

Practicing Place: Collective Experience and Difference in an Urban Online Forum

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Despite predictions to the contrary, place has assumed a new significance through recent innovations in digital technology. In this paper, we argue that the exchange of information and experience occurring daily on the networked urban forum Phillyblog can be usefully conceptualized as the practice of place. In adopting this terminology, we suggest particular analytic and theoretical lines which hold important implications for the way we think about information and place in online settings. Within the context of Phillyblog, the practice of place (1) publicizes and reinforces collective experiences of the city and (2) plays an active role in constructing the distinctness and diversity of its neighborhoods. In analyzing their regular interactions on Phillyblog, we hope to add to research on information practice, in particular “everyday information practices” (Savolainen, 2008), by suggesting their role in the social construction of place. Using this particular case, we explore how information sharing and production, in particular, may play a role in the perception, conception, and experience of place.

Practicing Place

Marketers, journalists, and prophets of the first dot-com era promoted a vision of information and communication technologies that could transcend spatial boundaries with ease and efficiency, erasing distinctions between the places where we live. While linkages enabled by rapid and

efficient information sharing have connected us in ways previously unimaginable, reports of the “death of place” —of those experiences and practices which are inextricably tied to our unique, local context —have, to repurpose Twain, been greatly exaggerated.

In their landmark study of a wired Toronto suburb, Hampton and Wellman (2003) concluded that information technology actually enhanced a sense of neighborhood by facilitating contact between loosely connected residents; compared to non-wired residents, those who had internet access and subscribed to the local online discussion group both knew and talked with more neighborhood people. The researchers also observed the internet facilitating discussion of —and at times, efforts to organize around —local issues. More recent scholarship suggests the internet is becoming “more local” in its content, in its use, and in who it connects (e.g. Davies & Crabtree, 2004). Certain online experiments, such as the genre of blogs called placeblogs, are focusing specifically on the “sustained attention to a particular place over time,” one that is fundamentally “about the lived experience of a place” (Placeblogger, n.d.). Even mobile technologies, “the latest preoccupation of the perennial predictors of the demise of the city as a geographical place” (Burd, 2007, p. 39), have, in fact, inspired new kinds of engagement with place, through geo-annotation and “locative media” projects connecting digital information to specific GPS coordinates (Hardey, 2007; McCullough, 2004).

Our research focuses on another noteworthy example of the persistence of place in the era of Web 2.0: the Philadelphia-based Phillyblog.com. A large online discussion site dedicated to politics, culture, and daily life in the nation’s fifth largest metropolitan area, Phillyblog has been, since its inception in 2002, a space for finding, sharing and making sense of the everyday lived experiences of the city. Topically wide-ranging, the unifying focus for the site is the discussion of all things Philadelphia, or at least all things from a Philadelphian perspective.

In this work, we propose that the exchange of information and experience occurring daily on Phillyblog can be understood as the practice of place. In adopting this terminology, we suggest particular analytic and theoretical lines which hold important implications for the way we think about information and place in online settings. Our work has been influenced by others who view internet-enabled communication as embedded within everyday activities, concerns, and relationships (Benkler, 2006; Shirky, 2008). And while we value the rich scholarly debates about these terms — “practice” and “place” — we join them here as a way to describe information-intensive activities occurring in and through the site, which are cumulative, collaborative, and recursive (cf. Hardey, 2007). Moreover, these activities center on a community of users “who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (n.d., see also Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). In analyzing their regular

interactions on Phillyblog, we hope to add to research on information practice, in particular “everyday information practices” (Savolainen, 2008), by suggesting their role in the social construction of place.

In the case of Phillyblog, this practice of place has two distinguishing characteristics. First, practicing place publicizes and reinforces collective experiences of the city in which Phillybloggers live — providing an opportunity to share personal knowledge and compare firsthand impressions. Secondly, the practice of place has an active role in constructing the distinctness and diversity of the city and its neighborhoods. When viewed in dynamic combination within the site’s discussion threads, these two characteristics yield a further reason why we employ the term practicing place to understand what Phillybloggers are seeking to do: contributors find meaning for their practice through a process of interaction around the problems and challenges of everyday life in Philadelphia.

While those challenges are numerous, we have chosen to focus our analysis on one popular topic, the persistent problem of trash. Some Phillyblog users seek information about how to get their trash collected, appealing to those with local knowledge of city services or a more extensive history with neighborhood efforts to reduce litter. Others make attempts to effect change, encouraging their neighbors to take action or contributing their own energy to a local cause, such as obtaining trashcans for public street corners or rewriting dog ordinances for neighborhood parks. The most hopeful or most despairing share their visions of what Philadelphia is becoming or might one day come to be. All of these goals and the conversations they inspire overlap within the same online space; when crystallized into proposed solutions or incompatible projections of what should happen, they regularly come into direct competition. But unlike those who see the arguments, insults, and general cacophony of the forum threads as the signs of dysfunction, we believe them to be the very essence of practicing place.

Literature Review

Place is a powerful, but oftentimes elusive notion and its significance to our information environment can easily slip from view. In some instances, place is regarded as one of the contextual factors that motivates, qualifies, or influences the way in which people seek and use information. Treated as such, places (and the differences between places) may help to explain information practices or the primacy of one set of practices over other possible alternatives (“the library is on the other side of campus, so I just used Wikipedia,” “I live in Philadelphia, so I am always looking for information on Philly restaurants”). Yet when place is conceived primarily as a contextual container within which we seek and use information, we overlook the active role

information practices play in the production of place.

The study of information in everyday contexts creates a broader perspective for exploring the relationship between place and information. Recently, a focus on information practices and the everyday has led scholars such as Savolainen (2008) to adopt concepts from social phenomenology, notably the idea of the “life world,” as a way to describe the mundane details of experience that often recede to the level of the invisible or taken-for-granted. By explicitly aligning himself with the tradition of social phenomenology, Savolainen seeks to emphasize that this notion of the life world is not simply a matter of individual perception. It is a “fundamentally intersubjective and thus a shared world,” (p. 26), constituted by such everyday things as the cyclical passage of days and weeks, the repetition of habit, and —most importantly for our purposes—a sense of spatial order or place. While his project does not expressly examine how information practices might construct or reconstruct spatial dimensions of the life world, this is the point that we wish to explore in analyzing how the daily conversations on Phillyblog might influence perception, conception, and experience of place.

Other communications scholars and internet researchers have presented like-minded arguments. Borrowing less from phenomenology than from Habermas’ redefinition of lifeworld to emphasize the importance of communication, Gordon and Koo (2008) coin the term “placeworld” to suggest the ability of groups to develop through communication a common understanding of “who we are,” by means of “a mutual understanding of someplace” (p. 206). In developing this concept, Gordon and Koo suggest a more active and reciprocal role for communications technology in creating an everyday sense of place. They write, “Networks need not degrade, nor merely coexist with, but can augment the capacity of a place to form meaning.” Moreover, in building placeworlds, networked communications and the internet extend their influence into the material spaces of everyday life. “Groups that form around common spaces —neighborhood organizations, for instance —increasingly use online networks to facilitate that placemaking as well as extend the idea of the place into broader contexts for the purpose of enhancing political, social, or economic influence” (p. 208).

The recursive, reciprocal, or dialogic relationship between exchanges of information and place has become more visible with the proliferation of Web 2.0 applications, where the opportunity for users to produce and share information has increased exponentially. Networks of blog authors who ground their writings in the experience of place have been growing in both size and self-awareness (Hardey, 2007). Such “placebloggers” may be sole authors of an online journal devoted to observations about their city neighborhood, suburban subdivision, or rural county. Or they may adopt a rotating authorship and list their blog at an aggregation site like

Placeblogger.com, which dedicates itself to acts “of sustained attention to a particular place over time.” Other Web 2.0 technologies, such as geoannotation or social place tagging applications allow you to: “publish ‘virtual post it notes’ about any geographic location: a street intersection, street address, a restaurant, a hiking trail or a geocache” (Hook, Longson, & Degraf, 2004). This digital information becomes a constitutive part of that place, something that structures future experience of it, just as architectural and environmental features do.

Rather than being limited to the experiences and reflections of an individual blogger, Phillyblog extends the participatory, open-source dynamic of Web 2.0 by creating an occasion for sustained group attention on sharing information about place. In the sections which follow, we describe some of the characteristic interactions that take place in forum threads, particularly as they relate to local knowledge, accumulating experiences, and public conversation.

Study Background & Method

Phillyblog is among the most active regional sites measured in terms of user-supplied content. In 2007 there was an average of nearly 1,300 new threads and 18,000 replies per month. The forum’s 42 boards can be grouped into four categories: 1.) neighborhood, with 14 different city neighborhoods represented; 2.) topical, which includes 14 subject boards ranging from politics to spirituality; 3.) six catch-all or “miscellaneous” forums where generalized discussions take place; 4.) and eight boards dedicated to classifieds and site administration. The large neighborhood boards are by far the most active, as well as the topical forums on politics and food, and a catch-all forum named “General Discussion.” Roughly two thirds of all new threads initiated receive 10 responses or less, while another third ranges between 11-300 responses. While relatively rare, a small number of threads see intense participation, with 600 or more posts to a single thread is not outside the realm of possibility.

Architecturally, Phillyblog is more similar to a threaded discussion board than a conventional blog; threads can be initiated by any registered member, on any topic, and comments are posted and displayed in chronological order. The site’s relative openness to new contributors has helped to create a massive and topically wide-ranging arena for conversation. There have been more than 50,000 new threads and 750,000 posts added between the site’s inception in 2002 and May of 2008. A large number of posts are tips for being a better-informed consumer of the city (where to get a good haircut or a good burrito); online classifieds to hock items and services (a used VW Jetta or one’s local string band); or advice on how to negotiate the complexities of urban life (phone numbers for city services or the fastest route to the airport).

Our analysis here emerges from a larger qualitative-based project studying conversations on Phillyblog. Research for this specific study was carried out using both ethnographic methods and textual analysis of posts using WordSmith software (Scott, 2007). Several approaches to data collection and analysis were employed, using a grounded theory approach to inform study design, sampling and analysis. Over the course of several months, researchers observed conversations on multiple forums and used open coding (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) to identify major themes. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with active Phillyblog current and past users. WordSmith software was employed to create concept sets for the thread data. Threads were analyzed via atlas.ti using thematic coding.

To generate a more unified discussion, we are focusing on a set of threaded discussions regarding trash disposal and collection. In keeping with Phillyblog's fine-grained focus on the daily routines of city life, the litter, refuse, and graffiti ever-present in the city is one of the most pervasive topics of conversation, appearing in general city-wide discussions and in local forums ranging from the wide avenues of the Northeast, through the pricey condo districts of Center City, and deep into the rowhouse neighborhoods of South Philly. Thus, trash offers an interesting case for it is a frequent topic regardless of differences in neighborhood income or geography. At the same time, these threads are theoretically instructive because they illustrate how local knowledge and shared expertise contribute to the ways in which place is practiced on Phillyblog.

Findings: Constructing shared local knowledge

A distinguishing characteristic of Phillybloggers' engagement in a practice of place is the way in which a shared domain of local knowledge is built through discussions of the city. This shared endeavor can be recognized in Phillybloggers' commitment to engaging in conversations about the everyday problems and experiences of the city. In our analysis two primary means of contributing to the conversations emerged: 1) posing questions and inviting discussion, which represent of the translation of information-seeking requests into topics for participants to consider, thereby adding to the local knowledge made visible through the forum's threads; and 2) corroborating, comparing, and adding to impressions, which consists of the posting of one's own experiences to contrast with or lend support to others' conclusions, or to extend and build upon the topic of discussion in a new direction. We examine each form of contribution in turn.

Posing questions and inviting discussion

Phillyblog's shared domain of local knowledge is often extended by posing questions seeking information or advice. For example, participants ask each other "why wasn't

the trash picked up?” “does anyone know what the holiday recycling schedule is?,” or “what number do I call to get a recycling container?” In asking such questions, Phillybloggers appeal to the forum’s collective wisdom and resources. Offering a solution to an observed problem by proposing more trash cans, another forum participant asks simply, “What do you guys think?” Other threads begin with more direct appeals for help. One forum participant, for example, noticed an old picnic table sitting on the sidewalk, a “huge eyesore” that was a seeming magnet trash. Having had little success with the city’s sanitation department, she had debated about just dragging the table to another block, but “felt guilty.” Her question for the forum — “What would you do?” —was both a plea for creative problem solving and an ethical dilemma for the respondents to ponder. Such questions and the responses they engender start to build a repository of information about the city, the history of trash collection problems in particular neighborhoods, or advice on possible solutions to typical trash problems (e.g. abandoned buildings with trash problems). Popular threads or popular “solutions” are linked to and referenced in subsequent conversation.

Another common way of initiating conversations is posing questions which are not direct requests for information, but rather, are meant to invite further reflection among readers and contributors. Questions of this type tend to emerge from forum participants’ daily encounters within the city. In translating these everyday experiences into questions posed publicly, posters are making the taken-for-granted aspects of city life visible, often to invite a discussion about why things can’t be different or better. For example, one of the forum’s more infamous discussion threads begins with a rhetorical question and simple observation: “Why do so many people run their dogs in the tennis court at the playground? It ruins it for tennis players who have to dodge (and get splashed by) puddles of dog urine. . . What’s wrong with the many local dog parks?” This seemingly mundane question sparked a thread of more than 600 responses that remained active for more than five months, pressured the neighborhood association to take up the issue of appropriate park usage, and created a body of knowledge about where to go to file complaints. Another thread about the crime and trash problems attributed to a neighborhood take-away restaurant began when the original poster noted a group of young men hanging out in front of the establishment, throwing their trash “wherever they want.” After confessing to some unease about the situation, the poster asked for affirmation: “Has anyone else noticed this?” Other participants are even more direct, incorporating questions such

as “Mayor Nutter, what happens to all the trash?” into the title of their new thread.

Corroborating, comparing, and adding to impressions

A shared knowledge of place is also built through Phillybloggers’ corroboration of their experiences, comparing their own impressions to discussions of city problems. This activity is best seen as collective practices that occur over the course of one or more threads. By shifting the unit of analysis to the threads —focusing on the developing conversations rather than the discrete posts of particular individuals —we can see how individual local experiences accumulate into composite impressions of the city.

In the thread “Street Corner Trash Baskets,” a Phillyblog contributor initiated a conversation by publicly questioning why trash cans had suddenly reappeared in the Center City district of the city. He argued that the cans were problematic because they actually attracted more trash in the form of illegal dumping; other thread participants quickly posted their agreement, sometimes quoting directly from each other to emphasize specific points of assent. In other forum conversations, posters responded with analogous or comparative observations. One notable trash example was the Phillyblogger who asked compatriots to contribute their personal nominations for the “South Philly Trash Awards,” assembling a running list of street corners or neighborhood blocks that were particularly offensive.

In many conversation threads, knowledge of the city is built by adding small pieces of information to an ongoing discussion. By posting related, but not precisely parallel, impressions this additive practice is open to the widest range of participants interested in the subject area —even if contributors did not witness or participate in a similar experience. In this way, Phillybloggers share their rants and express their sympathies around a particular topic, while technically not addressing the same thing. In real time, posters appear to read what others have said about a particular subject, and are reminded of their own frustration or joy with a similar experience. For example, a thread simply titled “Trash” began when a resident posted a photo of curbside trash and pondered why his neighbors disposed of their refuse in “cheap dollar store bags.” What unfolded was a conversation in which a range of participants added their own “You know what else..?” frustrations: the misuse of garbage cans, the neighbors who left their recycling bin out all week, the neighborhood businesses that were unresponsive to residents’ complaints. The litany of pet trash peeves may have reached its apogee when contributors began to compile lists within their individual

posts: “The thing that bugs me is the renters who don’t even bag their trash. They just pour it into a big trash can and put it at the curb. . . .Also, is it true that if there are more than 6 apartments in a property that they are supposed to have a private hauler take the trash? . . . And while we are on the subject of trash, I am very bothered by the youth who play basketball at a local park and even though there is a trash can at the court, they just throw their trash on the ground. . . .Lastly, isn’t there a law that states all food facilities are required to have a trash can in front of their location. . . . Okay...I’ve ranted enough. I feel better knowing that there are others in the Northeast who have noticed the trash issue becoming more and more of a problem” [emphasis added].

Findings: Expertise in the local

Within the context of the site, personal histories within the city and its neighborhoods provide participants with one of their primary forms of collective expertise. Whatever the topic under discussion, participants often preface their responses with phrases like “I’ve lived in this neighborhood my entire life...” or “We’ve lived in Queen Village since...” While other forms of expertise is on display, it is not surprising that residency remains one of the most important criteria for lending weight to one’s posts in the practice of place, and firsthand accounts continue to be among the more frequent forms of contribution to discussion. For this reason, the suggestion that “You’re obviously not from around here” is one of the neighborhood forums’ more powerful and dismissive putdowns.

One might expect that hot-button social issues like race relations, crime, or education would be the most likely to provoke this sort of one-upsmanship, but some of Phillybloggers’ most passionate exchanges swirl around everyday issues, the sort of background details that are not often addressed in the commercial news media. Nothing, it seems, inspires Phillybloggers to revisit their favorite anecdotes or insults than trash-strewn streets, waste-clogged gutters, and public receptacles overflowing with household refuse. From logistical inquiries about recycling schedules to complaints about “trashy” neighbors —dirt, smell, and refuse are not only popular topics of conversation, but for our purposes, they provide rich evidence of experience.

In our analysis, two modes of sharing local expertise were most visible: contributing firsthand knowledge —offering anecdotes or observations based on personal history within the city; and establishing a context for problems —consideration and reflection about city problems, including an understanding of the politics, ordinances, and evolution of the city. What follows is an explication of both categories.

Contributing firsthand knowledge

Drawing on recollections, reminiscences, and conclusions based in personal histories, Phillybloggers make frequent recourse to their previous experiences within the city. For example, a participant in one of the vigorous debates on trash introduced himself to the conversation by writing, “Having lived in center city for 6 years...I admit I never estimated how much a downer the sight of trash everywhere would be.” Others respond to the current conditions with a perspective borne of longtime experience, framing reasons to explain their position on neighborhood problems. This deployment of personal history was on display when, for example, another trash commentator wrote, “It would be nice if there were more trash cans that were frequently emptied, but I think the majority of the refuse comes from either folks dumping or not bothering to tie up their garbage. That’s the conclusion I’ve drawn, based on more than a decade of being the only one who sweeps up the block.”

Forum participants also employ firsthand experience as a means to build on existing narratives about everyday life in the city, shared stories which take a variety of forms. Some draw on the received wisdoms about the character of the city and its citizens, particularly its reputation as a tough, blue-collar town. Within the context of certain issue threads—including those on trash and sanitation—a reference to these shared narratives sometimes has the effect of superseding debate, as in the case of a forum contributor who noted that while the accumulation of trash was sad, the city was in fact, much cleaner now than it had been when he was a boy. In other instances, the narrative implying that Philadelphia is, by nature, filthy intersected with other popular narratives, such as the commonly-held belief that city government is corrupt or at very least inept. When combined, the results were threads asking why the neighborhoods favored by longtime political fixtures were kept clean, while not far away, trash swirled off the streets in veritable tornadoes.

Another form of collectively-constructed narrative on Phillyblog tracks the appearance and projected course of neighborhood problems. In conversation, this most often takes the form of hypothetical solutions being matched against the lessons of practical experience. One characteristic exchange “Solving trash problems...Geno’s,” was initiated by a post questioning why trash receptacles couldn’t be installed in a park across the street from one of Philadelphia’s most famous cheesesteak stands. After several responses suggesting the thread initiator call the sanitation department, start attending neighborhood association meetings, or otherwise end the “whine,

whine, whine,” the original poster asked, “So tell me in four lines why getting more trash cans on the park side of Geno’s would be detrimental?” Another Phillyblogger wrote in response:

I don't think four lines is enough.

On the one hand, it would be great to have the cans so that anyone walking through the neighborhood has a place to toss their wrappers and such. On the other hand, they are often a lightning rod for illegal dumping. Some folks would rather toss last night's chicken carcass there rather than hold onto it until trash day. (In fact, there is a can at Tenth and Federal where the trash repeatedly piles up. The Sanitation Officer can't keep up with it.) Even when a trash can is removed, the illegal dumping continues in that very spot.

I think the problem comes back to enforcement. That and much of the population just doesn't seem to be aware that littering is nasty and creates a bad image for the city overall. Maybe what this town really needs is a trash disposal re-education camp for its offenders.

The immediate neighbors have approached Pat's/Geno's about the trash issue over the years, but the two shops have not been very receptive. They have their own trash cans for their patrons on their premises, and they empty them quite often. I doubt they would want the task of policing even more trash cans, especially if it means cleaning up other peoples' household waste. However, they do a good job of keeping their own properties clean.

Drawing on firsthand knowledge of past attempts to solve the problem, this post suggests why certain solutions have been ineffective even as it creates a public archive of neighborhood actions. Indeed, this is such a pervasive pattern of Phillyblog exchange that it prompted one forum participant to write, scornfully, “Here’s a summary of a typical Phillyblog exchange: – Here’s a common problem that occurs in our city. –Here’s a solution that works in 95% of cities in the first world. – That won’t work here, people are too stupid, the _____ is too corrupt, the _____ are too stupid, the homeless will _____. Don’t try to fix it.” Whether, as the satirical post concluded, this constitutes a “depressing” pattern, these exchanges emphasize the lessons of past personal history, acknowledge the intransigence of certain neighborhood problems, and indicate to board participants where genuinely innovative thinking may

be needed.

Establishing a context for problems

Phillybloggers often contribute knowledge of historical trends, touchstone political events, and the evolution of city neighborhoods to conversations on the board. In so doing, they offer a broad explanation or context for current conditions, one which is grounded in their own reflections and analysis of the city. In the conversation thread “Nutter tells national media that Philly is a trash heap,” for example, forum participants debated a published interview in which the city’s presumptive mayor had criticized Philadelphians for not keeping the streets cleaner. Several Phillyblog responses applauded Councilman Nutter for having spoken about the problem, contrasting his challenge to city residents with the unfulfilled promises of outgoing Mayor Street. One participant wrote “John Street over all these years has very little to show as mayor other than his rather mediocre first term where he did manage to do some things tangible that everyone could see [remember the nasty junked car problem plaguing the city?]” Another thread, “The South Philly Trash Awards!!” focused on neighborhood developments, noting the role that South Philadelphians had themselves played in creating the problem through their opposition to a street cleaning program. This post was followed closely by a response filling in the details: “Yeah...you’re absolutely right. I can remember hearing [councilman] DiCicco in a City Council meeting some years back expressing frustration about the refusal of so many South Philly folks to cooperate by moving their cars.”

At times, forum participants are more pointed in attempting to establish a broader context, or even in suggesting a root cause, for problems such as trash. Deeper into the thread initiated by the Nutter interview, a participant wrote “I think that the trashcan/emptied frequently is only part of the problem. For some reason (well, the reasons are pretty obvious —poverty, lack of respect for self and others, poor education, poor parental supervision, etc...) there is a large population here that will continue...to throw their litter on the ground.” Participants in such threads defend their concerns, refusing to allow the everyday issue to trash to be dismissed as trivial and returned to the taken-for-granted of city life; several of the trash threads refer to the “broken window theory” tying quality of life issues to higher crime rates. Of course others are less measured in reasoning and conclusions, tracing the city’s trash problems to the inherently “dirty and ignorant” character of Philadelphia residents.

Conclusions: Practicing Place, Practicing the City

Both of the preceding characteristics of Phillyblog conversation, when viewed in dynamic combination on the site's discussion threads, indicate the ways in which practicing place is, in fact, a collective endeavor focusing on the assembly of local knowledge. Through the process of translating their personal observations into written responses posted to a forum, Phillybloggers encourage one another to take greater notice of the everyday, whether by questioning what they see or by viewing their observations as part of a more generalized experience of frustration, delight, or bemused amazement. In other words, the very act of writing and posting one's personal impressions constitutes a kind of collective practice, a deeper immersion in the city and the discussions that constitute its everyday social life. At the same time, participation in Phillyblog cultivates a more active awareness of surroundings as one travels through the city and takes part in its daily routines, whether by matching one's firsthand responses to those encountered on the forum threads, or even—for the particularly avid Phillybloggers—by encouraging them to imagine the forum posts and responses that might be generated by their immediate experiences.

It would also be a mistake to treat the conversations on Phillyblog as equivalent to the more familiar forms of blogging, particularly single-author blogs that generate minimal response. Phillyblog posts are typically brief and the forum's characteristic patterns of discourse tend to emerge at the level of conversation. We wish to emphasize this point because it is in conversations about the city that the diversity of experience and the differences between forum participants find their fullest combination; by exchanging, in public, their knowledge and perceptions, delights and indignities, hopes and fears, participants in Phillyblog are producing a more recursive experience of the city. By this, we mean to suggest not only that Web 2.0 technology has made it possible for participants to add to as well as access local stores of information, but also that the accumulation of this local knowledge can have a social and material impact on the city. Hardey (2007) describes this as the emerging "synergistic" relationship between city and social media, noting, "There is a potential rapid feedback loop here as locations in the city may experience sudden flows of visitors or customers as people follow lines of information or seek the presence of those from their social network" (p. 880). Questions from prospective home buyers are a fixture on Phillyblog, as are business reviews and referrals. Some forum participants even admit that their perception of certain neighborhoods as having an active cultural or civic life have been, at least in part, based on the conversations they've observed in the forum's discussion threads.

At a deeper level, the more Phillybloggers turn to the site in seeking to understand everyday life and problems in the city, the more its conversations become part of their frames of understanding. The most obvious example of this is exchanges where veteran forum participants teach new arrivals the characteristic rules and boundaries of discussion, or instruct them in the “netiquette” of the site. A case in point occurred when a prominent figure in South Philadelphia politics made the mistake of posting his messages simultaneously to multiple Phillyblog topic boards. The resulting response demonstrated that outside authority—whether based in a prominent family name or an elected political office—does not supersede the forms of authority that emerge from within Phillyblog itself. Our interviews and ethnographic work have also revealed how participants extend their own personal networks by following up forum conversations by arranging to meet with fellow Phillybloggers at happy hours and socials.

Finally, the forms and conventions of Phillyblog have also seem to encourage a particular sensibility, a way of approaching not only forum conversations, but also of processing the sights, sensations, and encounters that occur everyday on the street. This might be best described as Phillybloggers encouraging each other to laugh off the city, sharing and even embracing its absurdities. Oftentimes, there is an aggressive or purposely offensive edge to Phillybloggers’ humor: the participant who rates reports of dog waste violations according to how many “steaming piles” they deserve; the mother whose tagline reads “The homeless make desperate, passionate lovers. But they will steal you blind.” We would not go so far as to suggest the motives behind this aggressive humor, except to say that it can function as a form of solidarity for participants—one of the ways you can tell a Phillyblogger understands the expectations of this discursive community. As for its significance, Jenkins (2007) notes that forms of online and digital entertainment may appear trivial in their content, even as they are training participants new modes of interaction and collaboration.

But the encounter of difference, the inevitable disagreement, and unassimilatable experience are not, within the context of Phillyblog, a sign that the site is a failure in its efforts to connect Philadelphians who share a commitment to the material space they inhabit. Rather, the site’s open embrace of differences, disputes, and disagreements marks a crucial difference between Phillyblog’s practice of place and more idealized conceptions of online and offline communities, where “community” connotes comity and accord, thereby repressing fundamental differences.

In the end, what unites Phillybloggers is their desire to engage in a searching, multi-vocal, and always-incomplete conversation about their city, and it so doing, have some influence on the textures of its everyday life. By combining, in fluid conversation, their acquired knowledge and present impressions, their reasoning and gut reactions, Phillybloggers are affirming that each is

necessary to the process of imagining and discussing the future of Philadelphia. Each new thread, from inception to exhausted conclusion, offers a public archive of how people are translating their experiences into forum contributions; if not always offering solutions to the problem, they at least reassert a commitment to the exchange. And in training participants in a new means of viewing and utilizing their experiences, whether online or off, Phillybloggers are in a very real sense, practicing what it means to be part of a city.

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