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# “Restlessness is the condition of contemporary mobile network society...”

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## Local and Mobile 2012 Report

On March 16-18 2012, North Carolina State University hosted *Local and Mobile: linking mobilities, mobile communication and locative media*, a joint international conference of the Pan-American Mobilities Network and the Cosmobilities Network, and the 3rd annual research symposium of the Communication, Rhetoric and Digital Media (CRDM) program at NCSU. Adriana de Souza e Silva, conference host, began the event with a brief history of locative media and its origins in research labs and art spaces before going ‘public’ as the mass-production of “smart phones” proliferated society. 21 panels took over the next three days, focused on a variety of issues within mobility studies research.

## Keynote Speakers

**Rich Ling**’s (IT University of Copenhagen) keynote speech focused on the consumption practices of mobile phones through a sociological framework, highlighting Durkheim and Weber to explore the notion of “connected presence”. He provided the audience

with an interesting anecdote from one of his peers who says, “if you don’t have a mobile phone, you are inconveniencing me.”

**Paul Dourish** (University of California, Irvine) discussed the commodification of location and how different ways of structuring time and space (a complex network) has the potential to interrogate notions of privacy and location. He exemplifies some of these theories through a case study of sex-offenders using GPS transponders in the USA. He suggests that the new developments of location as a technologically trade-able object carries with it a new set of problems that must be interrogated and analyzed.

Long-time locative media practitioner and scholar **Terri Rueb** (University of Buffalo, SUNY) closed the conference emphasizing mobility and subjectivity with the concept of ‘landscape’ as a framework towards a more rigorous discussion of (mobility) aesthetics. Her keynote raised many questions for scholars and practitioners on mediation and technology. Drawing on her site-specific audio work, Rueb’s practice reveals the embeddedness of technology in our lives and questions the reduction of the field of mobility studies to “the question of technology”. Rueb acknowledges the pervasiveness of new media technologies and engages in a self-reflexivity that is in dialogue with the tension of spatial cognitive perception. Opening her presentation with the quote: “restlessness is the condition of contemporary mobile network society...” Rueb comes full circle in her closing remarks urging us to look to process philosophy, affect theory, non-representational theory among others to open up the mobile media space.

### **Creation of hybrid space(s) through backchannel discussions**

During the conference, an exemplar of hybrid space (de Souza e Silva 2006) ensued:

participants active in the online milieu started using the hashtag #localmobile2012 on Twitter. Most often, comments in real-time would be posted during a presentation, and audience members would reply to each other, re-tweet (RT) and so on. Being part of this back-channel network allowed me, for example, to take part in the other panels that were occurring simultaneously in other rooms through reading other hashtagged tweets. The tweets comprised of a variety of content such as: direct quotes of the presenter (these were often RT'd by others); critiques of a point made by a presenter, which often started micro-discussions and debates; questioning data presented; adding links and information to a point made by a presenter; and, questions for the presenter. Indeed, this micro-community only comprised of a small number of participants and speakers, but it allowed another layer of communication, particularly for those who are not as comfortable engaging in face-to-face interactions. Twitter use during the conference also provided archival documentation for the public, as anyone can follow the hashtag and can view the tweets after the-[conference is over.

As usual, many attendees were taking notes on their laptops, in notebooks, and now also on their smart phones. However, a new trend of taking photos of slides appeared. Select audience members, instead of quickly trying to take note of the important points on a slide before it dissolved, took photos of pertinent slides for future reference. In other words, people are more likely to document and archive information through a mobile phone than ever before.

## **Thinking about devices**

One of the main objects of inquiry that kept coming up was current and future development for the iPhone, with several presentations focusing on an iPhone app as complementary to the project. Kim Sawchuk in her presentation “Virtual Daylighting: mobile media and Montreal’s buried rivers” self-reflexively pointed out: “don’t be focused on devices.” It is no doubt that the iPhone’s pervasiveness gives practitioners and scholars a baseline on how and what to test, and there’s no need to stop developing for the iPhone. However, what is important to consider is how developing for a specific iOS may obfuscate or stall other possibilities, particularly that of the open source movement. While more people (at least in North America) may buy iPhones because of all the “neat apps,” and developers may be developing for iPhone because they know their app has a much higher chance for diffusion on the iOS as opposed to other platforms; for university-based developers, the potential of developing for multiple operating systems may be beyond their budgets. However, what is being set into motion by this new trend towards “app development”? This proverbial chicken and egg scenario will need watching.

## **Convergence of art and scholarship**

The convergence of art and scholarship is growing in popularity and legitimacy. Part of the conference location included an artist space, where a variety of artists working with mobile media and locative-based art, such as sound walking and augmented reality were able to present their work. In his talk “Mobility and the Soundscape in Dialogue” scholar

and practicing artist Samuel Thulin, from Concordia's Mobile Media Lab, brought up the notion of an expanded soundscape, similar to a hybrid space, and discussed the multiple mediations of sound that work through our mobile phones. As part of the research-creation framework that exemplifies much of locative media work, Thulin presented *River Flow, Sewer Flow, Street Flow*, an experimental interactive sound work using the application RJDJ, in the artist space. The work was an extension and an exemplar of some of Thulin's theoretical arguments presented in an earlier paper. Another interesting project which participants were able to test was *The Sentient Room* by locative media artists Fernanda Duarte, Samara Mouvery and Brent Simoneaux. The sentient room, a corner of the artist space, included, among other household items, a couch (similar to one you see in traditional psychiatrist offices) that reacted and responded to the participant's movements as they sat and/or laid on it. A two-hour workshop on augmented reality with Markus Wust (NC State U) was also open to conference participants. The conference, in other words, opened up a valuable space for artists and academics engaged in new forms of mobile media production to demonstrate, in a hands-on manner, their production-based research work and to answer questions from potential users one-on-one.

### **Interdisciplinarity**

The conference's interdisciplinary focus can be overwhelming to those studying within one specific field, but is a model that recognizes the need for departments, fields and modes of thought to work together and to share knowledge across academic milieus. Having a strictly quantitative sociological presentation on Armenian technology

penetration statistics by Katy Pearce (Georgetown U) on one panel, and a strictly theoretical discussion by Seth Mullikan (NC State U) about post-humanist approaches to studying mobility focused on the Deleuzian de-centered subject allows for enlivened modes of thought, and allows for a richer criticality of work being conducted.

One of the main themes percolating in the conference was just that: the need for meaningful and lively conversation and the issue of convergence. Mobility studies does not belong to any one discipline. After attending the conference I am more convinced than ever that it should never belong to any one discipline. It is exactly the ability of mobility studies to be cross disciplinary at its core, that makes it exciting and a space of potential for scholars and practitioners. While mobile media technology seems to be common to much of what is happening in mobility studies, it is worth noting that this is not the only important area of research and inquiry. Other interesting questions that arose included contextualizing (un) sustainable mobile media practices. “Identity, Race and Mobility,” one of last panels of the conference, presented a distinctive way of looking at mobilities, one that was not directly tied to an analysis of the import of the mobile phone. Armond Towns’s presentation foregrounded how (im)mobility is produced through race relations. Towns presented a complex and important case study on the *LA Gang Tours*, bus tours of active-gang activity areas which are scheduled during “neighbourhood ceasefires”. These tours create a mobile space for tourists to traverse at the expense of producing an immobility of the residents of these neighbourhoods. It makes us wonder, how and in what ways are (im)mobilities linked?

Finally, in addition to encouraging conference presenters to tweet their questions and reflections during the conference, the conference organizers have done an excellent and comprehensive job documenting and distributing the conference online, including photos and videos of all the panels and keynote speakers.

This can be found at: <http://communication.chass.ncsu.edu/mobilities/index.html>

## References

de Souza e Silva, A. (2006). *From Cyber to Hybrid: Mobile Technologies as Interfaces of Hybrid Spaces*. *Space and Culture* 9.3 (2006): 261 -278.