Locating Emerging Media: Ethnographic Reflections on Culture, Selfhood, and Place

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Introduction: Space, Place, Media

Media have long shaped identities linked to place. Just as print media helped foster nationally imagined communities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, emerging digital and social media are implicated in global and transnational networks in the twentieth. Yet new communication technologies, from mobile phones to the Internet, are not necessarily engendering the global world once predicted; instead, multiple social worlds and experiences of place proliferate. Ethnographic approaches provide insight into shifting configurations of identity, selfhood, and place through a critical empiricism that makes possible research across diverse sites and contexts, digital or otherwise.

In the early twenty-first century, for example, Berlin was transforming rapidly as a nexus of people, technologies, and new configurations of space and place. The once-divided city of Berlin was (and is) still being stitched together, the symbolic and geographic midpoint of post-Cold War Europe and Europe’s ongoing cultural, political, and economic integration. By the late 2000s, many young adults moved to Berlin from Germany and elsewhere who comprised a “knowledge” or creative class (Florida 2004), settling in the city’s central districts.

Upon moving to Berlin, many joined social network sites for the first time, especially Facebook, and began using mobile devices more frequently. I conducted sustained ethnographic research over eleven months between 2007-2015, primarily in 2009-10, with small “friend circles” (Freundeskreise) and their extended networks
online, to understand how emerging media are transforming urban European middle classes. In this chapter, I show how digital ethnography enables research across multiple sites and spaces, while inviting critical reflection on media, identity, and place-making. One particular fieldwork incident illustrates an emerging European transnationalism, which I analyze as a form of geographic scale-making—that is, practices that produce the local, national, or global as spatial scales (Tsing 2005, 57-58; see also Brenner 1998; Marston 2000).

Many have explored what networked, digital communications entail for place and identity in a globalized, deterritorialized world. Thinking about place on transnationally circulating media, however, requires asking how identities come to be linked to place in the, well, first place. Cultural geographers contend that space and place are constructed culturally, suggesting that spatiality can form online. Anthropologists and Internet scholars, meanwhile, demonstrate that digital and online worlds exist as places in their own right, where forms of social life flourish that cannot be predicted from their technological affordances (e.g., Boellstorff 2008; see also Baym 2010).

Online communities exist as legitimate places and, conversely, place-based communities exist online, such as national publics, regional networks, and local ways of living (Bernal 2006, 2014; Ellison et al. 2006). These accounts of place online, however, necessitate considering carefully what it means to talk about place; that is, what is a geographically-based social formation when it takes place through the seemingly “placeless” Internet? I turn to ethnographic accounts of space and place to attend to the dimensions, temporalities, and scales of space and place, including non-representational registers of feeling and sensing. Non-representational approaches to place, for example,
seek to account for how spatial experiences take shape through practice, interaction, and
daily living in contingent ways (Anderson and Harrison 2010). Others reframe questions
of scale and place-making to rethink the connections, rhythms, and practices that
constitute the “local” or “global” (e.g., Massey 1993; Marston et al. 2005; Lambek 2011).

The above inquiries all call attention to power and unevenness in the production
of space and place, such as digital mapping, geotagging, and location services that render
space uniform and homogenous (e.g., DeNicola 2012). Considered broadly, emerging
media, being simultaneously symbolic and material, provide an opportunity to rethink
conceptual divides between matter and meaning in the ways they are engaged through
daily, lived experience. In this view, emerging media shape experiences of place in ways
that are always plural, heterogeneous, and uneven, stabilizing only temporarily.

“The other side of the street is a bad neighborhood”

In 2015, I returned to Berlin to reconnect with people and places from previous
fieldwork. I found a city that had transformed rapidly, though many elements of life in
Berlin endure.¹ Longstanding practices like apartment sharing and subletting that were
facilitated in the early 2000s by web boards and Craigslist, for example, now increasingly
take place through Airbnb and related “sharing economy” platforms. This coincided with
demographic shifts ongoing since the Wende, or Turn, in 1989, and national German
reunification in 1990. As my Airbnb host explained, he and his peers (having moved to
this part of Berlin in the 1990s) could no longer afford hip districts like Kreuzberg
(formerly in the West, bordering the Wall, and center of the lively German Turkish
community; see Mandel 2008) or Friedrichshain in the former East. Remarking on the
perceived divide between punk, edgy Kreuzberg and its shabbier, more residential neighbor Neukölln, home to numerous immigrant communities—the border of which ran past my rental apartment—he repeated what was clearly a familiar quip: “The other side of the street is a bad neighborhood.”

These spatial and demographic changes cannot be separated from technological shifts. In a few short years, candybar-style “dumb” phones have disappeared, replaced by nearly-ubiquitous smartphones, mostly touchscreen-based iPhones and their imitators. Airbnb did not exist in Berlin in 2010, but has become immensely popular with “club tourists” (Rapp 2009) and other short-term visitors (including visiting researchers). These technologies have consequences for experiences of place, reshaping movements through urban space (think of restaurant recommendation apps or transit directions). But if emerging technologies do not necessarily replace local identities with global ones, nor simply reproduce geographically-based communities online, what is happening? To investigate this, I want to lay out briefly ethnographic approaches to media and place.

Media have played a central role in fostering identities linked to place since at least the advent of print capitalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (e.g., Anderson 1991; Gellner 1983). By the twentieth century, electronic media such as cassettes, satellite television, and video games appeared poised to destabilize national boundaries and forms of selfhood linked to the nation. Anthropologists and others found, however, that national communities reassert themselves through new technological means, whether national television viewing in Egypt (Abu-Lughod 2005), or radio fostering a national speech community in Zambia through laterally circulating “public words” (Spitulnik 1996), among numerous examples (see also Mankekar 1999;
In divided Germany, broadcast media contributed to the fall of the Berlin Wall, as many East Germans received West German radio and television. Through illicit consumption, many envisioned alternative lifeworlds which incited growing political dissatisfaction (Hesse 1990).

Computer networks and mobile telephony were incipient when Germany reunified in 1990, but distributed unevenly—many West Germans had computers and video games, while most East Germans did not have household telephone lines. This divergent history shapes media practices still; for example, some young East Germans I knew shared their mobile phone handsets in ways that echo phone-sharing practices from the DDR² era (Schnöring and Szafran 1994). With the advent of the Internet and digital media, many predicted the realization of McLuhan’s “global village” (2013 [1964]) or a global “space of flows” (Castells 1996). But digital media equally provide new means to articulate and enact local, national, and other place-based identities, as numerous examples of “virtual nationalism” attest (Bernal 2006, 2014; Lee 2007; Eriksen 2007), or of “geographically-bound” communities such as college campus networks (e.g., Ellison et al. 2006).

If globally circulating media do not undermine place-based identities, nor replace parochial connections with cosmopolitan ones, how do emerging media reshape selfhood in relation to place? Anthropologists have contended since the 1980s and 1990s with increased mobility and deterritorialization under globalization (Appadurai 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 1997; Clifford 1992). Of course, human culture has long been predicated on circulation and exchange, from the Kula Ring of Papua New Guinea described by Bronislaw Malinowski, Nancy Munn (1986), and others, to the
interdependent “world-system” of Immanuel Wallerstein (1974; see also Wolf 1982). Arjun Appadurai (1996) proposed that mass media provide new imaginative resources for fashioning selfhood in a global, deterritorialized world, while David Harvey (1989) diagnosed the temporal and spatial effects of late-modern capitalism in terms of “space-time compression,” effectively making the world smaller.

Late modern reconfigurations of people, places, and identities challenge viewing culture as co-extensive with particular peoples or places, but what then does it mean to talk about identity or selfhood as place-based? Anthropologists and geographers address this by examining how space and place are constructed in uneven ways, pioneered by the work of Henri Lefebvre (1991). Anthropologist Setha Low, for example, calls attention to the political stakes of determining how spaces are produced and used (Low 2009, 2014; see also Munn 1986). Low argues that culture is “spatialized” in ways that mask ideological structures and inequalities: “both the production and the construction of space are mediated by social processes, especially being contested and fought over for economic and ideological reasons” (Low 2014, 35). How do we locate digital media in contingent cultural and historical processes that produce space and place?

**Emerging Spatialities**

Ethnographic accounts highlight the contingency of place-making, offering a way to think about the production of space and place online. By this, however, I do not mean a singular, monolithic “cyberspace.” As Daniel Miller and Don Slater (2000) noted, the Internet comprises an agglomerate of technologies, while online media practices always take place in specific, locatable instances: “what we were observing was not so much
people’s use of ‘the Internet’ but rather how they assembled various technical
possibilities that added up to the their Internet” (2000, 14). Cultural geographer Mark
Graham similarly takes issues with spatial metaphors of the Internet which reduce a
complex, relational networked space to a “distinct, immaterial, ethereal alternate
dimension” (2013, 181). The metaphor of cyberspace evokes a separate dimension
coterminous with physical space, everywhere yet nowhere. He advocates instead
attending to multiple, complex spatialities that are always grounded, contingent, and
material.

Spatial metaphors can make space and place appear natural and fixed, although
this does not preclude online spaces and virtual worlds existing in their own right, as Tom
Boellstorff (2008) and others have shown (e.g., Taylor 2006). In my work on social and
mobile media, I find spatial terms like “local” or “global” inadequate to describing the
multiplicity of spatial levels or scales that emerging media bring together—and
reconfigure. Like print and broadcast, social and mobile platforms provide new means to
enact relationships and worlds, bringing together lives and connections into the same
spaces (Kraemer 2014). For those like Karoline, who moved to Berlin in 2007, Facebook
brought together disparate parts of her life—friends from Magdeburg and from
university, Ausländer (foreigners³) met in Berlin, and younger family members and work
colleagues. Though this “context collapse” (cf. boyd 2014, 31-32) could spark tensions,
Facebook did not necessarily homogenize social connections in a singular global space.
Instead, it often became a nexus of conversations, communities, and interactions at
multiple scales—not unlike cosmopolitan life in Berlin.
Conversely, the “local” scale of Berlin could also take place online. At a monthly “Strickenbar” (Knitting Bar), for example, one friend circle gathered to practice knitting over drinks. The event’s Facebook page reflected aesthetics found in bars and cafés in Berlin, and illustrates ways local life “offline” unfolded on Facebook (see Figure 1). The local here might be understood not as a scale, but as an affect or structure of feeling (Lambek 2011). Michael Lambek proposes rethinking the local as a tempo constituted through particular rhythms, activities, and feelings rather than an instance of some global phenomenon: “the site at which these multiple activities and temporalities… are lived simultaneously” (2011, 208). Local life in Berlin could be inhabited online through imagery, language practices, shared references, and shared affect specific to Berlin.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

The notion of spatial scale, however, risks evoking a concentric circle that expands outward from the local to the national and the global. Cultural geographers and others contest this depiction, construing such levels instead as constellations of policy, infrastructure, circuits of capital, and so forth (Brenner 1998, 2001; Marston 2000; see also Massey 1993). Others question the utility of scale as an analytic and advocate doing away with vertical models of scale entirely. Marston et al. (2005), for example, propose a “flat ontology” that allows emergent spatialities to unfold by “accounting for socio-spatiality as it occurs throughout the Earth without requiring prior, static conceptual categories” (2005, 425). Such ontological and non-representational approaches
(Anderson and Harrison 2010) attend to practices, enactments, affects, and material relationships rather than symbolic representations.

From my perspective as an anthropologist, media provoke pressing questions about space and place precisely because they are constituted materially and symbolically, locatable yet circulating instantaneously. On returning to Berlin in 2015, I observed emerging media practices that link together people and places in an emerging European transnationalism: that is, a shared sense of Europeanness rarely articulated as such. Alongside anthropologists of affect like Kathleen Stewart, I consider scenes of daily living to account for broader meanings and forces through embodied practice: “this is not to say that the forces these [totalized] systems try to name are not real and literally pressing. On the contrary, I am trying to bring into view as a scene of immanent force, rather than leave them looking like dead effects imposed on an innocent world” (Stewart 2007, 1).

**European Transnationalism on Social Media**

On January 7th, 2015—one week into my stay in Berlin—two gunmen opened fire in the Paris offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, a French satirical publication featuring incendiary cartoons. Though the journal purports to target all religions equally, many find cartoons depicting Mohammed and Muslim themes exemplify widespread anti-Muslim sentiment in Europe. The attack by Arabic-speaking assailants (later identified as two French Algerian brothers) sent shockwaves through the Internet, and illustrated a European transnationalism forming in part through social media. News of the attack raced across
my European Facebook and Twitter feeds, provoking emotional, politically-charged responses from many who avoided such topics otherwise.

Annette, who had friends and family in Paris, posted: “Sorry for the sad & political post. Anyone with an interest in the French political press know who these two persons are (were, sadly),” with a link to the Twitter status of the French LePoint, showing photos of two murdered cartoonists. Comments piled up in French, German, and English, and Annette cut short one convoluted response, saying: “I don’t want this post to turn into high-school political debate. Kthxbye.” She posted frequently that afternoon, from a humorous image warning readers not to “discard brain,” to a YouTube clip from a French children’s show from the 1980s, featuring one of the cartoonists as an actor, writing:

Second sad post today. Fuck everything about this. Non-French speakers: this is one of the victims of today’s attack in Paris, a famous satirical cartoonist, who appeared in what was by far the best-known children TV show in this country in the 80s. He shouldn’t have been murdered by idiots.

She moved between English and French, and in effect, between possible audiences. She also responded to a Facebook event page called “Je Suis Charlie,” for a gathering in front of the French consulate in Berlin. The post was titled in French and German, and 209 people had also responded. A few hours later, that number had jumped to 1,136. In the comments, Annette added: “People not in Berlin,” with a link to similar events across Europe. She moved back and forth between events in Berlin and conversations taking
place in Paris and elsewhere, primarily engaging other French-speakers (and referring, indexically, to France as “this country”).

Another person with many connections to France shared an image that read: “Je Suis Charlie. Rassemblement citoyen à 19h, Place de la République à Paris pour la liberté de la presse, la démocratie, la République / SOLIDAIRES / CHARLIE HEBDO” [“I am Charlie. Citizen gathering at 7pm, Place de la République in Paris for the freedom of the press, democracy, the Republic / Solidarity / CHARLIE HEBDO”]. He posted another that simply said “COEXIST” in religious symbols, with the tagline “Triste attentat, évitons les raccourcis rapides svp – Coexistons” [“sad attack, let’s avoid fast shortcuts please – let’s Coexist”].

News of the attacks reverberated across Twitter, perhaps even more forcefully. #CharlieHebdo became a trending hashtag within hours (awkward besides others such as “Coachella” and “Justin Bieber”). By the next day, #JeSuisCharlie was trending in Berlin (according to Twitter’s Near You search option) as well as “Everywhere.” Plenty can and should be said about the cultural politics of #JeSuisCharlie, such as how universalizing discourses of freedom and secularism deny the legitimacy of Muslim cultural citizenship in Europe. In the broader postcolonial context, European supranationalism—the project of building shared European cultural identity at the supranational scale—depends on Islamophobic views of Muslims as Europe’s monolithic, nonwhite “Other” (Boyer 2005, Bunzl 2005). I want to focus, however, on two aspects of how these events encapsulated place-making on social media.

Critiques soon erupted of #JeSuisCharlie, some coalescing around the counter-hashtag #JeNeSuisCharlie. This was less prevalent in my Europe-based newsfeeds than
another curious combination, however: #JeSuisCharlie and a campaign protesting
PEGIDA, a rightwing anti-Muslim group. PEGIDA⁹ began demonstrating in Dresden in
October 2014, a few months prior, accompanied by the hashtag #PEGIDA. Thousands
had marched, recalling the protest movements of 1989 in Dresden and Leipzig which
helped trigger the Wende. Many appropriated the era’s slogans, shouting “Wir sind das
Volk.”¹⁰ But the contemporary context relates more to the rise of asylum seekers in 2014,
owing to conflicts such as civil war in Syria.¹¹ The demonstrations sparked a
counterprotest and the hashtag #NOPEGIDA, attracting international headlines as
thousands more marched under slogans such as “You are Cologne—no Nazis here.”
Notably, this slogan interpellates counterprotestors through a territorial identity as
citizens of Cologne. Cologne’s famed cathedral turned out its nighttime floodlights in
silent protest, as did the Semperoper Opera House in Dresden and the Brandenburg Gate
in Berlin (the site of the Berlin #JeSuisCharlie gathering).

That week in January 2015, the hashtags #JeSuisCharlie and #NOPEGIDA
collided and became entwined in surprising ways. One person, Daniel, living in Cologne
but connected to friends in Berlin, had previously protested PEGIDA on Twitter. The day
after the Charlie Hebdo attacks, Daniel posted to Facebook saying: “the statements by
PEGIDA about Charlie Hebdo make me ill, sad, angry. I’m speechless,” and shared a
version of the COEXIST graphic (Figure 2), on a blue background surrounded by yellow
stars (evoking the European Union emblem), and reading: “Der Terror von Paris und Die
Pegida-Seuche / coexist #nopegida NEIN zu Terrorismus! Nein zu Fremdenhass!” [“The
terror in Paris and the PEGIDA epidemic / NO to Terrorism! NO to xenophobia!”].
It seems contradictory to espouse #JeSuisCharlie while decrying PEGIDA, which is not to say one cannot protest anti-Muslim activism and denounce violent attacks. But many argued (often through #JeNeSuisCharlie) that anti-Muslim sentiment in Europe revolves around liberal, western logics of freedom, secularism, equality, and so forth, encapsulated by solidarity with Charlie Hebdo. Yet the same people, on social media, at protests, and elsewhere, expressed disgust with rightwing extremism and overt anti-Muslim, anti-immigration attitudes. Whether or not contradictory, these trends on Twitter and Facebook draw attention to something else: in addition to sentiments people articulated, images and hashtags circulated according to shared feelings of Europeanness. In this sense, I observed an emergent European transnationalism coalescing on social media, not necessarily through discourse or representations, but through shared ways of feeling at the supranational scale.

Annette, for example, had been living in Berlin for many years, but posted in English and French, addressing both a French-speaking audience (some living in France), and a broader audience imagined as international or transnational (especially in Berlin). She moved through communities at multiple scales—national French ones, local scenes in Berlin, transnational networks of music fans across Germany, the UK, and elsewhere. When Daniel in Cologne posted in English about #NOPEGIDA, a German movement, he addressed, and imagined, a transnational audience—yet most of his friends on Facebook are German-speaking. A music producer in Berlin similarly posted in English, addressing translocal music fans across Berlin, Moscow, Copenhagen and elsewhere: “I’m
concerned. Frightened and speechless. Now is time to become a political person.” All posted in emotion-laden registers of sadness and dismay, deeply affected by the violence, while circulating images of peace and pluralism. Social media helped engender this emergent European transnationalism by circulating through—and generating—multiple spatial scales. This transnational formation stabilizes only temporarily, however, coming into focus at particular moments, and then fading. It took shape, moreover, in and through Berlin, a city where life takes place at many scales.

**Conclusion**

Finally, I want to return to a plaza in Berlin, to show how ethnography can bring into focus the production of space through—and on—social media. The evening of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, I went to the site of the demonstration at the French consulate. Most demonstrators had already left, and the neighboring Mitte district, of wide boulevards and grand imperial buildings, was dark and desolate. As I walked down Under den Linden, the tree-lined boulevard leading to the Brandenburg Gate, I passed a woman carrying a sign that read “#JeSuisCharlie,” and was impressed by how quickly the hashtag became a printed sign. “Excuse me?” I tried, and then, “Pardon?” She turned, shaking her head until she responded, “Deutsch.” She said she came from the assembly, but the police broke it up. A few people were still there lighting candles, and she offered me a tealight, saying, “you can light a candle too.”

When I reached the French consulate, a concrete and glass building on Pariser Platz, I found the plaza mostly deserted. On the sidewalk, a small cluster of perhaps thirty people huddled around a shrine of candles, flowers, pictures—and signs that read “Je
I overhear a woman ask in English what it was about, and a younger woman, apparently her daughter, recounted the attack. Others photographed the memorial, some with professional-looking equipment. It was so windy, though, that I had trouble keeping my tealight lit.

I describe this final scene to give a sense of how the #JeSuisCharlie hashtag spiraled through multiple spaces, linking them together in emergent configurations. Digital and social media become agents in creating social spaces, whether persistent virtual worlds, transient conversations on Facebook, or digital publics at multiple scales. Media have long generated publics and scales; what’s new here is how social and mobile media weave together lives in shifting configurations. My interlocutors in Berlin and elsewhere, for example, rarely posted political comments or strong affective sentiments—save for occasional posts about upcoming elections or censure of a musician for right-wing extremism. The #JeSuisCharlie hashtag, which dominated social media briefly, circulated through—and helped generate—this emergent European transnationalism.

I offer this scale not as a stable geographic level between the national and the global, but the product of ongoing processes, intersections, and practices. #JeSuisCharlie came into being temporarily, ricocheted across Twitter, Facebook, and public plazas, then dissipated. Briefly, it fostered a shared European selfhood for a shifting urban middle class, at the supranational scale. The same people critiquing
PEGIDA and racist, right-wing anti-Muslim extremism equally defended the liberal views of *Charlie Hebdo*, a contradiction that underpins cultural citizenship in Europe.

Place, then, comes into being through multiple means, including (but not limited to) media technologies. Online versus offline are not adequate in this sense to describe the role of emerging media in constituting social worlds. Social and mobile media, however, make possible experiences of place in novel ways, allowing the same people to move between addressing co-nationalists on Facebook, organizing events in Berlin, and fostering shared European feeling and solidarity. Digital ethnography makes it possible to trace these placemaking processes across contexts, calling attention to how space and place are virtually *and* materially constituted, inseparably, as Paul Dourish and Genevieve Bell (2007), Heather Horst and Daniel Miller (2012), Sarah Pink et al. (2016) and others explore.

Localness in Berlin can take place on Facebook event pages, through urban redevelopment projects, and through specific ways of living and being. Yet the same emerging media platforms equally generate social worlds at other levels, from national publics to shared Europeanness (predicated, as many have shown, on excluding Muslim Others). Common European feeling was articulated verbally and through imagery, in affective registers I rarely observed otherwise. These social worlds come into being not only through discourse, but also through shared feeling and sensing. Just as emerging social worlds unfold across media, means, and contexts, I contend that media practices are simultaneously meaningful and material, shaping lived worlds—and places—in singular yet iterative ways.
References


Word count: 5235.

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1 See Weszkalnys 2010 on urban redevelopment projects and the production of public space in Berlin.
2 Deutsche Demokratische Republik, or East Germany.
3 Often used to refer to Turkish Germans and other immigrants, but here primarily American, British, and other Europeans.
5 See Katherine Hayles’ “media specific analysis” (2004).
6 Although I only maintain one account for both research and personal use, I create separate lists to view the posts of those whose practices I study.
7 Some written quotes have been slightly modified to protect confidentiality.
8 Long a favorite of US bumper stickers in the 1990s, mostly referring to religious pluralism.
9 “Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes,” Patriotic Europeans against the Islamicization of the West.


12 See Mei Zhan on the translocal not as a scale but as a process (Zhan 2009).