The Efficacy of Phenomenology for Investigating Place with Locative Media

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> That our human senses, of which all media are extensions are also fixed charges on our personal energies, and that they also configure the awareness and experience of each one of us… (McLuhan, 1964, 10)

The notion that media makes our world is a fundamental notion of the discipline of media studies. From that start point, it is a surprising yet plausible argument that much of what the discipline has to say about the world (and particularly place) is characterized by a distance from the human in the world and a retreat to the view from above that characterizes a scientific worldview of the world. Maybe this should be of no surprise; the need for rigor and an empirical certainty about the effects of the media on people demands a quasi-scientific method of studying the media that reinforces a subject-object view of the relationship between people and media. Such a position is informed by critical theory that reinforces the subject-object distinction such as political economy, behaviorism and social learning in the case of media effects or semiotic theory in the analysis of representation through the media. Given the 'spatial turn' in the social theory as exemplified by Gaston Bachelard (1964), Michel de Certeau (1984), Henri Lefebvre (1991), Edward Soja (1996), David Harvey (2001) and of course Michel Foucault (1986) to name a few, one might expect the increased attention to the spatial aspects of media. However, closer attention to the nature of the research in locative media (as an indicative example of spatial media) indicates that attention paid to place, as opposed to space, is limited.

This chapter details an attempt to integrate a phenomenological approach to the understanding of place and the understanding of place that people gain when using locative media in a traditional media studies research project. Any call for more attention to the

phenomenology of place in Media Studies is recognition of an identified need to pay greater attention to how media attunes users to place (Coyne, 2010) as opposed to analyzing representation or structural aspects of space. A phenomenology informed approach to place – attending to lived-in experience, everyday being-with media and the importance of orientation and mood of being-with technology and the effect on placehood of that being with – informed this research project. In a phenomenological view of place, place is not undifferentiated matter (or space), but is filled with things that provide meaning and a sense of differentiated *place* (Relph, 1976, 43) rather than undifferentiated *space*. Place is therefore lived in (Elden, 2004, 187) rather than observed from outside, and the top-down approach to the analysis of media as an object rather than an environment that is occupied will encounter difficulties when the phenomenological experience of place is not addressed in media that actively remake and make new places. The efficacy of that approach and what media studies as a discipline might take from such an approach is the focus of this chapter.

Locative media

Locative media can be understood as media that are bound to or related to a particular location, but which are not physically bound to the location that the content of the media refers to in use. That may sound confusing, but as an example take Google Maps. By unlocking my phone and activating the application I can explore the layout of streets, town or cities anywhere in the world from the place I am in at this time. Locative media is therefore concerned with location and requires information about location. In most devices today, Global Positioning Technology (GPS) will allow the device to be located and for location-specific data and information to be provided for the user of that device. Locative media therefore has a dual articulation: locative media can provide information about locations anywhere in the world (providing there is data available about that location) and can provide context- and locale-specific information about the place the device is being used in too.

The specific example of locative media that was investigated using a phenomenological approach was the Location-based Social Network (LBSN) *Foursquare*. *Foursquare* is an example of a location-based service that builds a database of places by users creating "spots" and "checking-in" at those spots. *Foursquare* launched on March 13th 2009, and had 50 million registered users by May 2014. On *Foursquare*, users were (prior to an application redesign in August 2014 that saw the check in function delegated to a new application called Swarm) rewarded in points-based systems for the creation of and checking-in to spots, and from this a game environment is created where users are encouraged to compete with friends for high scores over periods of time.

Users were also rewarded with badges and titles for check-ins and creating spots: *Foursquare* did convey the status of "mayor" on users who had the most check-ins at a spot. Users can still leave comments about spots they check-in at (and as many of these spots are services like restaurants or shops, this can be seen as a form of free advertising or user-review of the service) and photographs of the place. Links with other social networks, with Facebook and Twitter being ubiquitous options, helps to find 'friends' and to post real-time updates to potentially larger audiences - all while promoting the application itself across other platforms. (Evans, 2015, 37-38). When checking-in to a place, a list of nearby venues and places is automatically generated, providing the user with further information on their location and their relative position to other places and services. This is the basis for the locational search function that was central to the mission and use of *Foursquare* since the initial excitement of its use in the early 2010s.

While the use of *Foursquare* has curtailed in recent years, the application's key features can now be found in all the major social networks, such as with Facebook's places feature or the location-specific features on Twitter. *Foursquare* has been described as an example of

'zombie media' (Evans and Saker, 2017, 69). These 'zombie' media 'haunt' new and developing media platforms and forms, informing and helping to shape new technologies. The impetus to study this form of media, and the reason it is still of interest, is in how the locational search facility allowed users to go beyond a representational understanding of space into a meaningful understanding of place. My initial thoughts as a user (and I was part of the research in an auto-ethnographic manner) was that I could find out much more about places I was visiting – and indeed, places I was already familiar with or so I thought – through the social gazetteers left by other users. These went beyond just recommendations on where to eat or not to seat; social history, personal preferences and detailed thoughts on venues were encoded into many user-generated gazetteers that gave me an understanding of the nuances of venues that went beyond locating that venue. The feeling of understanding and affinity through the use of other people's opinions was bringing forth a feeling of *place* in the phenomenological sense outlined earlier. At other times though, I would just open the application and check-in to get some points especially if I saw the location as high status. The project undertaken, and critiqued here, looked to use phenomenological theory to understand this feeling of place as a mood on the part of the person using the application, to assess whether phenomenological theory could provide an understanding of this feeling where other explanations of locative-media use that could explain these different usages and intentions of use, placing the person using locative media and their experience at the centre of the theoretical explanation.

Given the ubiquity of smartphone hardware and location-able software that can achieve these effects, a large body of research has emerged in Media Studies that is concerned with how usage of locative media affects understandings of place and space which foregrounded, informed and developed during the project in question. Wilken (2012, 243) identifies the major themes as research directed towards analyzing how locative technologies mediate the

relationship between technology use and physical or digital spaces (see de Souza e Silva and Frith, 2010; de Souza e Silva and Sutko, 2011; Wilken, 2008; Wilken and Goggin, 2012), discussions of power and politics in location-based services (see Elmer, 2010), and assessments and discussions on the nature of the representation of space that emerge through locative media (Gazzard, 2011). In addition, the area of privacy has been a major area of interest (See Michael and Michael, 2009). A substantial body of research has developed on location-based applications (see Crawford and Goggin, 2009; de Souza e Silva and Gordon, 2011; Evans, 2015a; Humphreys and Liao, 2013; Wilken and Goggin, 2012) that has explored how locative media are used to communicate and coordinate social interactions in public space (Campbell and Kwak, 2011), leading to a persistent sense of co-presence (Licoppe, 2004; Ling and Horst, 2011; Rainie and Wellman, 2012), affecting how people approach physical space (Martin, 2014), turning ordinary life 'into a game' (Frith, 2013; Hjorth and Richardson, 2009; Licoppe and Inada, 2008), and pointedly altering how mobile media is understood (Farman, 2012). Research has also investigated the idea that the use of mobile media alters the way that users relate to physical space in a convergence of location, digital networks and location-specific information that mediates geographic places (Martin, 2014, 180; Campbell and Ling, 2008).

This body of work is concerned with ~~largely concerned with~~ space as something approached by media users, rather than lived-in place – concerns of how software mediate spaces lived in by users have do not have a phenomenologically-influenced stance generally. The dominant mode of explanation in this work is from a critical geography perspective where the making and remaking of space (following Thrift and French, 2002, and Dodge and Kitchin, 2011) that creates new spatialities is the dominant paradigm. While this approach is valuable, the lack of attention to the feeling of *place* as a mood meant that this project at hand on Foursquare had to look to phenomenology to explain this potential feature. There is some

indication that a phenomenologically-informed appreciation of place is apparent in some of the work in this area though. For example, in de Souza e Silva e Silva and Gordon's (2011) *Net Locality* that assesses location-based services as technologies that open up hybrid realities between location and technology. A hybrid situation in this view is one where the local and the remote cannot be clearly defined as the mobile technology pulls in remote information to inform the situated actor in the local context. The presence, and more importantly use, of this information in local contexts has a transformative effect on the experience of space for the user. In short, the presence of the software transforms the experience of place in terms of performance, experience and conceptualization – foundational ideas for the approach undertaken in this project.

Furthering the phenomenological theme, Frith (2012) states that location based services give the possibility of a 'personal database city' where the subjective experience of places is both coded into databases and fed back to users, making the device and location based service a central aspect of the subjective experience of place. Embodiment plays a role in this, as a means of accessing information in the taken-for-granted processes and behaviors of using mobile devices. If embodiment can be understood as not limited by the body itself (Richardson, 2005; Ihde, 1993; Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1968) but rather open to alteration by the various technologies we employ as prosthesis then the use of smartphones to discover information on spaces and places may be considered an embodied activity. Jason Farman's work moves beyond the phenomenologically-influenced towards a more explicitly phenomenological research paradigm (2012), exemplifying an approach to understanding the use of locative media where the relationship between user and mobile computational device is understood through the prism of embedded cognition where embodiment and space are co-constitutive. Farman's approach positions mobile computational devices as things that can reconfigure the way that users can embody that space of which they are co-constitutive. As

such, this was a major inspiration to the project as the use and embodied practices of use of LBSN on the part of the person using the application is posited as central to how an understanding of place as *place* (as a meaningful existential locale rather than geometric space) is created.

An Explicitly Phenomenological Media Studies of Place

As the project aimed to understand experiences of place as constructed through use of objects and things such as locative media, rather than being predetermined (Soja 1996; Lefebvre, 1991), then a phenomenological approach to the experiencing of feeling of place was arguably ideal. Phenomenology, particularly in the work of Heidegger and post-phenomenologists such as Ihde (1993), offered a theoretical basis for the use of objects in everyday understanding of the world and an explanatory framework for modes of understanding that can be achieved through the use of particular objects or things in places in order to understand place as *place*. The project was based on an explicitly phenomenological understanding of how the understanding of places may be affected by the use of mobile computational devices, locative media and the potential for interpreting such an understanding as either as place or 'technological' space. The project therefore theoretically relied on the key Heideggerian concepts of care (as in taking digital media devices into care in everyday life), attunement and dwelling-with technology.

The project took the form of an ethnographic study – conducted in 2011 and 2012 using mixed methods including online surveys, face-to-face interviews, Skype interviews and email interviews – of 65 users of the LBSN *Foursquare*. There was a dual purpose for this ethnography: firstly, to investigate what *Foursquare* was being used *for*, that is what were the practices of use that users were actually engaging in; secondly, what effect on the understanding of place did the practices of use of *Foursquare* have for the users, and how could this be conceptually related to and analysed through a phenomenological framework. A

hermeneutic phenomenological analysis (Van Manen, 1997) as a derivative analytic method from critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) was employed to analyse the data with regards to how usage affected an understanding of place for the user. Following a macro reading of the material collected, the data was coded using conceptual codes derived from the Heideggerian phenomenological theory. The codes world, care, place as resource, dwelling, dependent on LBSN, management of self and understanding of place were identified following the macro reading as key themes in the data, and were appropriate in associating the data once coded with the two understandings of world (the *poetic/computational* and the *technological*) derived from a Heideggerian phenomenological position.

The project aimed to avoid ahistorical criticisms through acknowledging the importance in computational code in the poetic revealing of place as well as its role as an ordering in a technological revealing. In doing this, the project was clearly aligned to a software studies/digital media agenda. This approach also tried to avoid Feenberg's (2003) critique of Heideggerian philosophy of technology as one-dimensional.

Heidegger was happy to forego discussions on specific technologies, as the essence of modern technology would necessarily be the same no matter what form or function that technology took. This project argued that computational devices through their use of code can order and arrange information and practices that provide the sufficient conditions for a revealing of place. Allied to a mood or orientation to the world that seeks an understanding of place rather than space, the revealing of place is achievable through using locative media in the marginal practices of disclosing location and place as a product of taking the device into care. If this is the case, the world will not be revealed technologically, and an understanding of place will be one that takes things into care and reveals through the equipmental spatiality that allows for a revealing of place as a referential totality of things that is meaningful through the orientation of Dasein to those things in a non-enframed attunement to place. The

interpretation of evidence from users of *Foursquare* in the project indicated that there is the possibility of a revealing of place as a meaningful existential locale if there is an appropriate orientation to the world that is rooted in a taking of computational devices into everyday activity and a mood or desire to understand place as a locale with deeper meaning than mere co-ordinate to be used in the execution of goals.

It was found that from the responses by people that used that application that usage does not neatly fall into poetic/computational or technological understandings of place; people move between these understandings, and the ethnographic analysis concentrated upon what factors affected this movement in understanding. The two world disclosures – the computational/poetic and the technological – were linked to different practices in usage of Foursquare and it is these focal practices of use that are indicative of the different world disclosures and understandings of place when using LBSN (Evans, 2015b, 854). These world disclosures are explicitly linked to the taking into care of the computational device in using the LBSN; the use of the device as a tool or thing can lead to a computational or poetic/computational revealing of place, while the use of the device as an object in the world leads to a technological understanding of place as a resource. A mood of use of LBSN that is concerned with the accrual of social capital (from checking-in to high status places or modifying use to present a particular image of self, a la Lefebvre, 1964) is indicative of a technological revealing of place. Places were revealed as resources and the practices of usage that emerge from these orientations to the device lead to this technological understanding without an understanding of place positioning of location ~~of location~~ as something to be used as resource. The revealing of place as *place* is indicative of a being-towards the world that brings the computational device into care, rather than just being influenced by information mediated computationally. The practices of trying to understand novel places through the social gazetteers of others found via locative media and sharing location with others in a

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manner that allows for further interaction are the practices (from the towards-which of Dasein in engaging with locative media) that can facilitate the phenomenological effect of dwelling-with locative media, or revealing place.

In the framework used to assess the use of *Foursquare* then, the orientation of the person (or Dasein) to that location and the locative media being used in that location are crucial to how a phenomenal, lived-in place is differentiated from pure physical space. The orientation to place is two-fold, in that it is not only a doing-with tools that allows place to be understood, but also the pre-interaction towards-which (or mood) that is important for an understanding of place. This stood in contrast to the orientation towards accruing social capital (the 'I am here! Look at me!' element of sharing location across social media) and the game elements of locative media that were identified as part of the technological revealing of space when using locative media.

When contextualizing these findings further in Heidegger's phenomenological thought, the idea of using *Foursquare* as a 'thing' (with the device and software taken as an assemblage at the time of use rather than different objects or things) that is involved in a moment of revealing of place was adapted as this can help explain how the functioning of the locative media and the mood of the person using that media contributes to the feeling of placehood. The focal practice of using locative media was identified as part of the event of revealing place – but this is not the entire event and the 'thing' as understood through the concept of the 'fourfold' can help explain how mood and media work to allow an understanding of place. The user experiences an attunement to place is the product of the gathering of the 'thing' that depends on the orientation to the device and practice of use. Place is the local world or existential locale that comes from the engagement with things; this is not a product of man's (or Dasein's) projection of meaning onto regions of space, but is explicitly a phenomenon that arises from the towards-which of Dasein (the mood), the taking of a thing into care, the

"thinging" of the thing (the gathering of the person, practices and mood of the user) (Heidegger, 2008, 243) and the event of world disclosure that reveals place as place to the user of the thing. The "thinging" of the thing makes the local world possible, but this is contingent upon mood and orientation of Dasein and the manner of engagement of Dasein with the thing. Here, the (locative) media is thing that 'things', drawing in orientation and functioning to allow for the revealing of place and understanding of world as *world* (in these specific circumstances). Locative media does not always 'thing' though – the possibility of 'thinging' is contingent on the mood of the person (or Dasein). Without sounding redundant, the 'thing' only 'things' if the person is comported towards understanding location as place. In essence, this was the key contribution to Media Theory in the project. When a person uses Foursquare to understand the place around them, they encounter both the application and the location itself in a mood that is open to the possibility of an understanding of place. At other times, they may just use the application to score points or mark territory – understanding location as space.

Evaluating the project as a contribution to Media Studies

The project described here realized a certain amount of utility in a brutal, instrumental sense: a PhD dissertation, monograph (Evans, 2015a), a major contribution to a co-written book (Evans and Saker, 2017), and several papers (Evans 2011, 2015b; Saker and Evans 2016a, 2016b, 2016c). Given all this material passed through peer review, one can argue that the validity of the project has been established – although that instrumentalist view would be at odds itself with the position on mood and phenomenology as being important in understanding meaning (in location), and so a deeper evaluation is called for in this case.

An important consideration in evaluating the project is whether it can offer commentary on or extend previous work in the field. de Souza e Silva and Gordon's (2011) *Net Locality* argues

that presence, and more importantly, use of this information in local context has a transformative effect on the experience of space for the user. In short, the presence of the software transforms the experience of place in terms of performance, experience and conceptualization. The project made a similar argument – the use of locative media, which provides hyper-localized information on location, allied to a particular orientation on the part of the user can change the qualitative, subjective experience of a locale to a feeling of *place*. That emphasis on mood can be read as a contribution of a phenomenological nature of the ongoing work on locative media (linking in particular with Farman, 2012) which allows it to be read as a continuation and development in a new direction of such work. Fitting into the existing body of work indicates that the project was not necessarily revolutionary and that the explicitly phenomenological can have some level of 'fit' with work that is implicitly phenomenological or informed by phenomenology.

As such, the project adds a new dimension with the focus on the mood of the user (albeit this has been considered without the explicit phenomenology in Hjorth's (2011) ethnography of mobile media users in Seoul). However, Vollrath (2016) in reviewing the monograph *Locative Social Media: Place in the Digital Age* that derived from this project, makes two pertinent critical points that indicate some of the issues that such a project has in relating to the wider discipline and questions both the validity and efficacy of that addition. The first is that "judgments about how place is revealed for *Foursquare* users are ultimately [the authors] own" (Vollrath, 2016, 1049). This is a criticism of the inherent subjectivity in analysis when undertaking an interpretive phenomenological analysis such as the one in this project. This can be read as a repetition of a criticism already made in the conclusion of the project, in that the criticism indicates that the judgements made reflect an unresolved recursion (although this could be read as a hermeneutic circularity) where mood or orientation presupposes rather than co-creates a meaningful existential locale or place. That criticism is rooted in the highly

subjective nature of the hermeneutic phenomenological analysis (although this may be applied to any number of discourse analyses, even those with co-researcher internal validity of analysis), and the lack of apparent empirical rigor of the approach. Secondly, the highly interpretive approach and reading of evidence lacks empirical rigor – the subjectivity means another theorist would treat the findings completely differently as they are only interpretive. There is some validity to this criticism, but the solution to this is also problematic. The problem can be read as one of *translation*, where the content of participant reported experiences is translated or mapped onto existing categories of analysis. Indeed, the operationalization of concepts derived from Heidegger into variables in an empirical project may strike some as a form of scientism that Heidegger was explicitly critical of in his work. An alternative to this would be to conduct a non-phenomenologically (or any other theory) informed empirical stage of research, and 'let the research speak for itself' which would be open to a lack of theoretical relevance or applicability. Any number of approaches from critical geography could be applied to this work, but such work may not engage with the mood of the user directly, which would necessitate another approach to mood and orientation that does not necessarily have the affordances of the phenomenological approach. Addressing this was both the aim of the project and stands as the most salient contribution to the discipline from the project, and as such to weaken that focus would be counter-intuitive in some ways. The phenomenological approach is, of course, neither the optimal nor only way of approaching this topic, but should be considered an addition to other research approaches and methods.

The second criticism is that "[the author's] book fixates too strictly on the phenomenological (to the detriment of an investigation of the background within which experience takes place)" (Vollrath, 2016, 1052). Again, this critique refers to the other approaches already available, being used or being developed that do not focus on the 'feeling' of place or the context of

experience. The investigation of the background within which experience takes place may refer to any number of other factors that could form part of the agenda of urban studies, critical geography or a number of other disciplines. The call in this criticism is to broaden; however, part of the relationship that the project has with other work is to add contours and new reflections to that research. While a wider focus was one of the reasons why a phenomenological approach was taken in the first instance, one of the limitations of the approach is that (necessarily one might argue) other approaches are not focused upon. The criticism may be read as a call to integrate phenomenology with these approaches and methods to consolidate the phenomenological approach within a more recognizable media studies milieu. Jason Farman's (2012) work arguably achieves this in having an approach to embodiment heavily informed by phenomenology but refined towards the use of smartphones. Given the critique of this project, a phenomenologically-influenced or - informed analysis of place in Media Studies may be better received than explicitly phenomenological analyses with narrow focus and subjective interpretation. This is not an unreasonable position; it indeed describes much of the work mentioned in the early part of this chapter. The difficulty in operationalizing phenomenological concepts in the project described and the reasonable criticism of subjectivity in interpretation make phenomenological analyses both challenging and outside the received 'way of doing' in the discipline.

However, if phenomenology only informs analyses of place in media studies, it is reasonable to question what kind of phenomenology is actually at play in the discipline. A 'phenomenology-lite' approach to place may provide a better fit with the discipline as less subjective research methods are analytically informed by phenomenological theory.

However, with the advent of Augmented Reality – the overlaying of digital information and images onto the physical world with the use of a lens or device – and the return of Virtual

Reality (VR) as a commercial, educational and consumer medium that aims for the creation of an artificial, immersive world of experience then a theoretical position which addresses direct experience and mood may prove to be a valuable addition to the discipline. For example, the emphasis on orientation and attunement as key phenomenological concepts that explain placehood in virtual spaces has important implications for emerging new media such as augmented reality and virtual reality, particularly in the case of VR where immersion in digitally-created place will be a key objective of programmers, developers and producers. How, why and with what digital objects users feel at home with in VR will be key questions in understanding user experience in such media. The criticisms of subjectivity and empirical validity may always be levelled when research is attempting to understand phenomenological orientation and mood towards media. These criticisms do not mean that attempts to understand these important aspects of the experience of using media are not important to answer, and that the answers derived are not of value to the development of theory and understanding around media.

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