

The New Localism

There is a growing belief that situated computation, applications that understand the geography of the real world and which we interact with in real time, are helping to revitalize the local in everyday life. In a world where we have all become global, forcibly so, actors in a culture that has been intermediated, virtualized, fragmented, and repackaged for delivery, this revitalization of the local is supposed to let us reconnect to our fellow human beings. We will become friendly again. We will leave our enclaves of like-thinking virtual people, and go talk to our actual neighbors. Eating in the little quiet places that are reserved for the “locals” will make us part of the local culture, will provide a shortcut to civic solidarity. Of course, this is still the networked future, and this new local doesn't need to be tied to any specific location. We will be locals, wherever we go!

This is, of course, a lie. Foursquare and Yelp are not the same as actual local knowledge. While in one sense this is obvious, understanding why they aren't the same tells us a lot about the ways in which this new locality will fail at its goals and the perils that appear in that trajectory; at the same time, it may point out ways that we can correct that trajectory.

The volcanic ash cloud that closed European airspace has provided a fascinating filter to examine the reality of the new local. The people most heavily and volubly affected by this were the same post-locative set that is tied into the construction of the new localism, and yet, despite being incredibly connected and living lives which are often theoretically location-independent, the inability to move was profoundly disruptive, and not only on the grounds of missed plans. A great wave of depression came forth across the blogosphere, as the reality of having to not merely dabble in but actually live purely by this new simulated local hit home. Why?

The local, in its original construction, was the accretion of continuous, bidirectional lived experience over time in a specific geographic region, sociocultural milieu, and circle of people. It was the experience of knowing the people in your community, of habit. Of getting a good haircut because you knew all the stylists in the salons around you and knew who worked well with you, not because you had sifted through reviews. Of dropping in for gelato on the spur of the moment at the place where you had been going since you were barely tall enough to see over the counter.

Modernity disrupted that original local, alienating people from their communities—travel, immigration, social change, discontinuities of experience occurring at a faster pace than previous cultural processes could absorb them. All culture, of course, has always been undergoing a process of continuous change, but in stereotypical pre-Modern cultures, the pace of change has been below the pace of adaptation of the culture, allowing it to maintain a nature that we might describe as authentic. Different cultures have different levels of resilience to change, depending on the type of change, the worldview of the culture, what or who is threatened or uprooted by the change, and their prior experiences with change. Some

cultures have been forced into nomadism for most of their existence. They were used to integrating side by side with an over-culture, and to the extent that they have been able to avoid dilution, they have often done well by modernity; it challenged them too, but in ways they were uniquely prepared (often by previous tragedy) to deal with. Modernism impacted different cultures at different times, not only because modernism itself was poorly distributed, like all temporal shifts, but because different cultures could absorb more or less of it before they began to respond inelastically.

In the Modern period, the experience might have been one of alienation and discontinuity, but it was still a genuine experience. Postmodernity and globalization have called into question the possibility of genuine direct experience and undermined further the conditions required for it to arise as previously conceived. The coercive inter-region competition inspired by the globalized neoliberal market is only one example of the continuing pressure towards alienation and fragmentation, but it's an interesting one, as it is also tightly implicated in the rise of the supermodern.

Supermodernity and its accompanying non-places—the airport, the gas station, the chain restaurant, the mass transit system—forms a kernel of delocalized familiarity, common across a much larger cultural sphere than could ever have been true of a Modern, much less pre-Modern, local. With postmodernism, we began to see the explicit reproduction of past realities as simulations and the extension of this simulation to things that never existed as simulacra. Simulacrum has become the dominant, if not the only possible mode of place making in our times, and non-places barely even qualify as simulacra. While still heavily imbued with signs, their meaning has been stripped to a purely functionalist, almost biological level; they are a palette for the larger culture, without any contribution or shaping of meaning inherent to themselves.

Network culture promotes the use of information tools to manage information and context. While it undoubtedly creates a useful functional efficiency, there is a qualitative and obvious difference between access to information and understanding, between computational context-awareness and lived understanding, between performing the local and embodying the local. The apps and the sites that are generating this new localism (which we might call augmented locality) serve as information prosthetics to enable the simulated performance of the local, offloading the time and work that go into creating an authentic local, even if one were still possible.

This is not a value judgment as such, but rather a differentiation between the pre-Modern local and the supermodern network-simulacrum performance of the local. Pretending that we are returning to an assumed golden-age of locality blinds us to the actual possibilities of this new era and pushes us to make assumptions about its meaning that are not borne out by reality, such as it is.

The problem of building real connections and making a functional, useful, and human society in an age of globalized, monetized alienation is a very real one. Situated information is useful, but it is not a strong

enough tool to create actual human, emotional connections between individuals in space. At most, it can perform a critical but small function of acting as a seed crystal, creating a surface on which such interactions can occur, but the potential creation of possibility is not the actual creation of interaction.

To complicate the matter further, augmented locality is not an unbiased field. These tools are explicitly monetized, in the same way that the local-simulacra which they purport to navigate have been envisioned—locality recreated on a shim of advertising and data profiling. Even where these tools not inherently financially biased, there is a significant problem of access. The pre-modern local was equally accessible even when the institutions and activities that comprised it were not. The experience of locality was not, in and of itself, a commodity.

A variety of related problems in the augmented local combine to divide culture here—economic access to services, e.g. the cost of an iPhone and a data plan, the density in one's social circles of other members of the augmented local required to produce useful network effects, and the investment of time and expertise required to become a native of augmented locality. While there have always been cultural divisions, if we literally alter the experienced geometry of our lives along class lines, most of the theoretically integrative promise of augmented locality will be, by definition, not only actively unreachable but possibly even poisoned. Our technologies of integration will actively make the problem worse.

How can we make augmented locality more inclusive?

How can we make augmented locality into something other than a tool of the neoliberal race to the bottom?

How can we repurpose the tools of augmented locality to better support genuine connection?

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