Space, Place, and the Materiality of Internet Studies: An Introduction to the #AoIR18 Special Issue

by Alison Harvey and Mary Elizabeth Luka

We are pleased to present the 12th special issue of *Information, Communication, and Society* themed on the annual Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) conference. As with the previous issues, you will find a selection of papers that exemplify the critical rigor as well as theoretical, methodological, and disciplinary breadth of Internet Studies. In particular, the papers included in this issue showcase how the field engages with the conference's theme of "Transnational Materialities". Hosted by Professor Andrew Herman and the programme committee of Jeremy Hunsinger, Mary Elizabeth Luka, Mélanie Millette, and Cindy Tekkobe, the conference was held October 10-13 at Le Centre Sheraton Montréal Hotel in Canada, welcoming Internet scholars from 30 countries. This diversity in the national contexts from which we as a community operate was mirrored in the wide range of approaches to the conference theme, ranging from paper sessions, fishbowls, and roundtables to the Digital Critical Race Mixtape session to the Privacy Booth staged next to the reception desk. We are delighted that the papers included in this special issue represent this critical and creative expansiveness.

In Montréal, we welcomed 527 participants who presented 180 papers and participated in 25 pre-constituted panels, 15 roundtables, 6 fishbowls, 8 experimental sessions, 11 pre-conference workshops, and a doctoral colloquium. A range of pre-conferences set the stage for conversation, including sessions on live streaming technologies and practices, social media data analysis, and critical AI studies, to name but a few. The conference also hosted an iteration of the Museum of

Random Memory: A Critical Data Literacy Workshop + Exhibition. This multi-year digital literacy project aims to build awareness about how the ubiquitous nature of our digital worlds can be made understandable. Long-time AoIR participant and researcher Annette Markham describes the research team's aim to make visible "the link between personal technological devices... and larger data collection, archiving, and marketing infrastructures; and greater understanding of the difficulty of retaining meaningful memories as and if they are lost within the huge masses of competing data points" (Markham, 2018, p. 1). Research team members facilitated explorations of the role of digital media in memory-making through the creation of a crowd-sourced archive of everyday ephemera including computer parts, written memories, visual images, light and sound. This playful approach to the sensory in the digital highlighted both the specificity of North American digital life and encounters with global behemoths.

As this exhibition and other physical installations like the Privacy Booth indicate, there was a deep sense of place emphasized in the execution of this conference, where despite our shared interest in digital phenomena and infrastructures, bodily presence and situated locale were underlined. This was apparent in the preconference themed on Montréal's 'third places', where organizers and participants encountered the embodied experiences that make overlapping boundaries, territories and stories of place visible (O'Rourke, 2013). Engaged with sights, smells, sounds, and tastes that included autumn colours, iconic bagel bakeries and chocolateries, participants walked through many of the city's most iconic neighborhoods, visiting fabrication lab échoFab, co-working studio NOMAD Nation, and the artist-run makerspace Eastern Bloc. These diverse sites incorporate in distinctive material ways a globalized community ethos as well as the tensions arising from waves of gentrification. Discussions about grassroots creative

approaches and critical perspectives on the relationship between urban space, commerce, creativity and digital technologies allowed participants to reflect on Montréal's experimental, alternative, DIY, and bilingual identities in ways that revealed what Nanna Verhoeff (2016) has conceptualized as the ways "media technologies intersect with the complexities of cities as historically layered, continuously changing, and intricately connected spaces" (p. 3). As plenary panelist Alison Powell's (2008) earlier research on the development of the city's public wireless network Île Sans Fil ('wireless island' in French) demonstrates, the organization of community Internet in Montréal is deeply tied to a culture within Québec of working class and grassroots action, self-determination in the country's only French province, and the association of leftist politics with community media.

The conference's Call for Proposals on "Transnational Materialities" provided an important reminder of the need to be attuned to the specificities of spaces and places. In particular, the organizers provoked contributors to consider how histories, geographies, and geospatial relations shape engagement with ideologies and networked technologies, highlighting the politics of context and its significance:

"As a settler nation with complex contested histories, vast geographies, and ongoing struggles to achieve global economic impact, Canada is situated firmly in the middle of the pack globally when it comes to internet presence. Like so many other nations, Canada's transnational aspirations are deeply tied to its efforts to integrate and grow a diverse population. Such interconnected orientations are increasingly mediated by internet technologies. These interconnections are materialist in nature, but deeply

transnational in both institutional and cultural construction. This leads us to the theme of the conference: transnational materialities."

The CFP furthermore opened questions about the material constraints posed by embodied forms of exclusion, from race, ethnicity, language, and migration status to gender, sexuality, and class. It provocatively called for contributions that teased at the complexities and contradictions of what are viewed as friction-free global flows of capital, data, and information and ever-present material relations of domination and subordination. The papers included in this special issue all interrogate the paradoxes of examining historical and contemporary material relations in a transnational context. As in previous years, we sought to showcase the theoretical and methodological diversity of the Internet Studies community. Across this multiplicity, we are pleased to see there is once again a clear interest in the relationship between transnationalism, materiality, and opportunities for greater equity. These critical yet ultimately optimistic perspectives are all uniquely, deeply rooted in a sense of space and place in terms of their objects of study, which demonstrates the potency of nuanced analysis of local relations and practices even while considering global networks and platforms.

The articles included here were invited after being peer reviewed by volunteer experts from the AoIR community with an eye to representing scholarly breadth as well as the work of scholars in different regions of the world and at various stages of their careers. After a shortlisting process with the local programme chair, twelve teams of authors were invited to submit full papers, all of which underwent a process of double-blind peer review. We are very pleased to now present six papers encapsulating the strengths of the field and posing important questions about the

relationship between space, place, and materiality without resorting to the simplistic binaries of local/global, online/offline, or real/virtual so often entailed in public discourse about these dynamics.

This criticality decisively characterized the provocative addresses given by the keynote and plenary panel speakers at the #AoIR2018 conference. Attendees were welcomed by Vicky Boldo, co-chair of the Montreal Urban Aboriginal Community Strategy NETWORK and cultural support worker, educator, and facilitator at Concordia University. Boldo opened the conference with a territorial acknowledgement and Indigenous welcoming ceremony, instilling in the proceedings an awareness of the colonial legacies and present realities on which the host location is built. This set the stage for Professor Jason Lewis's keynote talk entitled "White Supremacy - It's Not Just for People Anymore!". As Professor of Computation Arts, Design and Computation Arts and University Research Chair in Computational Media and the Indigenous Future Imaginary at Concordia University, as well as director and co-director of a range of critical and creative initiatives such as the Initiative for Indigenous Futures and Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace, Lewis's route to Internet Studies derives from his interest in computational culture and in particular how the "digital earth" is constituted. In his talk, Lewis discussed how the opacity of data sets leads to racial biases in data and algorithmic processes, noting how this is not in fact a broken system but working as designed to protect White supremacy. In response, he argued for us to be inspired (but never appropriate) Indigenous epistemologies, which offer different approaches to understanding relationships and kinship structures with non-human entities. Reflecting on and imagining new ways of seeking balance, understanding responsibility, and nurturing interdependence, he posits, is the path to flourishing for all.

The turn to future-thinking was picked up by the esteemed Internet scholars featured on the plenary panel chaired by conference organizer Professor Andrew Herman. Themed on "Transnational Materialities and the Future of Critical Internet Studies" the plenary interrogated speculative and utopian questions about a different kind of Internet, new approaches to Internet research, and the trans- and interdisciplinarity necessitated by these possibilities. Melissa Gregg, author of *Work's Intimacy* (2011) and the recently-published *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy* (2018), kicked the panel off with a discussion of her research on transnational startup co-working companies. She noted that these spaces and their aesthetics and conventions are premised on job precarity in contemporary capitalism, with global giant WeWork drawing on 3D mapping technologies to maximize worker productivity. As a glimpse into the future of networked work, Gregg's research highlights the significance of considering the relationship between physical and digital platforms in scaffolding the acceleration of financial capital. Guillaume Latzko-Toth, Associate Professor of Communication and Digital Media at Laval University addressed the question of the disciplinarity of Internet Studies, making the provocative statement "ontologically, there is no Internet" to demonstrate the significance of the community's transnational, transdisciplinary, and transperiod scholarship. Alison Powell, Assistant Professor in Media and Communications at the London School of Economics, countered this statement with a situated approach to understanding ontology as material, first locating the audience in Montréal's history and then tracing her own movements to question "where is the internet from?". The final speaker, Sarah Sharma, is Associate Professor of Media Theory (ICCIT) and the Director of the McLuhan Centre for Culture and Technology

at the University of Toronto. In her talk she argued for a feminist technological determinism, thinking of feminism as a failed technology, with resistant women and racialized people as machines that are broken and sex robots as their new and improved models. This plenary panel with its diverse philosophical entry points highlighted again the significance of place, not at the expense of transnational flows but with a distinct emphasis on the local and its attendant histories, relations, communities, needs, and differences in access. These politically-charged talks from the keynote and plenary speakers direct our attention to the future of our field and the Internet in a manner that also characterizes this special issue.

The articles here provide insight into the role of space, place, and the material complexities of the Internet. This is accomplished in a wide-ranging series of sites, for example, through analysis of transnational social networks between educators in Kenyan refugee camps and Canadian universities in pursuit of gender equity (Dahya, Dryden-Peterson, Douhaibi & Arvisais, pp. xx in this special issue); the Trickster figure as a mode of understanding the #NoDAPL movement in the USA, based on Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Hinzo and Clark, pp. xx in this special issue); and social media storytelling by citizens and activists in response to limited mainstream news coverage of the Flint Water Crisis (Moors, pp. xx in this special issue). A thoughtful and hopeful contribution about cross-platform and multimodal expressions of joy by Black users highlights the extension of resistant oral traditions to online environments (Lu & Steele, pp. xx in this special issue); while an in-depth look at how local narratives emerging from an Israeli software app startup begin to change as the company transitions to becoming an international corporation calls our attention back to the challenges of realizing common understandings about international protocols and standards (Ribak, pp. xx in this special issue).

Our last article helps reframe an evolving body of literature: a comprehensive overview of platform governance practices and policies in Europe and elsewhere draws together literature from governance studies within political science, digital media and communication scholarship (Gorwa, pp. xx in this special issue).

In "Social Support Networks, Instant Messaging, and Gender Equity in Refugee Education", Negin Dahya, Sarah Dryden-Peterson, Dacia Douhaibi, and Olivier Arvisais consider the use of instant messaging by educational stakeholders working in Kenyan refugee camps and Canadian universities. They indicate how these practices can serve to contribute to the goal of greater gender equity in higher education through the constitution of and support for transnational social networks. The authors draw on critical approaches including feminist science and technology studies and amplification theory to challenge the implicit power dynamics inherent in many technology-focused international development studies, and through their multi-method design provide a grounded sense of how these practices can despite best intentions still contribute to asymmetries in power, labour, and access to education for women in these refugee camps.

Attention to the relationship between land, digital activism, and knowledge production within and beyond Internet Studies is at the core of Angel Hinzo and Lynn Clark's article "Digital Survivance and Trickster Humor: Exploring visual and digital Indigenous epistemologies in the #NoDAPL movement". Examining social media visuals such as memes as forms of ironic humor evoking the Trickster figure, the authors provide the grounds for understanding familiar practices in context as forms of 'rhetorical sovereignty'. Drawing on their "situated knowledges" (Haraway, 1988) as, in the case of Hinzo, a Ho-Chunk scholar and member of the Winnebago

tribe of Nebraska, and in the case of Clark, a descendent of settler-colonial practices, the authors demonstrate the rich possibilities of decolonizing approaches to the study of not only social media activism but Internet Studies as a field.

This focus on place-based discursive strategies continues in "What is Flint? Place, storytelling, and social media narrative reclamation during the Flint Water Crisis" by M. Rae Moors. In her analysis, Moors examines how Flint activists intervene in dominant news media framings of the city as site of decline by highlighting its sites, citizens, and affective expressions of pride across social media platforms. Citizens drew on social media to assert other stories about living in Flint, destabilizing crisis narratives by centering themselves in accounts of the city and portraying their lived context in broader and more positive ways. In this way, Moors' paper highlights the potency of even the most mundane and personal social media posts in complicating place-based narratives while underlining the power relations between dominant media agencies and activists using social media for storytelling.

The significance of affect in relation to place and resistance to domination is made clear in "'Joy is Resistance': Resilience and (Re)Invention of Black Oral Culture Across Platforms Online" by Jessica H. Lu and Catherine Knight Steele. Their consideration of hashtags across Twitter and Vince using Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis enables not only a needed sense of how subversive activities operate across platforms and even at times against affordances (persisting beyond the closure of Vine) but also grounds these social media practices in longer oral traditions of resistance within Black communities. By situating their analysis of the hashtags #freeblackchild, #carefreeblackkids, and #CareFreeBlackKids2k16 in the context of both

platform affordances and historical practices of Black resistance, the authors provide a compelling argument about the role played by affective expressions of joy in both community connection and resistant messaging against dominant, one-dimensional media representations of anti-Black violence.

Rivka Ribak, in "Translating Privacy: Developer Cultures in the Global World of Practice" takes an in-depth look at how narratives articulated by creative workers based at an Israeli software app startup begin to shift and transform as the company grows into an international corporation. The evolving relationship with North American regulatory and business protocols, as well as the workers' encounters with global standards, reminds us that at the heart of each digital encounter, there are humans involved. The poignant and pointed tensions of the region (and in multiple cultural encounters throughout the world) are reflected in the workers' efforts to both accommodate international protocols and standards, and still assert the familiar, place-based values and approaches in the digital workplace.

Our last article in this collection, "What is Platform Governance?," reexamines the rapidly growing literature on platform governance practices and policies in Europe and elsewhere. Robert Gorwa draws from political science and international relations as well as digital media and communication scholarship to delineate governance relationships among platform companies, users, advertisers, governments, and other political actors. Taking recent high-profile scandals as a departure point, he traces efforts to understand how platform practices and policies impact and can be shaped by regulatory interventions. His aim is to develop a robust

interdisciplinary research agenda that can continue to address calls to make global corporations large and smaller "more democratically accountable."

Overall, the six papers in this special issue engage with space, place, and the materiality of Internet Studies on multiple levels. At the most explicit level, geographic location is a key element of the analysis in all papers, whether it is based on examination of practices in specific locales (across Kenya, Israel, Canada, and the United States) as well as in the transnational dynamics that underpin even the most grounded analysis, in terms of policy, norms, power relations, and other socio-technical governance mechanisms. But there are also two other points of notable convergence across these articles. They each in their own way firmly ground the at-times free-floating elements of digital culture- memes, hashtags, instant messages- within the concrete and always significant global dynamics of power, dominance, and resistance instantiated in our platforms, bodies, communicative systems, colonial histories, laws, and other material entities. Furthermore, each paper provides a clear intervention into the epistemological norms of Internet research, articulating the disciplinary foundations that have begun to form, introducing new critical and creative approaches for understanding digital culture, and signaling the importance of grounding our analyses always in the ever-present material constraints that shape Internet practices, including our own positionality as researchers. Based on these critical, theoretical, and methodological strengths, we hope this special issue provides the grounds for further interesting discussions and dialogue about the transnational dynamics and material realities that shape our field ontologically and epistemologically.

Notes on the editors

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