URBAN ASSEMBLAGE: THE CITY AS ARCHITECTURE, MEDIA, AI AND BIG DATA.

• Paper / Proposal Title:
Like a Local(Guide): Google Maps and the Automation of Location Awareness

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• Abstract (300 words):
Today, the mobile digital map is a widely-used tool for navigating cities. Its location-based data activates everything from ride-sharing to food delivery services and its predictive functionality suggests places to shop and restaurants to visit. At the same time, these mapping platforms reconfigure urban space by way of renaming neighbourhoods, mislabeling sites, and misrecognizing route directions (Benjamin, 2019; Dewey, 2019; Noble, 2018). In these contexts, mobile maps’ promise of automated location awareness seems inconsistent and at times incompatible with a city’s local knowledges. This paper is a critical look at the location-aware services afforded by mobile mapping platforms operationalized through a community of digital map users and contributors: the Google Maps Local Guides. Local Guides are Google Maps’ citizen contributors who upload place-based information and photography. While Local Guides are not official employees of Google, they nevertheless are responsible for many of the images, pins, and reviews visible when using Google Maps. Building on Safiya Noble’s (2018) work on the embedded biases of internet search algorithms and Sarah T. Roberts’ research on
the labour of content moderators, my research provides a look at the human face behind the automation of location awareness. This paper provides a short history and overview of Google Maps’ local guides program and then presents findings from a case study on Local Guides based in Toronto, Canada. The paper considers the role local knowledge plays in placing and locating data accessed through mobile mapping platforms and how this human work activates and contributes to the platforms’ automated affordances of location awareness. The paper concludes by reflecting on what is omitted and obscured when the local is mobilized as a product of automated location awareness.

References


Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Rebecca Noone is a practicing artist and holds a PhD from the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto (2020), where she currently teaches on Culture and Technology. Situated in the areas of critical internet & data studies and everyday information seeking, her work considers the dominant power structures and social biases reproduced and generated through technologies of placemaking such as mobile mapping platforms. Her doctoral research received several prestigious awards including a SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship. She has published in Qualitative Methods and DRAIN: A Journal of Contemporary Art and Culture and has presented at the Association of Internet Researchers’ Annual Conference and Society for the Social Study of Science Annual Meeting. As an artist, she has presented her work at the NES Art Residency (Skagaströnd, Iceland), The Luminary (St. Louis, MO), Elsewhere Museum(Greensboro, NC), and YTB Gallery (Toronto, ON) and she is the former curator and director of the Toronto-based Roundtable Artist Residency. Noone creative and scholarly work endeavours to tease
out the undergirding power structures at play in urban information experiences and provide an accessible and inspiring framework for reflection and awareness.