

7.0 CONCLUSIONS

As I explained at the beginning, my dissertation actively seeks to raise more questions than provide definitive answers, so this final chapter is dedicated to identifying particular issues and concerns that deserve further consideration. Reconfiguring the structure presented above, I divide my discussion here into two broad categories: ethnographic methods and social studies of technology, space and culture. In each section I summarise what I consider to be the main contributions of my thesis, and end with a set of possible questions for others to pick up.

7.1 ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS

My doctoral project builds on undergraduate and graduate studies in anthropology, and my dissertation's methodological contribution can be found in its examination of data bricolage and research blogging. Seeking to better understand what it might mean to conduct sociological research in the early years of the 21st century, I sought methods that could reflect the way I lived, worked and played. Primarily this involved a methodological bricolage capable of forging a combination of online and offline participant observation. In addition to conducting site visits, questionnaires and interviews, I made a decision to move my research notebook online and pursue writing as a method of inquiry. However, I had no idea at the time how important my weblog would become in shaping both the process and product of my studies.

When it came time to analyse my findings and begin writing my dissertation, I realised that in addition to the kinds of data regularly collected in ethnographic fieldwork, I had a record of years of observations and conversations contained within my blog. Looking back, I saw evidence of movement much more akin to the inconsistent swaying of a mobile than the stable and linear thought processes usually presented in academic research. Returning to anthropology's long-standing interest in writing culture, I wanted to explore ways of representing my research that better reflected these experiences.

In contrast, perhaps, to many doctoral students I had the distinct pleasure of being part of an intellectual and creative community that spanned the globe, and I wanted their presence to be felt in my dissertation as much as I had felt them during the period of my studies. In feminist epistemological critiques I found prior sociological attempts to textually include the excluded, or make visible the invisible, and I tried to follow their lead.

I took excerpts from academic sources, interviews, blog posts, news stories and personal reflections and presented them in my dissertation alongside more traditional analytical passages. These recombinant strategies were an attempt to encourage listening as much as telling, and often description instead of explanation. The overall result was an infra-reflexive pleated or layered text, where many voices and multiple perspectives come to bear on the issues at hand.

It was my hope that readers would follow my zig-zagging paths, finding a plethora of entrances and exits that will encourage them to understand things according to their own logic rather than according to a singular logic I have imposed to control them. This is not to say that I saw my dissertation as completely messy or unstructured, but rather that I wanted to encourage readers to become active producers of their own knowledge rather than 'passive' consumers of academic wisdom. At the same time, I also did not wish to position my text as entirely 'open' to interpretation, as a certain amount of 'closedness' helps tie a story together. And ultimately, I wanted to open for debate what advantages and limitations such an approach involves.

What does it mean to do participant observation online and offline? How does it challenge traditional understandings of 'the field' in fieldwork? What kinds of research are possible and impossible given the structure of blogs? Do blog conversations constitute new ways of conducting public and collaborative research? How is the very concept of research reconfigured? Does this kind of writing actually serve to reconfigure long-standing, and largely unequal, relations between expert and lay knowledge? What new relations between authors and audiences are created in infra-reflexive, pleated or layered texts? What degrees of 'openness' and 'closedness' work best? In what ways can such representations be said to be valid or valuable?

7.2 SOCIAL STUDIES OF TECHNOLOGY, SPACE AND CULTURE

My doctoral project also builds on long-standing, and increasingly relevant, social studies of science and technology. Its primary theoretical contribution ties together actor-network theory and the sociology of expectations, and its empirical contribution involves studying an area of cutting-edge design. While actor-network theory is now well established and widely applied in sociology and anthropology, my dissertation attempted to expand its reach to include emerging, rather than already existing technologies. It struck me that actor-network theory, and related theories of transduction, emphasise associations and connections in ways that are particularly well-suited to understanding how new technologies come to be.

In order to support this focus on emergent technological practices, I turned to a relatively new area of research known as the sociology of expectations. So far limited to future-oriented research in biotechnology, I wanted to see if it could be applied to other future-oriented technologies. While not quite as dramatic as technologies that stand to make the difference between life and death, pervasive computing nonetheless stands to reconfigure current paradigms of human-computer interaction, and the effects of these transformations could substantially alter people's experiences of spatiality, temporality and embodiment in everyday life.

By combining these methodological approaches and interpretive frameworks, I attempted to draw out the ways in which visions of a proximate technosocial

future are best understood not as predictions for the future, but rather as ways of shaping relations in the present as a means to orient people, places, objects and ideas in particular ways and not others. Shifting between large and small scale empirical accounts, urban computing and locative media were seen to expect and promise highly situated, and largely utopian, examples of pervasive computing that go a long way in tempering an overarching fear of a dystopian future of total technological surveillance while simultaneously suggesting a less than ideal present.

Again, it was my hope to open up these areas to further research. Can actor-network theory provide productive ways of engaging emergent technologies? Does a sociology of expectations translate well to other domains of technoscientific research? What are the connections between technological visions, expectations and promises? How do future-oriented visions act in the present and obligate future actions? In terms of technology design, how do market forces and policy decisions affect the outcomes of such exploratory research? How does such collaborative research stand to reconfigure power relations between disciplines or sectors of society? What roles can mass media and public involvement take in shaping future computing technologies? Which people and values are included, and excluded, from present design scenarios and future use?

By identifying a core set of expectations and promises associated with urban computing and locative media, I finally attempted to open up discussion on

matters related to people's experiences of space and culture. While certainly located within the domain of sociology and anthropology, it is perhaps this area that offers the greatest range of possible research interventions. Cultural geographers, architects and urban planners are just a few of the practitioners that can find shared concerns here. Scholars interested in media and communication ecologies also have many relevant contributions to make to these discussions, as do people working in policy or governance, to name just a few.

My dissertation further suggested that the existing literature on networked urbanism will increasingly need to account for technologies that seek to create hybrid spaces, where data is overlaid on, or embedded in, the physical environment. Not only would this allow information to be attached to particular locations, and accessed from multiple locations, but it stands to increase the current extensibility and transmissibility of urban space. While the seemingly endless disclosability of technologised space has already been noted, my work also suggested that this hybridity and complexity may not find adequate explanation in existing network models.

First of all, I believe that the kind of world envisioned by ubiquitous computing will never have the perfectly seamless or stable infrastructure necessary to make it work at its most global and totalising scale. Computer technologies, including the internet, have always rolled out unevenly and without clear plans—and much of our technological infrastructure is already a mash of disparate parts made to do the best they can until they break, or something better comes along. Rather

than continuing to focus on the density and intensity evoked by network models, I suggested that this kind of uncertainty, inconsistency and instability is much more amenable to metaphors of fluidity or flow. Furthermore, the kinds of social relations and interactions that are advocated in urban computing and locative media visions are equally uncertain, inconsistent and unstable. This has profound implications for people's understanding and experience of everyday life, and for future social and cultural research. If notions of society have already been replaced by concepts of sociality, then we might also ask—for example—if multiple or mobile publics have replaced that singular public that has been seen to form the public sphere?

In identifying the playful aspects of locative media and urban computing's interaction scenarios, I also conjured my own visions of what such playful and mobile publics might be. Here we can recall Bakhtin's carnival and Canetti's feast crowds as powerful expressions of collective action that temporarily overturn the status quo. Understanding the technological projects presented here as heterodox interventions into everyday life allows for a degree of social and cultural maneuverability that, again, may be best understood in terms of flow. More poetically, we can recall Sartre's descriptions of Alexander Calder's mobile sculptures, and we can ask if social innovation or change is not better understood in such playful terms? At the same time, we can also ask whom such 'creativity' and 'playfulness' serves?

In closing, I would like to leave readers with a final set of questions: How can utopian locative media and urban computing projects serve as critiques of more dystopian visions of ubiquitous computing and pervasive surveillance? What kinds of social interactions are possible given the kinds of individualising practices they seek to enable? Why are everyday 'creativity' and 'playfulness' so highly valued in these scenarios? How can such temporary interventions reconfigure power relations in the long-term? And what do we stand to gain, or lose, if these expectations and promises come to fruition?