

Dousing for Dummies: methods for raising public awareness of invisible communication networks

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Motivation and aims

As mobile and wireless technologies proliferate in urban environments the space can be considered as having an existence in terms of several visible and invisible layers. In particular, we consider that there is a physical layer that makes up our everyday direct experience and several invisible layers formed by the audiovisual and communication networks. Yet, due to the ways in which we have traditionally considered space, there are many limitations in current ways of perceiving and thus engaging with these immaterial environments (Willis, 2005). For this purpose, we propose concepts and methods for raising public awareness of the presence and implications of wireless networks, such as closed circuit TV (CCTV) and WiFi nodes. In these environments the physical boundaries of walls, doors and gates, and distances still frame and isolate social encounters, but wireless transmissions increasingly trespass on the situations that take place in physically defined settings.

In this paper, we present a series of methods developed by the artist, Michelle Teran, for raising awareness of invisible spaces created by public wireless communication technologies. These methods include public performance, where participation is through a series of walks through the city, and workshops where participants engage in the design implications through a process of locating, examining and documenting some of these invisible networks. Overall, we explore methods and strategies for engaging the public, raising awareness of the limitations of their perception of communications technologies, and techniques that facilitate the debate on the rich opportunities that these invisible spaces might offer.

Methods

Artistic methods are employed to explore research questions that regard the social space generated intentionally, or most notably unintentionally through the use of widespread public wireless communication technology. 'Life: a user's manual'¹ is a series of public performances that examines the hidden stories captured by private wireless CCTV streams and how they intersect with the visible and spatial environment. 'Life: a user's manual' focuses on the use of wireless surveillance cameras within public and private places that transmit unencrypted analog audiovisual signal on the 2.4 Ghz frequency band. Easily intercepted using a consumer model video scanner, the captured, live images create a sequence of readings and views of the city and its inhabitants which are observed while walking through the streets.

¹ The title of the work is taken from a novel of the same name by Georges Perec

The work unravels at two levels of participation; firstly a street performance where the 'audience' is led on a journey through the city, guided through a series of hidden views by an urban and nomadic persona, who acts as a physical interface to the unseen. The 'audience', led on this nomadic journey, is drawn into a borderline action of observing a normally unseen and ephemeral view of public (e.g. consumer-level CCTV cameras installed in cafes, restaurants, kiosks, etc) and private space (e.g. consumer-level CCTV cameras installed in homes for theft prevention, baby monitors, etc). Staged as a silent 'mise-en-scène' with no offer of explanation, the audience participates in the production of meaning through their observation and interpretation.



figure 1: Berlin WALK² performed during the Transmediale05 Festival (Berlin), February 4, 2005

Active end-user participation also occurs through a series of workshops enabled by the artist herself, where she introduces the equipment and methods used in the work to members of the public who can then explore and develop their own practices for revealing hidden layers in their environment. These take the form of walks through the city where individuals take different roles in discovering, gathering, editing together and finally presenting their personal recorded traces of networks that surround citizens or physical spaces in a city.



figure 2: participants in a workshop

Although there are many opportunities offered by the suggested research program, the reception and recording of privately located CCTV also raises ethical concerns about privacy and ownership of captured data. We believe that in order to enable and

² Nominated for Transmediale05 award

encourage a balanced debate on these issues, a key step is to acknowledge the existence of these contested spaces, which ambiguously blur the boundaries between private and public life. Indeed, the participants of previous workshops have reported that the experience of these invisible views on their everyday settings and routines has added new meanings and changed their understanding of the otherwise familiar urban environment.

Discussion

We focus on exploring research issues that regard the social space generated through the employment of wireless communication technology. Communication technologies re-organize the social settings in which people interact and weaken the once strong relationship between physical place and social place (Meyrowitz, 1986, ix). The elaboration on the complex relationships between physical and social space raises the following research questions: 1) techniques for raising awareness (e.g. visualization of wireless networks) of invisible social spaces that people walk-through as part of their everyday life, 2) engagement of the public in the development of narratives that consist of both the visible and invisible social spaces and 3) design methods, principles and tools that will ultimately involve the end-users in the design decisions and especially into the debate on the social and spatial impact of wireless communication technologies in the city.

Practical activities

During the workshop at British HCI we propose to discuss and share the outcomes of a workshop entitled 'Invisible Networks - Invisible Narratives' led by Michelle Teran, which was held in Weimar in May 2006. We will also give those participating in the workshop (subject to time constraints) the opportunity to join in a 'hands-on' session where we will introduce some of the tools of practical research for participants to experience at first-hand.

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