***Everyday urbanism and digitalisation – who are we becoming?***

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***Abstract***

Everyday urbanism and digitalisation, is a wide-ranging research topic. Among many topics, it extends the question of smart technology (or digitalisation) from what it can be used for into the question of its impact on society, on life, and what it is to be human. This paper presents some preliminary thinking about the ontological impact of digitalisation of the every day, and of urbanism. It is based on a series of thoughts arising out of a recently held workshop on Everyday Urbanism and Digitalisation held at Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU). These thoughts are oriented toward the question of who are we being, or in this case who might we be becoming as a result of the digitalisation of the every day, and the urban. The paper is intended to open a conversation about possible research directions in this wide topic. It represents an invitation to join this conversation.

***Keywords:*** Digitialisation; platform urbanism; ontology; everyday urbanism.

***Introduction***

This paper presents a summary of discussion held at a workshop on Everyday Urbanism and Digitalisation held at Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU), and some preliminary thoughts arising from that workshop related to the impact of that digitalisation on human being. In so doing, the intent is to invite researchers from outside XJTLU to enter into this conversation, and consider possible research collaboration. The paper thus makes no claims to be a comprehensive examination of the field, which as is revealed below is extensive, and potentially crosses into all social science research in the present age. Instead, the paper takes the opportunity afforded by the presentations at the workshop to provide a ‘quick and dirty’ opening of the discussion. There are a range of ways in which to enter this discussion and a concern with the ontological (the impact on human being) is only one. It is however a perspective which at times gives an opportunity to ‘fracture the now’ and open new horizons.

Acknowledgement must therefore be made that the majority of the content in this paper comes from unpublished presentations made by scholars in attendance at the workshop. This includes Dr Yanru Feng, Dr Jiwen Han, Dr Joon Sik Kim, Dr Jinjin Lu, Dr Lief Johnson, Dr Yuhan Dou; Dr Jing Wu, Dr Juhyun Lee, Dr Kon Kim, Dr Xinyi Wu, Dr Liu Cao, Dr Yanhui Lie, Dr Yiwen Wang and Anna Vichnevetskaia (PhD) all from XJTLU, as well as Dr Johan Vaide of Linneus University, Sweden, and Dr Sarah Barns of RMIT, Melbourne. The summaries presented here are composed from my own notes made on the day and after review of slides presented. The discussion on the ontological results purely from my own reflections.

***Introducing everyday urbanism and digitalisation.***

Among many different definitions and approaches urbanism is often considered to be about what happens inside cities, the form and function of cities and how cities relate to the rural (Rogers et al., 2020, p. 2). What happens inside cities includes of course what people do there, and the way that they interact (Wirth, 1938). The concept thus encompasses the physical or material existence of cities, power and how such places are governed, the interaction of the material and people that make up the city, and indeed how the people live.

Everyday urbanism then is the study of the particular ordinary, daily happenings which go on inside cities, and indeed inside people’s lives (Chase et al., 1999). It is thus concerned very much with human experience. It combines the shared experiences of urban residents with their ordinary routines to ‘reveal a fabric of space and time defined by a complex realm of social practices – a conjecture of accident, desire and habit’ (Crawford, 1999). Studies of the space of everyday are about lived experience (Lefebvre, 1991) and allow the potential to consider the connection between theory and the lives people live.

Coming then to digitalisation, here we are talking about smart technology; phones, computers, tablets, and such objects that can tap into the internet. But also, we can include the digital objects created by use of such devices; photographs, maps, travel paths (forecast and completed) and of course the user data that is subsequently captured and aggregated creating entirely new ways of knowing the world around us.

***Dimensions of this field discussed at XJTLU***

On 19th April 2024, scholars from a variety of disciplines met for a workshop on this topic of Everyday Urbanism and Digitalisation. The purpose of the workshop was to begin to flesh out the scope of research in the field and to explore what could come of undertaking a multidisciplinary view of different dimensions of the field. Scholars at the workshop came from strategic management, urban planning and design, architecture, China studies, health and environment, and sociology. The wider group of scholars at XJTLU indicating an interest in the topic includes foundational mathematics, English studies and media and communications. The following provides a summary of the fields discussed.

*Keynote address:*

The workshop was launched by an online presentation by Dr Sarah Barns, a Senior Research Fellow at RMIT, Melbourne. Dr Barnes is a public artist and strategic designer, and a leading thinker in the emerging field of platform urbanism, which considers the impacts of digital business models on urban governance, policy and practice.Her presentation began with a description of different perspectives that have dominated academic engagement with the topic. This showed that the history of concern with the digitalisation demonstrates considerable shift in the discussion but at the same time the central concerns relate to the manner in which this different form of interacting with the world effects our modes of thought and practices.

Initial perspectives or ways of seeing technology transformations involved a concern with how they act to produce or elevate certain behaviours and conditions of social life over others. While some of these behaviours are new, afforded by the technology itself, they merge with old behaviours already existing resulting in different impact in different places. This merging or combining is at least partially mediated by social imaginaries, for example ‘smart city’.

Concern then shifted toward a question of how these technologies interact with technics of the self. From impacts on sense making, to senses of the self. This is not a new concern, Simmel (1908) posited that technologies of public transport had created a much greater emphasis on sight as a method of interpersonal interaction due to having to stare at others while using buses and trains. Underground metro’s remade the city into a series of islands to be navigated through a network. Arguably smart phones have taken our sight away from even those across from us on the screen (we stare at the little screen instead), just as noise cancelling headphones remove us from the sounds around us.

Then more recently concern has shifted again to impacts on and through urban technologies which link these new perceptions, with the data that is produced, producing new imaginaries and understandings. There are two sides to this. Just as science has structured valid knowing (see for example Latour (1999)), so to the digital, and particularly the coding that governs how things become, are retained and discoverable in the digital realm is a kind of black box that privileges some kinds of knowing and not others. The other side is the idea of how the technology uses us or needs us to behave in order to work effectively.

A concern with street computing followed, asking how, when and through what medium data was not only being used, but also produced. A concern which has subsequently led to a concern for the manner in which that data is captured and encoded, owned, and redistributed. Which of course has led to a concern about what kind of behaviour these platforms based on a business model of increasing interaction, are changing or reforming the way we behave.

*Participant Contributions*

Adding to this overview of the field, participants at the workshop then shared their own research perspectives with discussion following as others sought to expand their understanding of the field. Inside this conversation seven interconnected domains of research concern were clearly identified.

Johan Vaide has been researching how wechat is used and uses us in daily life for several years. This research has taken the form of ethnographic studies into the way people use the platform, and how it is changing life and the space of the urban. This work references heavily ideas around hybrid space (de Souza e Sliva, 2006), and the constant oscillation between ‘the digital’ and the ‘physical’. It enters the question of the urban as a physical, digital and physical-digital networked place leveraging for example Pink et al. (2016) talking about four ways of being in the field; co-presently (face to face), remotely (chat, video, streaming, etc), virtually (web fora, mail lists) and imaginatively (digital stories and images on social media, blogs and other sharing sites).

This work raises the question of whether we are still experiencing urban life through digital technologies, or whether that experience has become urban life. Is it that we have a dual world or is it merging into something new? Regardless, numerous questions arise about how to address understanding of urban space theoretically, methodologically and empirically.

Taking a different approach, Jinjin Lu’s research is concerned with understanding child friendly cities, through looking at very young children’s (aged 4) behaviour in various educational settings. Motivated at least in part by concerns over the impact of social media on this group, as well as the opportunities and problems presented by home schooling. The work is engaged with the UN programme for Child Friendly Cities. The most recent project has been using trackers to understand better how young children use space, how long they spend in places, what they do and the impact of different educational spaces on their physiology (heat rate, respiration etc).

This research raises not only the question of whether social media and devices support constructive early child development, but whether they increase or decrease the ‘friendliness’ of urban space for children. Additionally, the question of how various devices might be harnessed in research, and their availability becomes a question. Clearly there is potential for researchers not only to capture data already being created on platforms, but to consider how to create useful data that could answer questions.

Leif Johnson’s research has been concerned with the experience of construction workers in China using ethnographic methods. While spending months working with workers on construction sites, in Shanghai, Leif’s observations inevitably included the way that such workers use mobile phones in daily life. This led to a new interest related to the question of how cameras are being used to construct verifiable facts. The example given was the regular practice of photographing of workers in their safety equipment each day as verification that workplaces are safe. The subsequent discussion revealed that this kind of construction of truth is widespread in China, where for example, teachers at schools are required to send photographs of children to their parents as verification of the child’s safety and security. Obviously, there are questions here not only about what truth is being constructed, but about the use of technologies of surveillance, changes to responsibilities (and presumably accountabilities), and indeed inevitably control.

Yanru Feng’s PhD research on construction migrant workers in China sought to understand the role of social networking sites on workers access to social support. Looking through the concept of the digital divide, the research found that there are different opportunities realised through digital technology, and that there are significant differences between different groups capacity to access these opportunities. The findings that there is indeed a digital divide between construction worker access to social support through social networking sites, and additionally that within the large group of construction workers there are differential access creates sub-groups with different social status and resources. This research reminds us that while use of digital technology appears ubiquitous it is not. There remain significant differences in ability to access and to use technology for different groups in society, raising issues of equity and access.

A further question raised through this research is the degree to which the digital has made possible the kind of work conditions that these people experience. Extended periods of time away from family are enabled perhaps by the ‘connection’ with home that these devices and platforms provide. The technology both enables a kind of bubble to form around these workers so that where they are no longer matters, but at the same time the technology can in some cases act as an enabler to escape from the bubble through learning new skills. When does support become confinement? This concern with the bubble effect of the digital strikes to Joon Sik Kim’s concern with new spaces of the urban where it is possible to remain in one’s bubble even when traveling across the city (via didi for example) or with applications that bring the city to the home (online shopping and food delivery). What happens then to the city of encounter?

Kon Kim’s research focuses on urban nomads moving from cities to smaller towns in Korea. While the research is primarily about what is driving this shifting demographic which includes younger and well educated people, it necessarily includes consideration of what enables this behaviour. It is clear that part of this behaviour is shaped by a capability to work from home and to manage interactions virtually. However, the research shows that this nomadic behaviour is not limited to work constructed primarily in the digital. Improved marketing allows production of bespoke items to be shifted to small workshops outside major cities. Further the movement of some people who’s work is largely online, has reinvigorated some smaller cities. This suggests that the urban is not only moving online, but it doing so it is expanding to regional towns in unexpected ways.

Juhyun Lee is working on theoretical and empirical research on how technology and planning can interact each, contributing to better planning processes and social outcomes. The research looks at different platforms and ways that cities have attempted to harness the digital, governance structures that have been involved, seeking to understand different practices and outcomes. Currently, the research is looking at seeing the platform (infrastructure) as the commons upon which people can create and use the city. The approaches have been varied and of various success. Different ecosystems are evolving allowing a range of actors to interconnect, building new interactions across the platform which translates to the physical city. Among many questions this raises the interaction of private and public is writ large here, returning to the concerns of platform urbanism about not only who owns the platform, but who owns the right to leverage the data created through its use.

Finally, Yuehan Dou raised the question of how changes in the concept of "sense of place," traditionally shaped by direct interactions with the physical environment might be occurring. With the advent of digitalization and urbanization, our sense of place is increasingly influenced by virtual environments, virtual nature, and digital interactions. As she notes this transformation raises critical questions about how digital experiences and platform urbanism shape our connection to nature and urban spaces.

There are clearly then a very wide range of concerns with which research on the topic of everyday urbanism and digitalisation could engage, something which even this very small workshop makes clear. What also becomes clear is that increasingly the digital is indeed integrating itself into the everyday, and indeed the unusual. The digital is a tool we use widely, a space that we inhabit, and increasingly shapes not only what we capture about the world, but the way we understand that world.

***The dimension of the ontological***

My own research is concerned with who we become when we enter into various situations or structures, and what the results of that ‘being’ are. I started with mega urban transport projects and through that research found that our being – who we are in the world, is not fixed. It shifts fundamentally depending on a kind of amalgam of knowledge, rationality and technology which we come to be in at particular times. This amalgam can be identified through consideration of the occurring world, and gives being because human beings work to act in concert with (in a dance with) the occurring world (Sturup, 2010). Thus, my research is engaged with the kind of being that Heidegger was exploring in being and time (Heidegger, 2008). It acknowledges that literally who one is, is not entirely a matter of what is contained beneath the surface of the skin, but is always constituted in relationship to the world (being-in-the-world). Consequently, my concerns with this agenda of everyday urbanism and digitalisation asks what it is that this digitalisation is having us be, or who are we becoming?

From within this paradigm of research on being, the presentations and discussions at the workshop raise a number of questions and domains of concern. Clearly digitalisation is a technology and thus like all technology it impacts our being. This is perhaps most obvious in the discussion about the dual world of the digital and physical. In very real ways it appears that we no longer see the world that we are in (if we ever did). The construction of on-line knowings of a place, colour the world we now inhabit. We know places before we ever find ourselves in them. While this has always been the case, for example learning about poa (a genus of common grass types) on an undergraduate field trip forever changed my view of grasslands, perhaps there has been some change to our own agency over what information we absorb due to the overwhelming ‘noise’ of social media. For me there are not only questions to be asked about how constructions of place are occurring and who is doing the creating (along with all the questions about the validity of such constructions). There is also a real question about how invasive these constructions – these imaginaries come to be. Do I have a right to avoid them? Can I? At what cost?

The discussion of platforms and the way that they force the construction of knowledge into particular structures is a central concern for philosophy of science. There has been wide acknowledgement in the built environment disciplines of the opportunities afforded by ‘big data’ to quantify a range of matters previously relegated by lack of accessible data to the domain of qualitative study. Accompanying that has come a resurgence in the dominance of quantitative research. However little attention has been paid to the way that platforms structure data capture in particular ways, leading to generation of understanding about only certain things. Even less has been paid to the way that the digital itself is changing the users behaviour to meet the needs of the platform. Our discussion in the workshop around conducting research by walking through the way that people use an app, revealed the fallacy in the belief that we can use apps as we want. In fact, whether capturing content (such as photographs) or using apps, things must be done a particular way. We perhaps need to be reminded that just as the scientific paradigm has led to the construction of the world in one way, the digital may also be doing so in another.

What opportunities are there to research the impact that the digital is having on our physiology, on our brains? The digital offers much in the way of sensor and brain imaging techniques which could be used to understand how or way of seeing, and being is changing. Previous research on the impact of watching television on children suggests they enter a nearly entirely passive and inert state when sitting in front of television (something many parents appreciate). Is this what is happening to students when they sit for hours in lectures without taking a single note, after all physiological states become easier to achieve with practice? Or, has something happened to the way they process information, enabling perhaps a return to the more holistic understandings that people of oral traditions report? Should educators therefore be finding new ways to support students capturing learning – ones that privilege a different kind of memory and knowing than that allowed for by the process of rendering knowing into language?

In terms of the construction of truth, the use of digital images (that are so very malleable) seems more than a little odd as a choice of such truth. But beyond that, there are questions about the impact of further surveillance on relations of trust. Mobile phones have already shifted the distance between us, making it tolerable to be away from loved ones because we are perhaps never really ‘out of touch’. But what is the impact of that on the question of independence and particularly the question of trust. What is the impact longer term on Children’s independence if parents are not forced to ‘let them go’ when they start school? Indeed, the relationship of letting go, trust, and memory are all things that are being adjusted by the presence of such an easy way of creating records of such particularised kinds of truth. In such a space what happens to the construction of our own truth’s, our own world views?

This finally then leads to my particular concern. Is this new way of being more or less sustainable? There are many aspects to this question, most particularly is whether we end up more or less individualised, and in so doing more or less narcissistic as we become lost in our own bubbles. My thoughts on sustainable ways of being is that they require both a sense of care for the planet and those around us, this is likely to require a degree of engagement with the world and others. On the other hand, sustainable ways of being also need to celebrate diversity and strengthen the understanding of the self as a valued individual, with a variety of perspectives each of which should be honoured. Thus, the homogenising effect of digitalisation of the everyday, and hybrid ways of understanding the world that are increasing formed from an ever more congealed consensus of the they are likely to be a significant problem. Which leads me to a concern over how to harness the digital to drive sustainable ways of being, rather than some form of opposite.

*Future research opportunities*

Following the workshop on the 19th April, the group at XJTLU is now at work on developing a more formal publication of our collective viewpoint. Our intention is to develop a further workshop on this topic to further explore the research agenda and research opportunities. We would welcome the participation of other researchers interested in the topic.

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