

Talking Places: how conversations are made from the locations

Eduardo Campos Pellanda, PHD

*Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (PUCRS), Brazil
eduardo.pellanda@pucrs.br*

Abstract

The rise of mobile communications had started a new kind of integration between physical spaces and virtual interactions. This combination had culminated in a social space of exchange among movable people that become smarter about the tangible space (RHEINGOLD, 2003). The ubiquity of mobile devices made it possible to be online and get information about the physical space, and the built-in camera inside cellphones helps individuals to capture and share what they are watching.

From this perspective, places start to change as they are more connected to information (MITTCHELL, 2003). The kind of ubiquity that mobile Internet has achieved is actually a new challenge for media producers to deal with because at the same time it is a chance to expand possibilities and it is also a problem to cover every block or street in the city. This results in a proliferation of user generated content (UGC) (GILLMOR, 2004) that is a treat and opportunity for traditional media.

This paper will use examples such as the Locast¹ platform and the Foursquare² social network system to investigate how geo information can transform the way that places can help to tell stories. The Locast is research project from Mobile Experience Lab at the MIT. The Civic Media version of the experiment is a partnership with the Media Communications Department of the PUCRS, located in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Foursquare is a location-based mobile platform that is rapidly expanding and now has 6 million users.

¹ <http://locast.mit.edu/>

² <http://foursquare.com/>

1 - Introduction

Mobile communication through devices such as mobile phones, smartphones, tablets or laptops, has changed the perspective of Internet access on systems that enable dialogue on social networks and connections to various contextualized information spaces. The perception of the virtual environment has been changed by connecting a physical context, geo-positioning in the realm of network (Pellanda, 2005). The antagonistic between the virtual and actual (Levy, 1996), in the first decade of commercial use of the Internet, was very marked by disconnection between the information in cyberspace and its reference to the geographical context. In a second stage of the Net, also called Web 2.0, conversations took on a greater extension of the decentralized model, all in all made possible by systems that enables interactions on social networks (RECUERO, 2009) with thousands of people. Systems like Facebook, Orkut and MySpace made conversations possible by contextual issues and interests.

At the beginning of mobile devices that enabled Internet browsing they were simply transposed and adapted to the smaller monitor and there was a limitation for processing information. With the development of these devices, the ability to view rich content has been expanded and also added geo-location systems using cell tower triangulation or GPS chips. These technologies allow a individual to be connected in a geographical context of information in the cyberspace. One of the clearest exponents of this technological convergence is the system of social networks Foursquare, which is pioneering a way of contextualizing the physical space. Apart from this item the network has elements of games and services in a synergy provided by junction of various technologies.

It was under this scenario involving mobile communications and its related uses that the Mobile Experience Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

(MIT MEL), coordinated by Prof. Federico Casalegno, decided to use the Locast³ platform to study Civic Media. Locast is partly mobile and in part a Web software program with which users can capture a video message (cast) and then upload it into the system with the GPS data attached. On an Internet website, users can view a map with clickable casts. This project was originally developed in conjunction with the Italian TV network RAI for use in tourism application programs in Venice.

In a partnership with the Media Communications Department of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul, located in Porto Alegre (PUCRS), Brazil, a new test of the platform was conducted in September 2009. At that time, the purpose of the project was to understand how a geolocated mobile media system could help communications in communities and the urban area. A media company, RBS, and a telecom company, TIM, also supported the project. The former involved its reporters in a project and the latter helped to provide Android cell phones and the network. During the initial 10 days of the project, 25 PUCRS students and 11 reporters were involved. Their initial objective was to collect different subjects from very specific topics like traffic reports or road conditions to more flexible time stories like interviews about neighborhood identities.

The research aimed to explore citizen media applied in the context of physical local as a tool to disseminate and encourage the social dynamics in different districts. Another purpose was to understand how social mobile networks impact in the city and the representation of urban space. Also, in this sense, to see how this tool helps people to keep informed, socially engaged and active participation in creation processes of the media, especially in connection with their communities. After the experiment, which lasted ten days, a series of individual interviews and group discussion with participants was made.

After the test, many participants were individually interviewed and also participated in-group discussions. The results were wide-ranging, from detecting that this platform could generate public topics that otherwise would not have much space in the traditional media to understanding that unedited mobile phone video footage could be perceived as more reliable in terms of credibility.

³ <http://locast.mit.edu/>

2 - Locast System

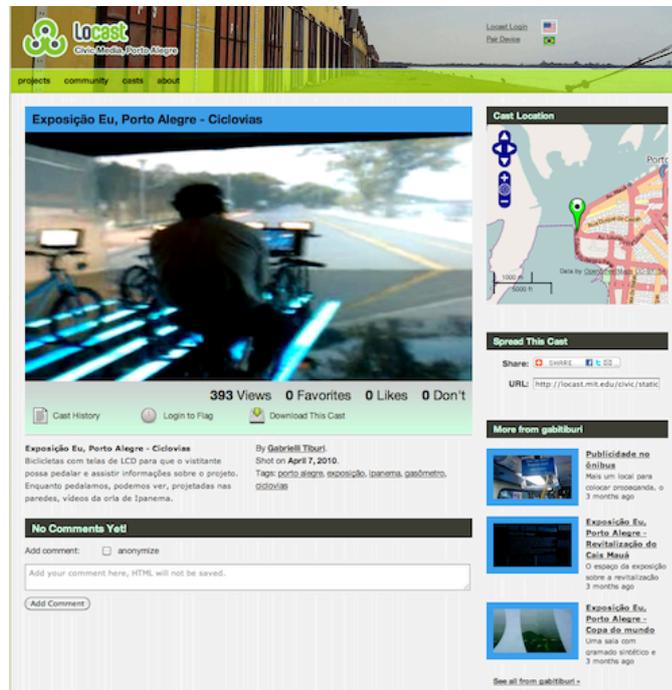


Figure 1

The platform consists of a website (Fig. 1) that contains the news that were updated by the phone or on the page itself. In the latter case, the update of the position is done manually. Linked with every news is a point on the map where these facts can be viewed in a graphical way. The individual can situate the events around them, which represents an alternative view of events, since usually the sites and blogs show the news in order to highlight the relevance of the fact or chronologically. The site also had the task of registering and managing users of the system.



Figure 2

Besides the site, the center of the platform is based on the mobile application (Fig. 2), which in this case, was developed in the Android operating system. The software has enabled the project participants to capture videos and upload them to the site with a text description and geographic location information captured by the GPS unit in the form of metadata. This story could be commented on and also be shared on the Facebook network. A Twitter profile has also been separately created and maintained by fellows of the project.

3 - Contents contextualized by places

On the first day of the experiment, was conducted a workshop to demonstrate the platform and create teams of two to work together. These teams received no instruction about what kind of information capture. This issue was planned and deliberate in order to understand what kind of subjects the project's members understand that is relevant to be shared on the platform.

After ten days of work, was observed several types of guidelines registered by the participants, from the most everyday like potholes in the streets and stories of

traffic jams up to coverage of events through others who sought more timeless tales of everyday life. In the case of the everyday information, it was interesting to note that even small incidents of the routine of a city such as Porto Alegre won a new environment with the location factor, for event such as closed roads or accidents are relevant to people who are geographically close. On the other hand, who is distant perhaps does not need to be aware of this fact. In the current context of a traditional website news article this type of classification is not feasible.

During this period, there was also one of the most severe storms the city of Porto Alegre, including taking classes at PUC University suspended due to blockade of urban roads. This was an unplanned agenda and just being targeted by several different kinds of visions for project members who were at different points of town. The mapping of this information resulted in a broad view of reports of various problems caused by this natural incident.

Another type of evidence was captured by a team that was interested in understanding the views of residents on a particular neighborhood. With the question: "This neighborhood is the heart of Porto Alegre?", The two members of the project accounts recorded on different perceptions of workplaces and housing of those citizens. This idea resulted in unedited short documentaries about different perceptions that many times had a clear line of thought among people of a particular region.

The company's professional journalists in RBS had Locast as an extension of current publishing platforms. The system was eventually used in the ten days of the experiment in two different ways. At first it was done to complement the traditional material, in some cases as a "making of" of the cover. In a second moment was used to capture some facts that would not have spaces in traditional channels. One goal of this integration with the company was testing how in one environment could cope content made by professionals and reports generated from the streets. This dual existence in a future open use of the system, and with a higher density of contributions, may be potentially rich for a distinctive design of the facts in the city.

One of the clearest exponents of mobile social networks is the system Foursquare, which is a linkage context of physical space. Beyond this aspect, the network has elements of games and services in a synergy provided by junction of various technologies.

The network was born in New York City in 2008, with the final public version in March 2009. In August 2010 the company already had 3 million people registered and active on the platform, and in January 2011 were already 6 million. Although there is a website with ability to edit connections and view the posts registered in the network are main interactions are made in applications for mobile devices like iPhone (Fig. 3), Android, and Blackberry.

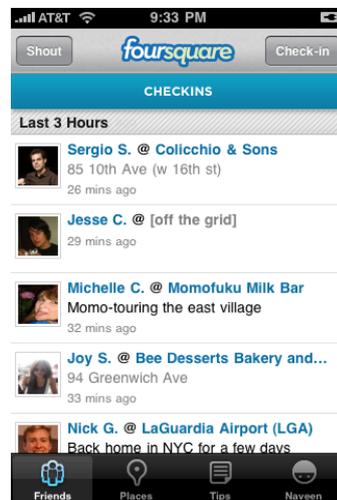


Figure 3

In these devices, the member performs check-in, or sign up to a certain place, that is in a database system that matches the geographic location where the individual is located with the place. The other components of the network can see where their contacts are and also view recommendations of these spaces. When certain criteria are fulfilled in one particular place the individual could become a "mayor" of the area and can earn stamps for achievements and points. This new network elements are games elements mixed within the social network. This has been one of the elements that made the successful expansion of the network, because members have compared their performances with those of your contacts. This performance is basically related to the transportation of the individual in the city, the more he moves, will have more points.

This action is the differential point of Foursquare in relation to other social networking systems, motion in the city is connected to the network information. The individual needs to use the body as part of the network and thus have a dimension of liquid and fluid information (Santaella, 2007) connected by this action. The places are there for connection, meeting in cyberspace and physical space. The project Urbagram⁴ has mapped check-ins in some cities, like New York (Fig. 4), and offered a preview for the density of connections.

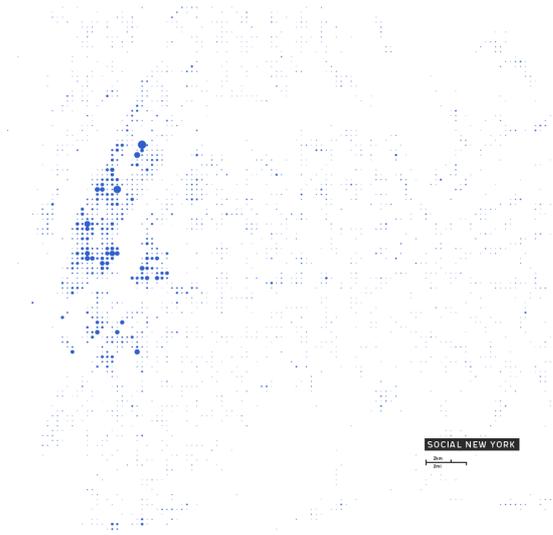


Figure 4

This way of mapping the registers on the Foursquare network shows a dynamic city and how the spaces are being used. The project is still divided by social activities such as eating, evening activities, shopping and artistic activities to demonstrate how there are spaces in different cities for each kind of interaction.

5 - Geolocated information

The main point of the Locast and Foursquare was to link the facts, images and conversations to the places where they occurred. The entire structure of geographical reconnaissance mobile devices that this moment provides allows us to connect to their places of historic events, thus making it a conducive environment for a daily memory

⁴ <http://www.urbagram.net/archipelago/>

(Casalegno, 2006). The same author supports his thesis in this expansion of citizenship with storage networks and urban conversation.

The map of events on the site allows a new view of events so that the individual himself can make their own connections between facts that are relevant to their daily life around him. In a future release of the Locast platform it should be deployed filter by issues, places and people.

This connected city (MITTCHELL, 2003) is composed of an informational layer with concomitant physical pathways. This link has the potential to strengthen the dialogue of citizenship as happened in the storm disaster story in which the display of images of different regions allowed an understanding of the whole situation. In scenes like these facts relating to the map can create a conversation that would be important hole on topics such as violence, traffic and large events. The map represents the mirror of the polis, but without the context of the data layer is only one node without connection.

The possibility of perception of what is happening around the individual is also something of extreme complexity in this context of joint virtual environment with the physical one. Even facts that could be considered less relevance to public and geographically close to the subject can have a high important to this individual. The proximity of a closed street by an incident is more relevant in that space of time than an earthquake in another country. The shared collective information point of view for people in a given region can mean a conversation enhancement of citizenship in collective memory.

6 - Conclusions

This range of possibilities showed that the context of a connected devices and individuals, the base of smartphones, can be an interface between the physical places, or atoms, and the flow of information based on bits, which form the basis of the Internet. If "... places cannot be separated from its context of experience" (SANTAELLA, 2007, p. 161) now has more potential relationships and exchange information with contextual social networking communities.

By aggregating the information to these spaces it change the meaning for the individual as notes (CASTELLS, FERNÁNDEZ-Ardevol, QIU, & SEY, 2007, p.

171) "An area which information flows is not an empty space, it has relationships built in the net and wrapped it ...". Adding to this a new perception of the information around (Meyrowitz, 2003, p. 97) "As a result, we are experiencing a radical change in our senses of place, identity, time, values, ethics, etiquette and culture"

Although Locast was an experiment, and it is not a large-scale research, it was found indications of potentials, which is the most valuable results. In ten days and a limited number of participants is not possible to measure the social impact that a system like Locast can cause. But the main goal was to begin a process of research on the topic that you will see if these potentials are confirmed. This bond of physical spaces with cyberspace is in its infancy with manifestations such as the Foursquare network and the beginning of the use of geographic tags on Twitter.

Applying the concepts in an experiment like Locast gives insight into the validation of theories, and a second time, write them again with the contribution from the empirical. All the data collected from interviews and field observations have demonstrated a natural ability for the connection of physical points to its factual and historical contexts, made possible by a convergence of technologies that enables a unique potential for citizenship.

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