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Abstract

This article explores the ambivalence between use and non-use through the notion of "default users". I interviewed six users of Places, Facebook's geolocation service. Through the variety of uses they reported, I explore the notion of "default users" and how it is predicated on the availability of the geolocation service and on its connection to Facebook and a "public" of friends. "Default users" are users "by accident" who have access to the necessary technologies and possess the skills to make Places work. They have no particular interest in Places per se, but they still use it because of its availability as yet another tool for socializing. They participate in a norm of technological progress, although in an ambiguous way: they are not very active users, some express resistance and some experience disappointment.

Introduction

In 2010, Facebook launched Places, an application which allows users to check-in wherever they are, to know where their "friends" are, and to interact on the basis of this information. To check-in, users pick a location from a list of "nearby places." With GPS technology, this list is automatically imported onto their mobile phone screen. Users can

also tag which friends are with them, describe what they are doing (as with status), and see and be seen by friends nearby. "Facebook friends" can see each other's check-ins on their newsfeed, and as with other posts, they can delete a check-in. They can also create new places by adding a name and a description of a place (Facebook, n.d.)

Based on interviews with users of Places, this article explores the ambivalence between use and non-use through the notion of "default users," an expression that one of the participants (Frank) invented. The users I interviewed started using Places when it was launched or shortly after, because it was instantly available to them on their mobile phones, even if most of them were skeptical of its relevance. They are what I call "default users." Some users were introduced to Places by seeing their friends' check-ins on their Facebook wall (or, in one case, by a "warning" against Places' threat to privacy). Most of them started to actually use it because the icon "Places" appeared on the screen of their mobile phone. They continue to use Places because it is available as another function of Facebook, as part of something bigger, and as enhancing their possibilities for socializing with their "friends" – that is to say, they do not use it because of the usefulness of the application in itself.

"Average" Users

When I started this research, I was interested in "average" users, meaning people who use Places but are not necessarily very active on it. I first conducted an interview with

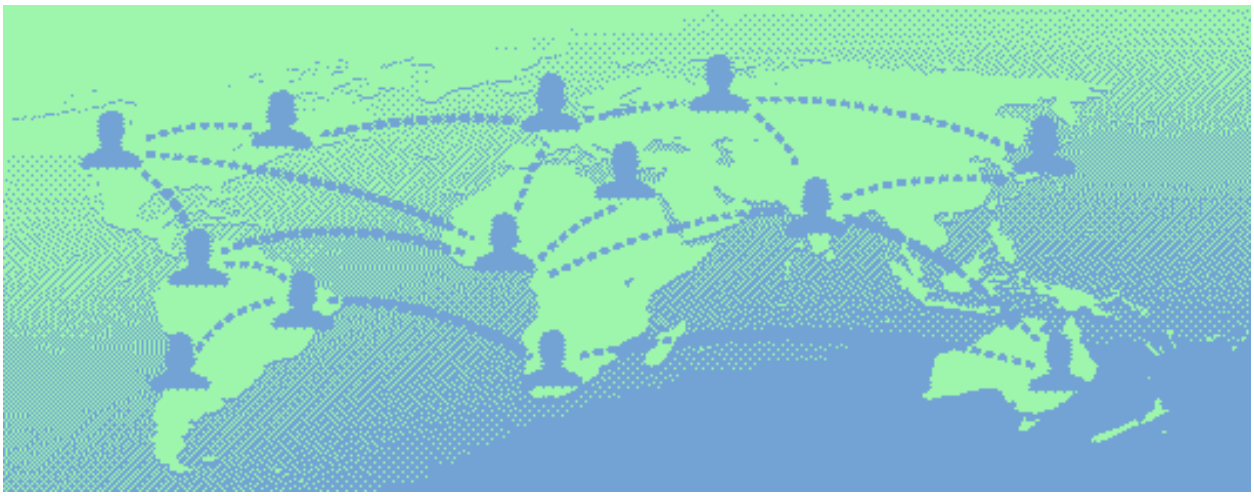
Frank, who is also a friend of mine. He sees spontaneous social congregation as the main purpose of the application, although this had never happened to him: “For me, it is a way to tell people ‘I am in this place, come by if you wish,’ which, by the way, never succeeded… nobody ever came.” Despite his perception of Places as useless, Frank persists in using it, with a bit of humour. This interview sparked my interest in why people were using this application, especially if it did not work in the way they expected.

Following a pre-analysis of the interview with Frank, I interviewed five other users of Places. Some were recommended by Frank and some were friends with me on Facebook. Their pseudonyms are Ted, Sam, Val, Clara, and Emmanuel. They were contacted through Facebook, and they all live in Montreal. Two are acquaintances and three are strangers to me but friends of other interviewees. The less active users I interviewed use Places once or twice a week, and sometimes less than once a week. The most active use it about ten times a week and mostly on weekends.

The choice to study “average” users diverges from most other empirical studies on social locative media that are mostly interested in very active users (e.g., Humphreys, 2010). The results also differ: while active users tend to change their paths according to the location information they retrieve, “default users” adopt less homogeneous practices. “Average” and “default” users do not refer to the same users, however, but they are notions that can overlap. The “default users” I interviewed are also “average” users, meaning people who are more or less active on Places, but they could become more active users. In one case, a user (Val) is not a “default user” because she actively sought

out geolocation applications, but she is still an "average" user in terms of how often she engaged with the applications.

The interviews were conducted in various places, including cafés suggested by the users, and one was held at a user's apartment. They lasted about half an hour and were recorded on a digital recorder. They were constructed as conversations, with prepared open-ended questions, spontaneous questions, and questions asking for comparisons with what previous interviewees had said. For example, the first question was "how did you start using this application?" and this question often generated answers regarding practices and ideas about Places, leading me to develop the notion of "default users." Other questions probed why the respondents used Places, what places they would check in from, what behavioural rules or codes of conduct seemed important to them, and how they would describe their relations with friends on Facebook. The interviews were conducted in French and the excerpts chosen for quotes were translated to English.



"Automatic" Availability

I have coined the expression "default users" to refer to people who adopt technologies merely because they are available and accessible. Their early adoption of this technology can be said to be "accidental." According to most users I interviewed, Places' automatic availability is the main reason they started using it. The icon Places simply appeared on the screen of their mobile phone. This availability is related to owning a specific type of mobile phone, with GPS technology, and to accessing Internet and Facebook on it:

It's since I bought my iPhone that I discovered the application, that I started to use it. […] Because I have been on Facebook for many years, I saw geolocations on Facebook, and when I saw it as a possibility on my iPhone, well I started to use it. (Sam)

Digital mobile phones can be characterized as portable, pervasive, location-sensitive, ubiquitous social devices, defining ubiquity as the "ability to communicate anytime, anywhere via computer devices spread out in the environment" (De Souza e Silva, 2007, p. 25). Anytime, anywhere availability is afforded by the devices' miniaturization, which makes their presence in our lives transparent in that they recede into the background. They are always present, oscillating between the periphery to the center of our attention (De Souza e Silva, 2007). The users I interviewed confirmed that their mobile phones are among the essential objects that they carry everywhere, together with their keys and their wallets. Val reported using her mobile phone "automatically" in moments when she did not have anything specific to do. When I left Sam in the café after the interview, I saw, while I was walking out, that he immediately started to play on his phone. Places relies on the already existing series of pervasive technologies and behaviours to become in turn automatically available to users who are not necessarily seeking out the application.

Studies on innovation have traditionally focused on active users and characterized non-users pejoratively (Rogers, 1995). Among the five types of users of the diffusion of innovation framework (innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, laggards), the last two represent approximately 50% of the population and are perceived as passive. This framework is based on the premise that innovation is something intrinsically positive. Jauréguiberry (2010) explains that studies of technology adopters conceive of non-users as a category only by default; they measure and interpret adopters' uses, and the non-uses are what remain implicit. Moreover, the late majority and laggards are seen as resisting change, synonymous with slowness or the inability to understand progress, whereas "active" users are seen more positively as adopting technologies before their usefulness is proven (thereby also often proving it).

Other frameworks, such as sociology of use, cultural studies or science, technology and society studies (STS), base their research on other premises, rejecting technological determinism and more or less critiquing the innovation framework. Scholars working within these frameworks are interested in the co-construction of technologies and society and in how people make meaning out of practice. I develop the notion of "default users" in dialogue with these studies who research the social aspects of uses and I refer to these studies throughout the article.

Taking the Internet as an example, Wyatt (2003) argues against a conception of use/non-use in which frequent, intense or exuberant use is considered necessarily better than other possible (non-)uses. Beside this stereotypical use associated to the white, young, university-educated man, she names different possible (non-)uses that we need to take into account. For example, non-use can be read as a sign of resistance or as the consequence of a lack of infrastructural, economic, or cultural access. As scholarly interest grew into (non-)users, empirical studies addressed exclusion based on lack of access and the digital divide, and demonstrated that equipment rates and economic and cultural status correlated: non-users are poorer, older, more isolated, have less technical skills, less education, and so on (Jauréguiberry 2010). Studies then refined these categories in terms of differences in uses and appropriations to address the "digital spectrum" (Lenhart and Horrigan 2003). The categories employed to describe non-use multiplied: Wyatt, Thomas and Terranova (2002) talk about rejecters, expelled, excluded, and resisters; Lenhart and Horrigan (2003) distinguish between evaders, dropouts, intermittent users, and truly unconnected; and Selwyn (2006) characterizes absolute no-users, lapsed users, and rare users. The frontier between use and non-use could therefore be described as porous. As for use, scholars have demonstrated that there is no single definition of use but a multiplicity of uses, where the term "use" does not necessarily have the same meaning from one context to another. For example, it can vary in frequency, degrees and forms of participation, according to temporal and social trajectories (Wyatt 2003).

Non-use can be voluntary and refer to practices such as choosing to use the Internet only occasionally or for one particular task. It is mostly restricted to some moments or situations, such as turning off one's mobile phone and refusing to be located by GPS. Jauréguiberry (2010) suggests that this type of non-use is developing in a context of constant connection and of excess of information and communication. Here, non-users are neither economically nor culturally marginalized (they have a job, they have used technologies before so they possess the skills, etc.). From this perspective, non-use is a deliberate choice. The "privileged" users appear to be not just the ones who have better access, but the ones who are better able to choose when and how to use or not use technologies.

This context of privilege corresponds to the western context in which myself and the respondents are located. In this context, the respondents can be said to perform their mobility, their technological skills, and their social connections through their uses of digital mobile technologies. For example, Sam and Val said they like to check in when they are visiting another city, to show people where they have been. This performance is characterized by broad access to the technologies necessary for Places' functioning, as well as a milieu facilitating its use: all of our friends use Facebook, we own mobile phones with GPS technology, we share an urban lifestyle more or less detached from family obligations, we have many opportunities for socializing, and none of us is restricted in our movements in and around the city. Considering such privileges is important, as Wyatt (2003) contends, in categorizations of the self as an "average" user. Designating my interviewees as "average" and "default users" is not meant to imply that we are a universal category of users; rather, "default users" is a notion that cuts across

many categories of (non-)use but is located in a specific context the interviewees and I share.

The "accidental" use of Places by "default users" positions them somewhere in between active and passive approaches (they adopt the technology early but almost by accident, and they do not use it very much). Although the users contribute to reinforceing a norm about the adoption of new communication technologies as intrinsically desirable, they also complicate this norm by their ambiguous uses. They do not use Places very often and they use it only in some kinds of places, mostly "public" ones. When, how, and where to use or not use Places is negotiated with "friends." Frank admits that Places is not working the way he wishes it would (for social congregation), but he still uses it. Ted, although he could simply choose not to use Places, expresses resistance by checking in at places where he is not:

I do not use it very seriously, I often check-in places where I am not, sometimes I do this to have fun [...] only to make people laugh, lastly, I checked-in at Ceramic café where I would never go, or in a sauna. People know me well enough to know that I am not really in this place.

Through this little game, Ted also positions himself as a privileged user who has access to technologies and who possesses the skills to perform this game; he can actively choose not to use Places in the expected way.

Val is the only user I interviewed who did not start using Places almost by "accident." Her willingness to use Places prior its "automatic" availability indicates a limitation of the notion of "default users." Her attitude toward the adoption of technologies would instead classify her as an innovator or early adopter in that she says she keeps abreast of new technologies. She is also the only one of the respondents to have used another locative media platform, Foursquare,[1] because she was told she could get a discount in some shops. But after a while, she gave up Foursquare, since the discounts were not sufficient to keep her connected and she thought she did not have enough "friends" on Foursquare. She saw Places as offering a broader public of "friends" and more chances for interacting with them based on their check-ins.

Matters of Sociability and Friendship

All users talked about Places as something to be understood as an intrinsic part of Facebook. For Sam, who sees Facebook as an opportunity for socializing, the relevance of Places is to be able to easily show "everybody" where he has been. For him and Frank, letting their friends know where they are and waiting for someone to join them, or to pass by to go to some other place, is the main purpose of using Places. Fortunately, it works at least for one of them (Sam). For example, on the day of the interview, we went to a café, where he stayed after I left. He was waiting for a friend to pass by, with the intent to stay in the neighbourhood and go out at night. Less than an hour later, I saw on Facebook that he had checked-in another place near the café, with friends. For Val, Places' relevance, also related to socializing, lies in the interaction with friends about the places, photos, and status posted. She thinks a check-in is similar as meeting on the street and saying: "hey yesterday I went to this place…". Similarly, when Emmanuel

posts that he is at the movies, his check-in starts a discussion on the topic of the film on Facebook.

The social implications of Places also extend beyond the virtual network of "friends" on Facebook and into the urban environment. Sutko and De Souza e Silva (2011), following Lehtonen and Mäenpää's work (1997), address sociability in urban environments as created by a balance between trust and unpredictability. Because non-expected things "might happen," intrinsic trust in others is crucial. Strangers are cohabiting based on unspoken rules that allow them to comfortably walk the streets. Unexpected events can happen, but trust in others' behaviour is based on the assumption that others are like us and will therefore behave like we would. Going to places where we might encounter a more diverse population, likely to behave in a different way, is understood as generating fear. Echoing these ideas, Humphreys (2010) identifies homophile tendencies in her ethnographic study of the most active users of Dodgeball.[2] Its users develop a sense of familiarity with places they had never been by seeing that other users are there. This sense of familiarity comes from their perception of other users as similar to themselves. Because people like them are going to these places, they expect strangers who are there to behave in a similar way.

Sutko and De Souza e Silva (2011) then argue that location-aware technologies "increase the potential for communication and coordination among their users, but mitigate the potential for spontaneous new sociability with more diverse non-users" (p.12). On

Facebook, some people connect to "friends," considered as people to be trusted. Checking in at places and being able to see friends' places can create a sense of familiarity in these spaces. Places could therefore support a perception of the city where one's friends are front-stage and others are less visible. This means that, in public spaces, instead of paying attention to people surrounding them, users would pay more attention to their phone and friends in their choice of places to gather. However, only half of the users I interviewed confirmed an interest in going to some place because they saw their friends check-in at that location. I also think that Places, compared to other geolocation services, allows some degree of sociability with non-users. These non-users (of Places) would be users of Facebook and constitute a broader and more diverse population. Nevertheless, this population is built through "friending" practices that constitute a "public" of friends with whom to interact.

Studying online networking sites, boyd (2006) addresses the creation of context through "friending" practices, where a "public" of friends and a set of norms are built in the absence of a structural context. All social media are not used in the same way and the connections one builds differ from one network to another. On Facebook, most people are not selective of the "friends" they accept (De Souza e Silva and Frith, 2010). "Friends" can designate close friends, acquaintances, ex-close friends, potential friends, lovers, etc.

The norms that appeared during the interviews relate to public/private places and tagging friends in one's check-in. The users I interviewed check in almost only at

"public" places such as bars, parks, cafés, restaurants, and concerts, or as Sam says "places where people hang out." The kinds of places a "default user" can post on Facebook is the result of negotiation between users of Places and other users of Facebook. For example, people are careful to respect their friends' privacy by asking permission before checking in that they are together in some place. They show their connections to their "public" of friends, while still respecting their friends' desire to be checked-in or not. Clara offers the advice to "always keep in mind that it [Facebook] is public" and to be careful not to hurt sensibilities.

Another related issue that came up during the interviews was the checking-in of "private" places such as one's apartment or one's bed (those were the most common "private" places checked-in). There was no consensus on this: one created his own "place," some thought it was acceptable that others created "private" places but they would not do it themselves, one thought a status was a better way of indicating one was home, and one said it was "quétaine" (corny).

Compared to other geolocation services like Foursquare or Gowalla,[3] what makes Places interesting is its partaking in a social media platform that allows users to connect location information to a set of "friends" who do not necessarily use this particular application. What makes Places different from other locative media is thus the "public" of friends available for potential interaction, a public mostly composed of non-users of Places. The users I interviewed only have ten to twenty friends who also use Places. In Sam's opinion, people who are prone to use Places are "social butterflies" (people who

are very social and easygoing). However, every user's "Facebook friends" can see where one is and what one does with this application (what kinds of places one checks in). We cannot say that they are total non-users of Places if, as Facebook users, they interact on their friends' check-ins. That would be another limit of the notion of "default users": some people become users through their interaction on places checked-in by their friends, even though they are not users themselves. Because Places is inherently related to Facebook, they can be considered "default users" in spite of themselves.

Conclusion

In this article, I took the designation that a respondent attributed to himself, that of "default user," to explore the technological and friendship contexts in which the use of Places, Facebook's geolocation service, comes to be initiated by automatic availability and negotiated with a "public" of friends. "Default users" are users "by accident" who have access to the necessary technologies and possess the skills to make Places work. I interviewed six "average" users. They have no particular interest in Places per se, but they still use it because of its availability as yet another tool for socializing. They participate in a norm of technological progress, although in an ambiguous way: they are not very active users, some express resistance and some experience disappointment. Through Facebook, these users are connected to people who do not use Places, and their uses need to be negotiated with these "friends."

This research was exploratory and recorded only six interviews from a relatively homogeneous group. Its aim was to explore the notion of "default users" and it could be expanded to interview more users in order to refine the description of "default users" and to see how this notion further cuts across different categories of use and non-use. This article raises some questions for further research related to the pervasiveness of technologies and to tensions arising from "default" uses. For example, we could ask what do "default users in spite of themselves" (who do not use Places but who see, read, and sometimes comment on others' check-ins or who have blocked the application all together) think of Places? We could also explore differences between users who deliberately choose to use the application and "default users," and deepen our understanding of the use of Places to create "private" places such as home.

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Footnotes

1. Foursquare is a web and mobile application, a kind of game to which people can subscribe in order to be able to check in and see their friends' check-ins. Points are awarded at check-in and users can earn badges and discounts for performing specific actions, for example if they check in at locations with certain tags, or for frequency of use. ^
2. Dodgeball was a service that allowed users to let their friends know when they were at local public spaces via their mobile phones. It required members to join a social network system similar to Facebook. Users sent a check-in (a text message)

to Dodgeball which broadcasted the message to their networks. (Humphreys 2010) It closed in 2009 and its creators then launched Foursquare. ^

3. Gowalla was similar to Foursquare, mostly centered on the production of virtual items and discounts for users (in partnership with companies, like Disney, for example). It was bought by Facebook, then closed in 2012. ^