The Device Paradigm, Focal Practices and VGI

Muki Haklay, UCL

Volunteered Geographic Information (VGI) raises many theoretical and conceptual challenges. Among these challenges is the understanding of the participant’s agency in the process of collecting, analysing and using the information. The typology of VGI that has already emerged can help to a certain degree in considering this agency. For example, it is possible to identify implicit and explicit VGI according to the goals of the application. Under such classification, an application such as Flickr is considered implicit as it focuses on photo-sharing as its main aim, while Geograph.org.uk is an explicit source as its participants are encouraged to provide full coverage of the country through photos (Antoniou et al. 2010). Another classification is passive and active participation, where in a passive situation the participant contributes information by using sensors in an automated way, while active participation requires awareness and cognitive engagement by the participants (Haklay 2010). However, these typologies do not go far enough in explaining the role of the participant in the activity, as they focus mostly on methodological aspects. One way to advance the discussion is by evaluating the interaction between the participants and the technological apparatus that facilitates the collection and dissemination of VGI.

To progress towards this goal, the framework offered by the Philosopher of Technology Albert Borgmann in his Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life (1984) is useful. Borgmann has put forward the argument that modern technology often promotes the ‘Device Paradigm’ in which meaningful and substantive human activities are replaced by machines. In the process, the essence of the activities, which he calls ‘Focal Practices’, can disappear or be harmed. This is because the technology promotes specific aspects such as efficiency and readiness to use but might diminish important human values such as social gathering or spatial knowledge. Borgmann’s writing has explicitly dealt with geographical information. In his Holding Onto Reality (1999), Borgmann analyses GIS and discusses the problem of information systems within this conceptual framework, showing the problem of technological information, in which information is perceived as reality itself, and thus encapsulating the map in the Device Paradigm.

In the context of VGI, the Device Paradigm can help by showing how active participation in commons-based peer-production systems, such as OpenStreetMap, provides some participants with the ability to use technology to develop new focal practices, while in other situations, such as the use of GPS cameras, there is a risk of enfolding geography itself into the Device Paradigm. The presentation will provide a brief introduction to the Device Paradigm and will discuss its implications for VGI.

Reference


