280MAPA Podcast Transcript:

“How does Twitter create a virtual sense of place?”

Hello and welcome to the Mullins Media podcast. I am of course your host Ben Mullins here discussing all things media related. On this episode of the podcast, I will be looking at the idea of digital geography and discussing my thoughts on the question “How does Twitter create a virtual sense of place?”. Keep listening to find out more!

So, as mentioned beforehand, the specific area of media theory we will be taking a look at today is digital geography. Before we proceed, it is important to understand what exactly this means. Digital geography can be defined in many ways, however the main area of focus for my research is the creation of geographies of the digital. Ash, Kitchin, and Leszczynski explain this as “how engaging and communicating through screens alters the spatial understandings, embodied knowledge, political awareness and social relationships of users”. (Ash, Kitchin, Leszczynski, 2018) What this means is that digital geography creates an idea of virtual space for users to communicate and explore. Social media is a key example of this as social media sites allow users to explore and create content in an online space. When talking about social media and geographies of the digital, an example of a website which is relevant to this discussion is *Twitter. Twitter* is a social media site based around followers and trends, with users being able to share information amongst themselves. (ESRC, 2021) In relation to our pre-established definition of digital geography, *Twitter* can therefore be considered a part of this as users are able to explore and engage with the digital space around them. Additionally, *Twitter* is an example of digital geography which can be looked at not just with regards to space, but also place.

Whilst space can be considered an area of sorts, the definition of place has been thought of as a space which has been given meaning through shared thoughts and ideas. (Parmett, 2017) *Twitter* establishes this through its user-generated content. User-generated content, such as *tweets* or blogs, is important to *Twitter’*s distinction as a virtual place rather than space as this content is essentially a user dialogue and, as stated by Tomaiuolo, “dialogues can, over time, establish community”. (Tomaiuolo, 2012) As the distinction between space and place was based on shared knowledge and ideas, a community built on dialogue is therefore an example of *Twitter* creating a virtual space as these communities may potentially have their own shared thoughts related to their dialogue. This user-created content is also an example of participatory culture, as Jenkins states that some may see the “blogging community as a force that will shape the information environment” (Jenkins, 2006). Whilst Jenkins is talking about bloggers here rather than *Twitter,* it is important to remember that *Twitter* only came into existence in the same year as this statement was published (History, 2021) and so even though Jenkins never directly mentions *Twitter* here, he is speaking about another form of user-generated content which can therefore be applied to *Twitter* as a modern version of the same concept*.* What Jenkins is essentially saying here is that the environment, or space as it could be otherwise referred to as, can be shaped by user-generated participatory culture, once again linking to the idea of creating a virtual place. The difference with this idea of a virtual place, however, is that rather than having a previous shared knowledge, user-generated content could create a new shared knowledge amongst users and be shaped as a virtual place in this way. Whilst it is now evident that *Twitter* could, in theory, create a sense of virtual place, it is important to analyse an example of a community on *Twitter* which displays prior shared ideas and thoughts and new user-generated examples of shared ideas through participatory culture to understand whether this theory exists in reality. As such, I shall be analysing a community known as *Football Twitter*.

*Football Twitter* is essentially an encompassing term to describe football fans on *Twitter,* however some see *Football Twitter* as more than just those fond on the sport. *Football Twitter* is described online as one of the biggest sub-communities on *Twitter,* with users circulating around a team and a team’s players yet coming together based on international origin during tournaments such as the *European Championships*. (Quilter, 2019) Examples of users you may find as part of *Football Twitter* are accounts such as @nocontextfooty, (Out Of Context Football, n.d.) an account which publishes images related to football without context for comedic purposes. *Football Twitter* exemplifies a sense of virtual place by existing as a sub-community, otherwise known as a sub-culture. Haenfler states that subcultures adhere to “a certain homology, or a synergy with a group’s values” (Haenfler, 2014) giving an indication that subcultures share common ideas and thoughts. As I mentioned earlier, shared ideas and thoughts can be considered as a qualifying factor between space and place. As *Football Twitter* is a sub-culture based around the shared enjoyment of football, it can be seen as an example of *Twitter* being utilised as virtual place rather than simply a virtual space. Whilst *Football Twitter* utilises common values related to sub-cultural identity, a sense of virtual place is also created through this community’s participatory culture. An example of participatory culture on *Twitter* is the ability to contribute to trends using hashtags. Hashtags are an example of participatory culture as they allow an audience to literally participate in an online trend and shape what appears on *Twitter* via mass contribution to trends leading to them appearing on *Twitter’s* trending page. (Rethink Media, 2016) Whilst this establishes how hashtags, as an element of participatory culture, can shape a virtual space into a place through topics gaining traction based on common use, the question now is how does this apply to *Football Twitter*? Perhaps one of the most prominent examples is the hashtag *#WengerOut*. This hashtag became a trend due to *Arsenal Football Club*’s fans’ dissatisfaction with long-term first-team manager Arsène Wenger, with the hashtag and similar anti-Wenger hashtags reaching a total of over 400,000 uses in 2017 alone. (Shah, 2017) *Football Twitter* accounts were some of the most popular users of this hashtag, with user @TroopzAFC receiving over 1,500 likes on a *tweet* featuring #WengerOut in March 2018. (The People’s Champ, 2018) This shows *Football Twitter* as a source for new common knowledge amongst a community and thus further enforces the idea of *Football Twitter* creating a sense of a virtual place.

Overall, *Twitter* is an example of digital geography through social media as ideas surrounding space and how this can become more than simply space in order to create a sense of virtual place for users. *Twitter* makes this possible through allowing users to build online communities and sub-cultures, such as *Football Twitter*, which share ideas and thoughts about a specific part of *Twitter,* a key distinction between space and place. Additionally, the ability to use hashtags and user-generated content on *Twitter* allows for participatory culture, creating a sense of place through users’ own original shared thoughts and ideas which are established on *Twitter* itself.

Of course, there are many other communities on *Twitter* that could be spoken about in this regard, however *Football Twitter* is an example which I have followed personally for a while now and so I was interested to share my thoughts about this topic. But anyway, that was my opinion on this subject. If you’d like to voice your own opinion on how *Twitter* utilises digital geography, how ideas of a virtual place can be developed, or you’d just like to comment on *Football Twitter*, make sure you leave a comment on this podcast. The links for all of my references will be in the description or available on my blog page depending on how you are listening to this episode. Thank you for tuning in, and once again I’ve been your host Ben Mullins, thanks for listening!

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