Digital disorientation and place

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Abstract
Digital technologies affect experiences of place in ways that are disorienting because they overwhelm us with information and images, bring into question what is real and what is fake, confuse real and virtual reality, and exacerbate extreme views about who belongs where. The consequences of this ‘digital disorientation’ might seem to be experienced as unremarkable and benign. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that these consequences include a digitally poisoned sense of place based on exclusionary attitudes paradoxically fostered in the echo chambers of non-place communities. Resisting this and its political manifestations will require finding ways to promote an open and inclusive digital sense of place that is necessarily grounded in the actual places of everyday life; that understands that digitally these actual places are both permeated by and reach out into distant times and places; and that embraces rather than denies difference.

Keywords
digital disorientation, electronic media, global village, sense of place, surveillance

When Tim Berners-Lee invented the world-wide-web in 1989 he imagined it, in his own words, as ‘an open platform that would allow everyone, everywhere, to share information, access opportunities, and collaborate across geographic and cultural boundaries.’ By 2017, he had come to realize that the web, although it was fulfilling part of that vision, was also presenting unanticipated challenges about online privacy, misinformation, polarized opinions and political manipulation that could lead to a digital dystopia (Berners-Lee, 2017). To prevent this and to reduce its current misuse he has proposed a ‘Contract for the Web’ between corporations, governments and individuals, coupled with a series of practical initiatives meant to redesign the web and to ‘make the online world a place worth being in’ (Berners-Lee, 2019). This is a grand and optimistic vision. My perspective is more humble and less hopeful. I look at the material world as well as the online world through the lens of place, and pay special attention to how experiences of the distinctiveness of place relate to social and technological contexts. The challenges of a possible digital dystopia are, I think, not problems of web design. They are the inherently disorienting consequences of how electronic and digital media affect sense of place.

There is substantial evidence that for many people, possibly a majority, connections with the places where they come from and currently live are a very important aspect of how they relate to...
the world (Relph, 2015). Given this, it seems unlikely to me that digital media would have been adopted so widely and enthusiastically (about half the world’s population are active users of the internet and social media) if they did not enhance place experiences, perhaps through online sharing of photos and experiences of places, or by making it possible to stay in touch with home while travelling. Furthermore, locative devices, such as smart phones that always know where you are, have already become invaluable ways to deliver geographically relevant information in situ (Wilken and Goggin, 2014). Nevertheless, it is also the case that digital media, in addition to challenges they present about online privacy and misinformation, affect experiences of place in ways that are disorienting because they overwhelm us with information and images, bring into question what is real and what is fake, confuse real and virtual reality, and exacerbate extreme views about who belongs where.

Because digital technologies are new (the first inventions were in the 1940s), it is possible that digital disorientation is a sort of teenage angst that will be resolved with time and technical fixes. Alternatively it could be an enduring side effect of what Virilio (2006) has described as life in ‘the age at the speed of light,’ where ideas of reality, time and space are turned on their heads, and ‘what cropped up yesterday, here and there, now happens everywhere at once’ (p. 6, 142). I am inclined towards the latter view, and this means that the origins of digital disorientation have to be understood as associated with electronic media in general and not just the digital version of them.

Electronic media and hybrid places

McLuhan (1964), my teacher on matters of media, argued that communications media are not neutral vehicles for conveying information, that how things are communicated is, in the long run, more important than what is communicated because all media extend human senses in space and time, carrying them further than voice and memory alone. The effect of each innovation in communications has been to transform societies, albeit over centuries, as its potential slowly makes itself apparent. The mechanical printing press not only made possible the mass production of books with linear print that ‘extended minds and voices’ in ways that gave rise to widespread literacy, but also made possible the enlightenment, colonialism, the development of science and the rationalism that underlies many of our current institutions (p. 23).

The invention of the telegraph in the 1840s ushered in an era of electronic communication that has been intensified by radio, television, computers, and, most recently, the web, social media and smart phones. Electronic media are radically different from previous forms of communication because they travel so fast, circling the globe in seconds, that they effectively compress space and time. McLuhan (1964) wrote (p. 19) that they turn the world back on itself, in ‘a global embrace’ in which ‘we everywhere resume person-to-person relations as if on the smallest village scale.’ They create an electronic version of preliterate societies, a global village where emotional engagement and participation prevail. He was not enthusiastic about this. While Tim Berners-Lee and other pioneers of digital media expected their innovations to promote collaboration, McLuhan’s view, expressed in the 1960s when digital technologies were in their infancy, was that electronic media produce discontinuity and division. ‘The global village’, he declared, ‘is a place of very arduous interfaces and very abrasive situations’ (cited in McLuhan and Staines, 2003: 265).

Electronic media are self-effacing in spite of their substantial social impacts. They pass through air and walls, run through buried cables, leave buildings standing, and surface in small devices such as phones and the little plastic bubbles of surveillance cameras. Except for relatively inconspicuous aerials and transmission towers, they don’t modify landscapes. By themselves they don’t seem to be the direct cause of anything; instead they combine with other technologies and infiltrate institutions to change behaviour and experiences. They ‘steal into places like thieves in the night,’ wrote
Meyrowitz (1985) in his book No Sense of Place (p. 117, viii); they convey the same message everywhere, and undermine the role of place in determining social relationships because electronic media mean that ‘where one is, has less and less to do with what one knows and experiences.’

Mitchell (2001), a professor of city planning, writing only fifteen years after Meyrowitz, came to a different conclusion. ‘In an electronically mediated, networked world,’ he wrote, ‘. . . places that have unique, irreplaceable non-transferrable advantages to offer will be the most desirable.’ The reason for this remarkable turnaround, which he rather dramatically called ‘the revenge of place,’ lies in the fact that in the intervening years the importance of place had come to be increasingly recognized and reinforced through heritage preservation, postmodern design and planning, and perhaps most remarkably through the acknowledgement by multi-nationals that the distinctiveness of place matters for business (Relph, 2016). Electronic media, in combination with contemporary shifts such as international migration and globalization, had indeed lifted social relations out of their local contexts, but they had also made everywhere a potential centre in a global economic network, and permeated places with influences and cultures previously distant from them. To borrow the term of sociologist Giddens (1990), places had been made ‘phantasmagoric,’ not so much erased as disconnected from their histories, turned into confusing tangles of distinctiveness, standardization and connection, then reconstituted as networked, hybrid amalgams where some place qualities were suppressed and others were enhanced.

That was not all. McLuhan’s remarks about discordance in the global village reflected his insights about the profound effects of new media on social change. In this view, the rational worldview that has generally prevailed since the invention of printing is based on convictions, mostly conveyed in print, about the value of reason and empiricism for science, law, politics and most institutions. It seems to be more than coincidence that since the invention of the telegraph this conviction had been slowly unravelling in fields as different as abstract art, quantum mechanics and philosophy. By the end of the 20th century the broad social effects of electronic communications, including the hybridization of place, were becoming apparent. In the 1990s popular digital media arrived into this social and epistemological upheaval and immediately began to accelerate the changes that carry digital disorientation in their wake.

**Digital disorientation**

A defining characteristic of digital media is that they are participatory. Participation undoes models of communication, whether print or television, which involve top-down control, editing, and more or less passive audiences. On the web anybody can have their say in a realm that ‘has no geography, no landscape. . .no distance,’ where social relationships are not based on place, and conventional rules of behaviour and responsibility do not necessarily apply (Weinberger, 2002: 8). The arduous and abrasive situations, discordance, speeding up, and phantasmagoric mixing of cultural memories that are symptoms of digital disorientation flourish in this quintessentially placeless environment. Then, because participants in the web are also inhabitants of the material world, these disruptions can come back to invade experiences of actual places.

One familiar instance of this is the continuous partial distraction associated with smart phones in public spaces, users talking to somebody elsewhere, scarcely aware of what is around them, a phenomenon Kleinman (2007: 2) describes as ‘displacing place.’ In itself this is an innocuous sign of a decline in attention to place, though there is evidence of an increase in head and neck injuries because people are walking into things or falling off curbs while texting (Povolotskiy et al., 2020). But smart phone use can become obsessive, even addictive. Some teenagers spend so much of their lives inside, talking and texting on phones, rather than outside experiencing others in real places, that it is thought to be contributing to an epidemic of teenage loneliness and suicide (Twenge, 2017).
‘Smart mobs,’ which consist of groups of people who don’t know each other yet act together because they respond compulsively to online memes about special attractions, are another symptom of unbalanced behaviour related to cell phone use (Rheingold, 2002: xii). When wild flowers bloomed for a few days in March 2019 in a remote valley in California, an online post led to tens of thousands arriving to take selfies (and incidentally trample the flowers). At a larger scale smart mob behaviour is partly responsible for tourists overwhelming destinations such as Venice and Barcelona because electronic media both privilege places that seem special and attractive, and make them more accessible to travellers through easy online booking and Airbnb rentals. As a result local residents are displaced or forced out by rising costs of housing, and destinations are diminished into backgrounds for crowds.

Smart mobs are a short-term version of so-called ‘non-place communities’ based on interests that transcend geographical and other boundaries. Versions of these have always existed, for example intellectuals who shared insights through letters and journals. However, the open and participatory character of the web has allowed some of the worst people to find one another and to conscript others into non-place communities that espouse unpleasant attitudes, including exclusionary and discriminatory beliefs about race, place and territory. These extreme views are amplified in the echo chambers and brewing tanks of social media, then shared among geographically scattered participants to surface in a poisoned sense of place.

Sense of place usually requires an acknowledgement of a balance between change and continuity, coupled with tolerance for differences. When this balance is upset and intolerance for differences increases, the result is a poisoned sense of place (Relph, 1997: 222). In a modest way this occurs in not-in-my-backyard attitudes that angrily reject any sort of change proposed for the neighbourhood, everything has to be kept as it is, new development can go somewhere else. At a regional or national scale it is revealed in the zeal that regards other places and people with contempt, invents place memories to reinforce exceptionalist convictions, and celebrates nationalist supremacy, xenophobia, and, at its extreme, ethnic cleansing. While poisoned place attitudes have a long history, their current resurgence has been facilitated through online non-place communities. All too frequently these attitudes have coagulated into violent acts in real places, committed by individuals who have made their motives explicit in online posts.

Most social, legal and political practices assume a reasonable, empirical and shared understanding about what constitute truth and reality. Digital media, however, make it easy for alternative beliefs to be constructed merely on the basis of feelings or idiosyncratic observations, and then for these contrived truths to be shared, no matter how empirically erroneous or politically obnoxious they may be. Research into the diffusion of information on Twitter has shown that on social networks false stories outperform accurate information on every subject – business, terrorism and war, science and technology, entertainment and politics (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Given the long tradition of fake places being made for political or commercial reasons – Potemkin villages, Main Street in DisneyWorld, Paris in China – it seems inevitable that digital falsehoods will invade places, perhaps through deepfake videos that offer apparently realistic accounts of ideologically distorted versions of historical events that never happened.

Zuboff (2019) characterizes the current phase of capitalism as ‘surveillance capitalism,’ in which large tech companies have claimed human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioural data that can be used to make money. Data from locative devices that record your location (on Android smart phones up to 300 times in 24 hours even with location history turned off) are particularly voluminous. These data are scoured and recombined by brokers seeking ways to target online advertising to the place where you live. This is facilitated by the pathologically overdeveloped memory of digital media, everything on file, no privacy, and, in the absence of right to forget legislation, every Google search remembered in perpetuity.
Digital surveillance is already commonplace in cities. Facial recognition is used in many cities in China, there are thought to be over 600,000 CCTV cameras in London, there are few stores in North America without security cameras. And surveillance capitalism is beginning to be explicitly incorporated into urban development. Sidewalk Labs, a subsidiary of Alphabet, the parent company of Google, proposed a comprehensive digital infrastructure as part of the redevelopment of a waterfront district in Toronto. Smart technologies would assess traffic, housing, health care, GHG emissions, and whatever other ‘urban data’ could be gathered in the city’s physical environment. The website stated: ‘. . .we’re creating a new type of place to accelerate urban innovation, with people-centred urban design. . . a beacon for cities around the world’ (Sidewalk Labs, 2019).

It is not surprising that groups concerned about privacy vigorously protested this proposal for a virtual panopticon, and it has now been abandoned. It would have been a devious disruption to sense of place because like most electronic and digital media it would scarcely be apparent in the urban landscape – there would still be streets, buildings and shops, public spaces and private homes. But for anyone who chose to pay attention and was not distracted by their own device or smart mobs, sense of place would be diminished by a nagging feeling that you were being watched and whatever you did might be a source of data that could be used to exploit you.

Conclusion

There is a rather rare psychological condition called ‘developmental topographic disorientation’ in which individuals, because of a lifelong condition or a traumatic injury to the brain, have selectively lost their ability to find their way around, even in very familiar surroundings such as their local neighbourhood or their own home (Aguirre and D’Esposito, 1999). This is effectively a lack of sense of place, with all its attendant confusions about not knowing where you are or how to relate to your surroundings, even if the landmarks are familiar.

Digital disorientation can be seen as a social version of topographical disorientation that is technologically rather than neurologically induced. In both cases the built structures of places are mostly unaffected. However, digital disorientation differs because its symptoms do not involve the loss of sense of place so much as substantial disturbances in the ways place is experienced that have unbalanced how we relate to the world. In a single generation digital media have eroded place-based social connections, turned distinctive localities into phantasmagoric nodes in global networks, promoted fakery, facilitated widespread surveillance and reinforced the extremism that poisons sense of place. They have sped up and compressed experiences of space and time, and pushed notions of reason, reality, truth, and personal privacy out of what were previously regarded as privileged and secure positions.

Place has been extensively co-opted into these digital disruptions because Wi-Fi, surveillance, locative devices, and increasingly the network of things, operate in and through the home, public spaces, shops, airports and almost everywhere. Sense of place is not being entirely lost as a result, but it is being buffeted and its character is shifting, made more fleeting, more conflicted, more distracted, more suspicious about possible fakery and more aware of constantly being watched. In spite of this, rather like Samuel Johnson kicking a stone to disprove idealism, I remain sufficiently a print-age materialist to hope that the solid reality of actual places can still serve as at least a partial antidote to the virtual disruptions of digital disorientation.

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