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On „ICT & the City“

As Anna Croon Fors and Mikael Wilberg (2010, this issue) remind us, we are used to think of “Information and Communication Technologies” (ICT) and the “City” as two distinct units of analysis. But how can we explain the impact of ICTs of our ways of living in and with the city, if the City never was about information?

To say that information is immaterial is to assume that information has no specific place in the city and takes no physical space. Yet, we should acknowledge that even if we assume that information is immaterial, “it never exists without a material support. Information may be transferred from one material support to another, but cannot be dematerialized” (Wark 2004, 127) The City is the place, where the material support of information (e.g., books and other things made of paper) can be found and where people can meet each other and exchange information. In the City there are places, where information can be found, and the City provides spaces, where the exchange of information takes place.

This exchange of information characterizes specific conditions of public and private space in the city. Vice versa, the city is considered the (only?) place where people get information from their very socio-spatial environment by seeing, hearing, and talking to others, or sometimes just by thinking, sensing, or being present at a city place. That’s why the urban public has been regarded as being essentially about information since ancient times (Arendt 1998; Habermas 1991) and that’s why Sokrates is believed to have depended on the city (Helbrecht 2001). The city is the place where we can find urbanity, heterogeneity, spontaneity and innovation on the one hand side and built manifestations of history and the meanings of the past on the other hand – both of them sources of information provided only by the city. Hence, the influence of ICT on this public realm within the city touches fundamental ethical questions: How does it shape public life, how does it shape privacy? Will the city be replaced as a place of information or will it rather strengthen its informational function? How do both city dwellers and city planners cope with this future shape of the city?

One may criticise the view of “people talking with each other” as “people exchanging information,”

because it represents a technological view on information, reducing it to code, bits and bytes, to be produced, distributed and consumed. To view information primarily as a resource is a common trait in so-called information societies. One might argue that this is a reductionist’s view on information. Yet, using the framework established in an information society, focussing on modes of production, distribution and the use made of information, may also help us to understand how the City has shaped the flow of information before the rise of the information societies. And it might help us to understand, what kind of interfaces already did exist for the coupling of ICT and the City.

Looking for the interfaces provided by City life to the rising information societies also brings forward the subject of the City itself in its physical conditions, which has no prominent place in Western philosophy. Of course, there are notable and well-known exceptions. In Plato’s Republic the discussion on the City plays an important role with regards to the question of a just society. In Utopia Thomas Morus gave a description on the 45 cities to be found at the island, which all look the same. And while the City remained an important subject in the utopian discourse, modern philosophy and ethics rarely deals with the subject. Notable exceptions in the field of philosophy include Heidegger’s writing on dwelling, Vilém Flusser’s works on the telematic city, or Albert Borgmann’s “Real American Ethics” (2008). While the City provides the background for the everyday life of almost the half of the planet’s population, it has become invisible to us. In everyday life we do not take notice of the City as such.

This provides us with yet another reason to reflect on the City as a medium, because media tend to be transparent. Reading a book refers to reading the text printed in the book, not paying attention to the book itself. Watching TV does not mean to look at the TV set. In everyday life we will only notice the TV set as such once it has ceased to function. In her paper on “The cybercity as a medium” (2010, this issue) Seija Ridell reminds us of the “... backstage technical machinery that makes things happen on the front stage ...” and argues for bringing “... the digital infrastructure in the realm of the representation ...”, because this is “... the necessary first step in the process of coming to grips with it in terms of power.” One might add that Information Ethics as a discipline might be a suitable tool of questioning the digital infrastructure of the City. Even more, reflecting on the embeddedness of ICT in the urban environment may become a starting point to bring back

the City itself in the realm of representation and thus ethical reflection.

The importance of infrastructures, which constitute an important part of ICT embedded in city, is underlined in Torin Monaham's & Jennifer T. Mokos' contribution to this issue. With regards to infrastructures monitoring the environment to ensure the safety and security of basic goods (like water and air), they demonstrate that "[w]hile the management of such services is increasingly automated and informatized, judgements made about what the public's needs are and how they should meet are often hidden in technical protocols that resist public awareness or scrutiny." (Monaham & Mokos 2010, this issue) In her paper on "The Ethnography of Infrastructure" (1999) Susan Leigh Star summed up her experience of studying the International Classification of Diseases as worse than reading a telephone book. Yet, she starts her paper with "... a call to study boring things" (Leigh Star 1999, 377). Monaham's & Mokos' paper demonstrate the need to do so. In focusing on too often taken for granted infrastructures in rich countries, they point to the interplay between existing infrastructures and new technologies, but they also demonstrate that the potential benefits of the new digital infrastructure might be for a selected group of people only. Hence, justice is an important issue to address in the discussion on the implications of environmental monitoring, but there is also the strong need to analyse the trust relationships that are shaped by technologies and infrastructure. Even more so, as planning and monitoring strongly depend on ICT to create scenarios for urban development processes that later on shape both built environment and urban landscapes. 3D-models, remote sensing, augmented realities and above all GIS have become both indispensable instruments of analyzing and planning the city and as useful items of everyday life at the same time. The range of effects covers topics like building a new urban district as well as monitoring trees and animals on urban brownfields, driving to the hotel by car, working in a restaurant, or being captured by surveillance technologies in city spaces. As the authors point out, "... ethical issues are often framed in terms of autonomy instead of trust and this may have the effect of focussing on the individual agency to the neglect of social relations." (Monaham & Mokos 2010, this issue)

The article also demonstrates that in the age of globalization it still matters where you live. This is also pointed out in the contribution by Rodrigo Firmino and Fabian Duarte on the "Manifestations and implications of an augmented urban life" (2010,

this issue). They also point to the different, at times conflicting ways that ICTs have become part of the way urban space is produced and experienced by its inhabitants.

But the City always has been about change, while being a manifestation of yesterday's ideas at the same time. While any generation of its inhabitants is trying to shape the City to fit its needs, any generation of new City dwellers is confronted with the manifestations of its ancestors' way of living. Therefore, it's maybe not too much of a surprise that the idea of designing a City is – apart from the professional planner's perspective – far less common than to bring design thinking to other areas. It almost seems strange to think of something like the author of a City even despite the well-known exceptions. We sometimes tend to think of the City as something to be managed, not merely something to be built from the scratch, in other words we're not so much of Le Corbusier. Still, as the contribution of Anna Croon Fors and Mikael Wilberg (2010, this issue) demonstrates, a "designerly approach" in shaping the City and the life of its inhabitants. One may point to the dangers of taking a paternalistic position in doing so, but the "... search for ... meaningful compositions of materiality that disclose and enclose significant interactive processes and practice in the city ..." has to be recognized as an important quest in the ongoing process of shaping Cybercities.

Web applications and services available today facilitate the mixing and blurring of dichotomies such as public and private, global and local, and online and offline. As a consequence of these developments, communities are now often constituted in mixed spaces, where a specific social community website site reaches far beyond the confines of its pages and into both the physical reality of its users, other online spaces and other cultural domains. This brings new perspectives and challenges with regards to how communities organize and operate, and how they are perceived and perceive themselves. Community activities that take place in both physical and virtual spaces create new dynamics and flows, which facilitate new ways to relate to friends and other people as well as new ways to relate to figures of authority, e.g. the police. This is of course a key element in the idea of the Internet as a space of intersections and blurring of boundaries between offline and online worlds. Over the past few years, location awareness has become an increasingly important aspect of everyday use of the web. Especially, the popularity of smartphones, such as Apple's iPhone and Google's Nexus One, is mixing urban spaces and virtual spaces.

There has been a tendency for online social network sites to be based on the premise of sharing personal information, including not only activities, preferences and affiliations, but also current whereabouts, facilitated by mobile technologies for tracking and new web services for distributing. These technologies have the potential for repressive use but are also a platform for exposing oneself as an individual, where being seen or tracked is a crucial element. This tendency gives rise to new concerns in relation to privacy issues, but also seems to change our attitudes towards these issues. Furthermore, the mixing and blurring of spaces also facilitate new ways of constructing, performing and presenting identities and narratives. For example, teens seem to construct and co-construct their identities on social network sites with no clear distinction between offline and online existence, 'locally' practicing identities while demarcating themselves from the 'global' discourse they are surrounded by.

A manifold of interesting research questions arise in the wake the cities as mixed spaces: How do we metaphorically and conceptually grasp mixed spaces? How do we study the mobility and intersecting of people, information and artifacts online? How do the various theoretical framings of mixed spaces influence Internet regulation and use? How can we reach an understanding of the users' experience of their movements within these mixed spaces? When designing for mixed spaces, how can we integrate

and involve the needs of intended users? Does the advanced monitoring and tracking technologies invade our privacy? Are people lured into unfavorable power relations? On the other hand, do the potential gains outweigh the eventual losses? Are surveillance technologies helping us, protecting us and offering new possibilities? These and other questions are discussed in the various articles in this special issue of International Review of Information Ethics, and attempts to map future challenges in the field will be made.

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