

Interactive comment on “Synthesizing the face-to-face experience: e-learning practices and the constitution of place online” by J. Maintz

Anonymous Referee #1

Received and published: 14 February 2007

The paper “Synthesizing the face-to-face experience: e-learning practices and the constitution of place online” by J. Maintz describes difficulties that emerge if social events with a spatial context and under face-to-face conditions are translated into spatial representations of online-environments. The study is based on a community of e-learning participants who communicate via technologically mediated channels (information and communications technologies, ICT), except two face-to-face meetings at the beginning and at the end of the e-learning project. Theoretically, Maintz refers to actor network theory (ANT) to create a compatible mechanism for translating experiences of physical spatiality into textual representations disseminated in telecommunication networks. The term “constitution of place online” (in the title) is, therefore, not about a comparison of virtual and real spaces and also not about an approach to explain the deduction of

S11

virtual spaces due to real space experiences. The idea of ‘constitution’ of places online consists of, that is my interpretation of the paper, a starting point to find appropriate ways of how to translate perceived spaces among participants. Hence, e-learning practices function as a frame, a medium, but not as a causal context.

If this interpretation is correct then I would like to discuss the question whether or not ANT is the appropriate theory to analyze mechanisms of translation. Applying ANT is a good idea to study theoretically the organization of two, partly overlapping social networks: one network consists of actors being co-present physically (for instance family members, neighbors, colleagues) and the second network that links actors digitally like participants in an e-learning environment. In doing so, ‘overlapping’ comprises of several modes of interrelation: a structural overlapping due to the nodes participating in both networks; a temporal overlapping by acting in both networks simultaneously (this I think is the case of the mentioned mode of ‘parallel synchronous co-presence face-to-face and online’); and, thirdly, a social overlapping, since communication is not restricted basically to one of the two networks (as a closed system), but the flows of information and meaning flow continuously between both of them. In this organizational context Maintz is right: ““Actor networks” are constituted by the ensemble of elements defined by their relations. Relations might be held stable for a certain time, or change in the process of connecting or disconnecting with new elements” (p. 35).

To describe this organizational fact, the ANT definition of topological space - as immutable mobile - is assumed to be a suitable representation. Maintz, however, argues for the concept of a fire space to represent ‘alterity of Otherness’ (p. 43). The central question is: whereon is Otherness referred to? Maintz herself says: “This paper targets the interrelation of face-to-face and online environments when they are enacted as social spaces” (p. 34). I read her text in a different way: How can experiences and perceptions of face-to-face environments be suitably translated into textual descriptions, being able to distribute it in online forums, chats or bulletin boards. Thus, it is not about two different types of spaces or spatialities, but two different types of representations

S12

of spaces or spatialities.

This approach was developed and broadly elaborated by Klüter over the last two decades. His theory of space - applied as spatial abstractions of physical facts and phenomena, respectively, via combination (Kombinatorik), synchronization, and addressing to organize social systems spatially - can be utilized to exactly solve the problems mentioned by Maintz. If, however, the ANT concept of fire spaces has to be conceptualized, I propose that the following topics should be explained more precisely:

1. According to ANT, Maintz refers to fire spaces as: "Topologically, then, our argument is that in fire spaces a shape achieves constancy in a relation between presence and absence: the constancy of object presence depends on simultaneous absence or alterity (Law and Mol, 2001a: 615-616)". What does 'presence' and 'absence' actually mean? Is presence related to face-to-face interaction and thus a phenomenon of geometry? By quoting Callon and Law (2004, 3): "[É] presence and absence - or proximity and distance - [É]" it is supposed to be understood in this sense. If, otherwise, absence is a form of presence (like Hetherington and Law (2000, 130) argue), as indicated by Maintz as well, then, social interaction is neither restricted to the face-to-face type nor is face-to-face interaction the most favoured type of communication. Total presence makes no difference in distance. Or is presence/absence conceptualized topologically? In this case, distance has to be translated into: how many 'steps' (nodes) are necessary to be linked to connect 'me' with another 'you'? 2. Discussing 'Otherness' Maintz notes: "It accounts for the difficulty to include otherness in a network imagery. "[The network concept; J.M.] allows for no space outside" (Hetherington and Law, 2000: 128)". What should be explained with this expression? Every network seems to be a holistic fact, with no external accessibility. Moreover, it implies that every node is linked to every other node in the network under investigation. Is this a realistic assumption? I don't think so. 3. The network approach of ANT is defined as 'immutable mobile'. Consequently, the topological dimension ('immutability') and the geometrical dimension ('mobility') are mutually correlated to one another.

S13

Nevertheless, the question remains: What is the intention of applying ANT? My personal conclusion of the statements of Maintz is that she argues from a second-order-observation perspective, describing how people are challenged by translating spatial abstractions - including their emotions - while being part of a digital community. The two examples ('Namibia' and 'barbecue party', p. 45 and 46) can be interpreted in this sense. In this context it would be a good deal if Maintz could clarify more explicitly why and with what results she had applied an ethnographic concept; and what differences are drawn by the different types of co-presence - for instance what is the difference between 'synchronous co-presence face-to-face and asynchronous co-presence online' and 'parallel synchronous co-presence face-to-face and online'?

If I wholly misunderstood the author's intentions, I apologize for made hasty judgements; if not, I would appreciate comments on my comments.

Interactive comment on Soc. Geogr. Discuss., 3, 31, 2007.

S14