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The right to the network: radical urbanism of digital public space

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11–13 minutes

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Earlier this year, Tony Ageh, the Controller of Archive Development at the BBC gave a speech at Royal Holloway University (reproduced in edited form at OpenDemocracy) outlining his vision of a "Digital Public Space", described as "a secure and universally accessible public sphere through which every person, regardless of age, income, ability or disability, can gain access to an ever growing library of permanently available media and data held on behalf of the public by our enduring institutions".

Ageh's proposal for the Digital Public Space is wide-ranging, including data and media held by libraries, museums, public archives, and government services. He describes access to these resources as a 'right' that should be freely available to all, for "research or for amusement, for discovery or for debate, for creative

endeavour or simply for the pleasure of watching, listening or reading".

This is a truly radical and exciting vision, and one that should be welcomed by anyone with an interest in preserving the democratic, participatory nature of the open internet. Ageh also rightly identifies that the creation and preservation of such a Digital Public Space is a "decidedly nontrivial" problem — however, Ageh, argues that this challenge can be overcome with the help of "leadership, […] real thought and significant engineering power". Perhaps predictably, Ageh goes on to argue that the BBC is best placed to do so, and, he makes a compelling argument that the organisation possesses all the qualities he describes. However, the assertion that these qualities are required to ensure a vibrant, accessible digital public space is presented as axiomatic — and it is this point which I would like to examine in more detail. By looking at how the digital public space mirrors the physical public spaces of the real world, I'll argue the leadership of an appropriately qualified institution is neither sufficient, nor even necessary, in order to ensure a thriving, open, digital public space.

In order to do so, it's useful to look more closely at what the idea of a "Digital Public Space" denotes. It's certainly a powerful bit of branding — evoking a sort of idealised virtual *agora* — a space built for and defined by, participation, democracy, and leisure. However, this idealised version of public space differs from the actually-existing public spaces in which we spend our everyday lives.

Instead, I'd like to argue that it's through comparison with real-world public spaces that the idea of "Digital Public Space" gains its power and usefulness both as metaphor and as a concrete programme to create a democratic, participatory digital commons. Through a critical examination of the politics and sociology of actually-existing public space (and urban space in particular), we can arrive at a better, more nuanced understanding of how the idea of 'public space' manifests itself online, and how we interact within it. By approaching the idea of Digital Public Space critically, we arrive at a number of insights into the conditions and relations of online life, as well as a challenge to those people and institutions who seek to be the custodians of our digital public spaces.

The French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefevbre spent much of his career developing a criticism of the urban environment, and many of his ideas about public space are as pertinent to discussions of digital space as to discussions of the real world. In particular, Lefevbre's idea of the 'Right to the City', from which he argues

for a radically participatory relationship between the city and its inhabitants, is a useful starting point for examining the politics of digital public space.

In the "Right to the City", Lefevbre examines the city in both a positive and a normative sense — dealing with the actuality of cities are and how they came to be, as well as making a radically utopian case for a transformed, participatory urban life. The Right to the City itself, he characterises as "both a cry and a demand" — a reflection of our position within the city, as well as a claim on the city's future. David Harvey — Geographer, Marxist and Lefevbre scholar describes it as "far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city." The right to the city then is transformative — to claim the right to the city is to claim the right to change our environment in the service our own needs and desires. This transformation, however, is also reflexive — acknowledging that our identity and our environment are inextricably linked — and that by changing one, we change the other.

This interplay between identity and environment also plays out in our interactions online. Consider Facebook — perhaps the biggest example of an online social space — and their policy of requiring users to use their 'real' name on the site. Aside from making some arbitrary and simplistic assumptions about what constitutes an 'authentic' identity, as the Electronic Frontier Foundation and countless others have pointed out, this policy disproportionately affects members of marginalised groups — Trans* people and Native Americans in particular — who find themselves denied access to social space online, due to Facebook's assumptions about what constitutes an 'authentic' identity. Demanding the right to choose and control how you are perceived and referred to online, is therefore, analogous to exercising Lefevbre's right to the city in the context of our online life — it is exercising the "Right to the Network" — which, as with Lefevbre's right to the city, is about more than just access to public space, but the right to shape and transform that space itself.

In the case of Facebook, however, as with many other social spaces online, the idea of claiming any particular right in relation to that space might seem misguided. Facebook is after all a private enterprise, and it might seem therefore that any attempt to claim any rights in relation to our use of Facebook as a social space beyond those explicitly granted by its Terms of Service is an irrelevance, or purely nonsensical. However, this view of the relationship between organisations such as

Facebook and the communities of people using their software is a reductive one which ignores many complexities and imbalances. In particular, to see Facebook's platform as a simple product in which a right of private property exists is to wilfully ignore the role which our pictures, memories, interactions and identities play in making Facebook a viable product — without the millions of users using Facebook (the platform) to interact online, Facebook (the business) would not exist, at least not in any viable sense.

The value created for Facebook by our interactions using their platform can be viewed as a form of Affective labour, and we may claim a right to its product, as Laurel Ptak's Wages for Facebook manifesto points out. Here again, in the complex, and antagonistic relationship between labour and capital, we see digital life playing out as it does in the real world, and once again, Lefevbre's criticism of the latter can be instructively applied to the former. In particular, for Lefevbre, the City as it exists is itself an expression of this antagonism, brought into being as a result of the need of capital to dispose of its surplus product. David Harvey gives the example of Haussman's grand programme of public works in 1850s Paris, devised to simultaneously reabsorb the capital surplus and deal with high unemployment, which constituted, Harvey contends, the birth of modern urban planning.

Similarly, our modern social networks and digital spaces can be seen as the result of an attempt to reabsorb the capital surplus (through the giant money-churning machinery of Silicon Valley start-ups, VC firms, angel investors and tech IPOs), complete with the same class antagonism and contradictions as its real world analogue. For Lefevbre, the idea that the city-as-it-exists comes into being as the inevitable result of this process of class struggle forms the crux of his belief that to claim the Right To the City was an intrinsically revolutionary act — the city is both the terrain and the result of class struggle, and by claiming the right to transform the city, we claim the right to the product of our labour.

This argument might appear unrelated to Tony Ageh's vision of Digital Public Space — he was after all talking specifically about a new public space, to exist outside the existing social spaces we use online, and to be overseen by some custodian acting in the common interest, rather than by a commercial entity acting in the interests of capital. However, here again we find an analogy in the urban environment — that of the architect or town planner who seeks to transform the conditions of everyday

urban life through top-down intervention, and whose goals might well be entirely noble. For Lefevbre, this is necessarily a fruitless task — the city-as-it-exists is shaped by powerful social forces as we have discussed above, and no individual is on his own capable of creating, altering, or destroying social relations, by definition. “The architect”, says Lefevbre, “is no more a miracle-worker than the sociologist”. Herein lies the central point of the Right to the City — it must be a collective right, or else it is nothing — it is only by demanding and exercising our right to the city collectively that we may exercise it at all. Lefevbre again: “Only social life (praxis) in its global capacity possess such powers [to create social relations]”.

What, then, is to be done by well-meaning individuals and institutions such as Ageh and the BBC in the light of the above? Is his utopian vision of a Digital Public Space doomed to irrelevance in the face of class antagonism? This need not necessarily be the case, as long as those individuals and institutions join in their efforts with the collective “Cry and Demand” for digital public space. By explicitly acknowledging the role of class relations in the production of digital space, as in the production of physical space, and by ensuring that the right to the Digital Public Space is an explicitly transformative one, projects such as Ageh’s have a valuable role in the re-making of the entirety of digital space for the common benefit. More concretely, by ensuring that intellectual and creative works available through the Digital Public Space are freely licensed for transformative re-use by default and by providing the education and access to the technological infrastructure required to enable such re-use, such projects can ensure that we move beyond a general right to access the network, to a fully-fledged, transformative, Lefevbrian “Right to the Network”, enabling humanity to collectively to shape the whole of digital space for the common good.They can, In Lefebvbre’s words: “individually or in teams clear the way, they can also propose, try out and prepare forms. And also, (and especially) […] assess acquired experience, provide a lesson from failure and give birth to the possible”.

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