact of new media in contemporary urban life. Focusing on local realities in response to global technologies, I ask: How do people situate websites, Facebook, email and mobile phones within a communicative framework that is continually evolving in crosscutting trajectories with other forms of paper, wired and wireless media? Are "Web 2.0" and "social media" truly anything new? Is the Internet a social tool or an ego-centric, individualizing entity? Is it bounded by traditional categories of social stratification like class, age, ethnicity and geography, or does it efface and transgress them?

Central to this thesis is a detailed analysis of the cultural landscape of Figueres, a small town unwittingly thrust into multiculturalism in recent years and now grappling with immense challenges for social integration. Concentrating on the construction of human spaces (place-making) as a process which inevitably traverses online and offline life, I reveal how old and new boundaries and borders between "us" and "them" are installed, protected and/or contested, and how technology maps onto the urban environment. The metaphor "Urban Firewalls", referring to insulated models of social interaction that have developed in Figueres, correlates symbolic fears and expectations of technology with actual spatial logics in the streets of the city.

The elusive placelessness of the web continues to cause profound practical and analytical issues within and beyond the social sciences. Through case studies of Catalan linguistic nationalism, communication patterns, the Internet, mobile phones, social networking sites and banal activism, I seek to overcome these difficulties by applying a multifaceted ethnographic and theoretical approach that envisages new technologies as symbolically and literally tethered to the ground. Overall, I aim to advance anthropological research into the impact of new media by challenging assumptions of inevitable change, reflecting instead on practical and pragmatic choices in an ethnically diverse locality struggling against lingering ghosts of the past and escalating fears of the future.

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