New leisure forum for old leisure practices: online and offline interaction and presentations of self in Figueres, Spain

Francine Barone
www.analogdigital.us

Working paper presented to the Media Anthropology Network e-seminar
European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA)

15-29 March 2011
http://www.media-anthropology.net/

Abstract

It is widely believed that new media have the potential to eradicate traditional forms of leisure by altering how we interact and communicate at a global level in light of ubiquitous and placeless connectivity. However, contrary to pervading assumptions that local leisure traditions will naturally be displaced in favour of new media environments, this paper suggests that evolving leisure practices on the Internet are fundamentally shaped by existing, offline (face-to-face) patterns of interaction. Based on data collected from 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the Catalan city of Figueres, Spain, it focuses on the blueprints of traditional leisure practices in a local setting to argue that they may be enriched by web-based activities. I advocate an innovative approach to new leisure spaces in an increasingly mediated world by examining the geographic realities and cultural contexts within which new technologies are appropriated.

Introduction

Seemingly detached from physical locales, the "placeless" Internet (see Crang, et al. 2007: 2406), computers and mobile devices offer myriad opportunities for personal and social transformation. Twitter has been (over)zealously credited with enabling revolution in Iran (Morozov 2009) alongside other social media implicated in ongoing revolutions throughout the Middle East; Facebook has become a household word around the world; YouTube launches nobodies to stardom[1]; and blogs provide soapboxes for any web denizens wishing to vent their frustrations or publish their thoughts. Everyday, Internet users around the world carve out niches of specialist leisure pursuits, such as gaming, hacking, chatting, tending to virtual farms, designing pixelated homes, and seeking international renown through video-logging and photo-sharing. It is clear that the social web, which constitutes a fundamental component of a seemingly unstoppable move towards perpetual connectivity as a way of life in many countries, should not be underestimated. However, I argue that web-based leisure activities should equally not be seen as profoundly distinct, or wholly set apart, from their offline context. Instead, important continuities with offline leisure traditions can be traced by exploring in more

[1] For a comprehensive list of examples, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_YouTube_personalities

nuanced detail how people behave when navigating their increasingly saturated media environments.

Ethnographic evidence will be presented below to show that remnants of offline leisure patterns long since recognized as on the decline in light of altered media landscapes can be given renewed life online, indicating that the potentially transformative power of the web must be situated within specific socio-cultural contexts of offline life. First, I briefly introduce the concept of public space and performance in Spain by focusing on a leisurely practice traditionally performed through the main thoroughfares of every Spanish town (known in Catalan as the *passeig*). This everyday activity is emblematic of Catalan and Spanish leisure and the style of interaction found in central streets and plazas, tying leisure to urban geography and outward presentations of self. It is also currently seen as threatened and on the wane in Figueres, a city of approximately 45,000 inhabitants in the north-eastern corner of Catalonia.

With the increasing popularity of computers and videogames in the home, it is all too easy to correlate declining interest in public sociality with a corresponding rise in new media, feeding into popular perceptions of the Internet as the site of diminished and impoverished communication to the detriment of face-to-face co-presence. However, I contend that the experience and practice of interactive photo-blogging shares many similarities with the traditional, on-the-ground model of sociality embedded in the *passeig*, despite youth insistence that such a style of interaction is outdated and irrelevant to their lives. This indicates a cross-generational desire for a certain type of sociality within Figuerenc (Catalan/Spanish) society marked by a sense of co-presence, performance and identity-making in "public", a space re-configured by youths to include the web. To illustrate this, I present a detailed case study of the use of the website Fotolog, a photo-sharing or photo-blogging platform popular among Figuerenc youths.

The passeig

The social drama known generally throughout Spain as the *paseo*, and in Catalan as the *passeig*, describes the act of joining others in a leisurely, sociable promenade through the main public thoroughfares of a town, stopping to meet and chat with friends, and, above all, to see and be seen (Corbin and Corbin 1987: 48-49). This public ritual acts to solidify social bonds through simple greetings and instances of "phatic communion" (Malinowski 1923) as groups of friends and family intermingle, catch up with others and get filled in on day-to-day news.

Passeig behaviour is relaxed, yet purposeful and subject to careful rules of conformity. It spatially and symbolically converts the city center into a stage and sociality into a collective performance. The social event combines conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899) and performativity being the time and place to show off one's prestigious ties and personal accoutrements and to acquire further social capital in the process. In this context, it remains acceptable to publicly flaunt important connections with key figures in the town, indicating one's broad and interconnected friendships that validate their social

standing. From clothes to food to relationships, the choices put on display in the streets are deliberately constructed and always noticed.

Thus, while the *passeig* acts to cement social bonds and relationships in public, it is also the site of an elaborate performance in the presentation of self (Goffman 1969) and society. In short, once "on stage", Figuerencs put their meticulously groomed selves, newly acquired and carefully matched outfits, and valued acquaintances on display. Appearances are of the utmost importance: choices of apparel and accessories, purchases from local shops, trays of catered food and elaborately packed cakes, branded carrier bags from luxury boutiques, flashy mobile phones, well-dressed children with expensive toys, babies in designer push chairs, and even the tiny dogs that many Figuerencs keep as pets, are all part and parcel of the strutting and parading of the self that marks this key feature of city life. Each of these items represents a marker of status to be displayed for, and among, the other performing personalities in the city. Friendship, too, is put on stage, with elaborate greetings, hugs and loud chitchat punctuating the leisurely stroll.

The spaces which provide the backdrop or stage for this performance; namely plazas and adjoining pedestrianized shopping streets, are also significant. All towns, cities and villages throughout Spain and Catalonia have a *Rambla,* a large central plaza devoted to public promenading. It has pride of place among all other plazas, as is the case of the Rambla in Figueres (Figure 1). Installed from 1828-1935 to cover a river running through the city (Guillamet 1999: 195), it is an open and airy, tree-lined passage, encircled by cafes, bars, museums, and boutiques located in the heart of the city at the base of the Old Town's commercial streets. The Rambla is the traditional salon for everyday strolling and customarily represents the place in all Spanish towns were city dwellers go to visit friends, meet new people, amble back and forth to pubs and cafés and engage in lively conversation.

My Catalan informants are especially proud of the Rambla as a social institution throughout Catalonia. Not long ago, a Figuerenc writer extolled: "If many Catalan cities have their Rambla, few compared with ours represent so much for the city", and it is "not only its central position or […] unquestionable beauty, but the function as market, public square and crossroads which it performs simultaneously" (Freixanet 1966: 148). The Rambla therefore places an immutable role physically and symbolically central to the social drama encapsulated in the *passeig.* There is a perimeter of short green hedges marking off the space, and wooden benches line both lengths of the Rambla facing inwards beneath parallel rows of sycamore trees, indicating how (as is characteristic of Spanish cities) the "organization of plaza space distributes clusters of men, women, and children so that as they sit or stroll together, they become the audience for other small groups" (Richardson 1982: 430).

Status and sociality on the Rambla are displayed by means of walking, talking, standing and "holding the body", some of which are pre-conscious while others are deliberate (see Bourgois and Schonberg 2007: 10, Mauss 1936; Bourdieu 1977). For instance, it is appropriate to walk the Rambla with arms clasped behind the back, and shoulders tall

Figure 1: The Rambla in Figueres (Easter Sunday, 2008). Photo by author.

with eyes attentive to those around you. Conversely, it is inappropriate to pass through quickly and inattentively, and such actions denote someone as an "outsider" to the social phenomenon. Thus, it is a performance that centers on a clear task: being present in the environment and recognizing the presence of others whose company and approval one wishes to attract.

The decline of the Rambla

From its installation in the 1830s until the late 1970s, by which time television and cars had worked their way into Figuerenc life, the Rambla "was a kind of salon shared by all Figuerencs, where they would stroll at midday and in the evenings, and the joyful setting for celebrations every Sunday and public holiday" (Guillamet 1999: 190). My older informants recall lively evenings of their youth spent on the Rambla, meeting up with friends, meandering to and from the bars and cafés which line the surrounding streets, courting and chatting, drinking and eating *tapas* or sitting and playing cards. I was consistently informed that the Rambla should – and used to – be a place to "meet and get to know new people" and "to socialize[2]". The Rambla as a stage was the place "to see and be seen" and to discover new people (see Figure 2).

[2] *fer vida social*

Figure 2: A photo of life on the Rambla in the late 1800s or early 1900s. Source: Flickr user regibloc.

Today, however, the Rambla remains surprisingly devoid of life for much of the day and evening. Apart from tourists, on weekdays and during the early evening it is mostly a realm for over-60s who sit quietly and watch the city as it changes around them. Other activity is sparse and fairly individualized. In stark contrast to their nostalgic memories, none of my informants or interviewees of any age suggested that they – or locals in general – visit the Rambla to meet and get to know others, with the greatest decline in use among young people.

Indeed, young people in Figueres have deemed this activity of strolling on the Rambla to be old-fashioned and the domain of their grandparents. Teens in particular see the Rambla in Figueres as a "boring place" for "old grannies" and the old town center as having diminishing importance for everyday sociality. Youth leisure activities generally gravitate towards a complex on the outskirts with a movie theatre, club and bowling alley. Older teens head to nightclubs on the nearby Costa Brava or down the motorway to the city of Girona, which offers more substantial diversions. Nonetheless, teens can sometimes be spotted on the Rambla. Contrary to the once typical behavioural norms of the space as a location for comfortable strolling and shared social interaction, teens often roller-skate, skateboard, ride bicycles, breakdance or play ball games on the plaza, seemingly ignoring or rebelling against its "rules".

As an institution, there are appropriate manners and ways to behave on the Rambla which center on both respect for the space and for those using it. On the carefully manicured stage, "surrounded by ornamental nature, people are in the plaza to applaud each other's performances" (Richardson 1982: 432) and undesirable behaviour is carefully curtailed.

For traditionalists, the aforementioned transgressions are a perversion of the Rambla and its meaning, which is linked to the social drama of the *passeig*. For instance, one resident, a father in his mid-40s, reflects on the changing Rambla since he was a teen in the city and reveals his frustrations with its appearance today:

> The Rambla used to be full of young and old people. "Ramblejar" is a word we invented here to refer to the practice of people, young and old, walking slowly back and forth along the Rambla, talking and meeting people. It used to be a place to get to know new people. They would stop at one end and go for a drink or get something to eat, then come back and continue. You can't do that anymore – there are skaters, bikes, etc.

In general, many Figuerencs agree that the significance of the Rambla in Figueres today can be said to be on a decline that started in force in the 1980s. In 1989, Narcís Pijoan lamented: "We witness, disconsolate, the total and irreparable disappearance of the Rambla as a place to meet friends, pass the time or stroll. In the forties, fifties and part of the sixties[,] our boulevard was the city's most famous and characteristic place" (quoted in Anglada, et al. 1999: 181). Older generations in the city revealed to me a strong sense of nostalgia for the lively atmosphere and solidified, community feeling that was once established there. Only those over 50 years old seem to have a memory of a vibrant Rambla. Many blame this on the arrival of television, video games and other household diversions in the 1980s and 1990s. There is evidence to support this conclusion, since a growing proportion of leisure time is spent in the home and amongst private, family circles than in public, arguably at the expense of extra-familial socialization.

However, I contend that what initially appears suggestive of a conflict between generations and a weakening of the appeal of this longstanding ritual of performance and phatic communion instead indicates the opposite: a cross-generational desire for similar types of social behaviour, albeit reconfigured in unique ways according to changing identities and forms of expression. The leisure styles of young people are not so different from those of their grandparents. The need to perform in public – or to create a sense of "public" space through performance – has not been lost. Public displays of friendship and identity that typically define the everyday social interaction in Spanish cities strongly remain the mode of contact that young people view as a basic human need.

Furthermore, the archetypal social drama encapsulated in the *passeig* may yet be further reinvigorated, albeit in a new, digitized form. Thus, we have to look beyond traditional urban spaces to trace leisure continuities in an environment of seemingly rapid and irreversible change characterized by many Figuerencs as a palpable loss of traditional ways. The Rambla may be losing pride of place, but the *passeig* as a meaningful activity extends beyond the physical streets of the city.

Fotolog: An online passeig

Although I have thus far concentrated on the *passeig* as an embodied, on-the-ground leisure practice, I would now like to draw a correlation between the *passeig* and the use of the website Fotolog among youths in the city. Fotolog is a photo-sharing or photo-

blogging platform that, in 2009, was noted for exceeding the popularity of Facebook as a social networking site among people aged 12-18 throughout Spain (ADN 2009). Exceedingly popular in Chile, Argentina and Brazil, it is also the second most frequented social networking site in Spain with 15 million members country-wide as of 2008 (Otero 2008; Fotolog 2011). At the time I entered the field in late 2007, Fotolog was one of the most popular social websites among young Figuerencs between the ages of 13 and 25. The number of members ranged from 500 to 1000 throughout my fieldwork period, peaking in mid-2008.

The site is fairly simple in design and functionality: Fotolog accounts allow the user to upload one photo per day[3] to share with one's friends or network of contacts on the site. Visitors to the user's photo page can then leave comments for each photo as well as invite the photographer to "friend/follow" them and thereby join in their existing user networks or public groups. Each Fotolog user also has a personal profile where they can list basic information about themselves including their name, location and age. Users can refer to their list of friends and contacts on the site or send private messages to them through the member interface. As part of my ethnographic involvement, I also created a Fotolog profile, uploaded daily photos, posted and received comments, added contacts and utilized the private messaging facility to communicate with Fotolog members from Figueres.

Unlike MySpace or Facebook, Fotolog has a pared-down visual layout with minimal screen elements to divert attention away from the simple task of uploading and viewing a timeline of personal photos. On any user's photo page (Figure 3), their photograph or image of the day appears in the center. They can add a title and a caption/description to be displayed beneath the photograph. Comments from visitors appear in a list beneath the caption, followed by an empty text box encouraging the present visitor to also leave a comment (site registration required). The photograph located in the center of the page is flanked on the left and right by columns of thumbnails. The left-hand column shows a selection of the user's most recent daily images from their timeline, while the right-hand column lists the latest photo uploads of some of the user's Fotolog "friends/favorites" that hyperlink to their profiles. Visitors to the page can click on any of these thumbnails to be redirected to more photos, or can browse for more images by viewing any member's "calendar" or archive of posts. Members can also create and join themed photo groups as well as send "gifts" to the accounts of friends.

[3] Paid, premium account holders can upload more than one photo, but a majority of members in Figueres use the free service.

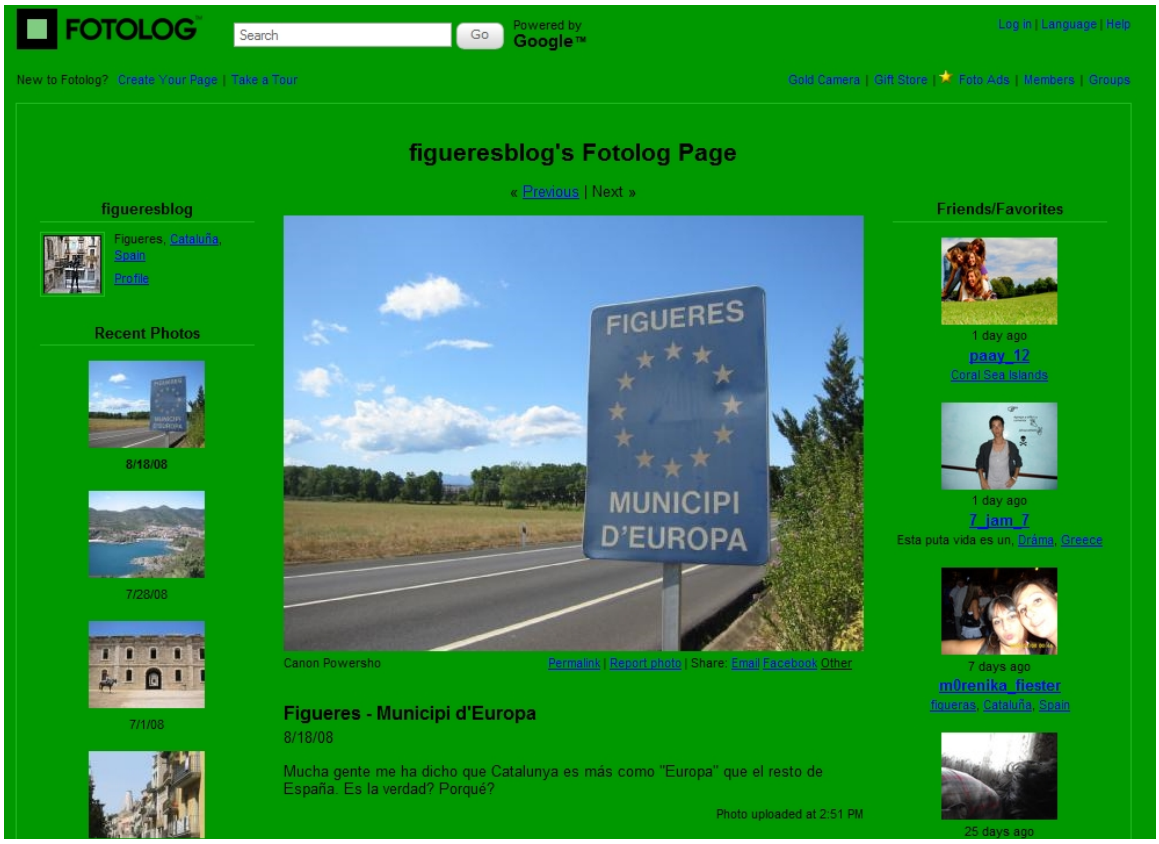

Figure 3: Screenshot of the author's Fotolog page.

Compared to other popular social photo- or image-sharing websites[4], Fotolog daily image uploads are displayed at a fairly small, fixed size (akin to a pocket camera snapshot). Emphasis is not *especially* placed on the quality or artistic "value" of the images as a photographic portfolio, since they are typically not professional media, but amateur photos taken with a point-and-shoot digital camera or mobile phone. In these aesthetic respects, Fotolog accounts are more equivalent to a traditional photo album than an artist's portfolio. Page colours and titles can be changed, but little in the way of additional scripts or code is typically added by the user.

The captions beneath the photographs also act as a personal blog (hence "log"), so that the image and the text appear together as a presentation of thoughts, feelings and ideas accompanied by a snapshot in the life of the Fotologger or "Flogger" as they are commonly known. Thus, the Fotolog formula is simple: post a photo with a caption and wait for friends to comment; then comment on their photos in return (as one Figuerenc teen succinctly summarized: "I communicate with my friends. We put some photos up and then later we add some comments".) I dissect this simple formula below to highlight the efficacy of Fotolog among Figuerenc young people engaged in the presentation of self and the creation of a social forum reminiscent of the traditional *passeig*.

[4] Such as Flickr (http://www.flickr.com) or Deviant Art (http://www.deviantart.com)

Photo + Blog

Over 95 percent of the daily photos uploaded by most of my hundreds of contacts from Figueres were self-portraits or so-called "ego shots" (Recuero 2008: 5)[5]. This style of Fotolog photograph marks the main trend that has become extremely fashionable in South America (especially Argentina) resulting in a subculture ascribed to the label "floggers". Recognizable by their appearance (shaggy hair, bright fluorescent clothes, trendy jeans and shoes, and horn-rimmed glasses, similar to the American "emo" and "hipster" subcultures) and obsession with posting daily self-portraits, floggers in Argentina have self-consciously invented a new subculture devoted to self-exposure, celebrity and fashion. Two famous "flogging" teens in Argentina known as "the little prince" and "the queen" receive thousands of hits each day on their Fotolog accounts. The simple act of posting photos and receiving comments from other teens transformed them into overnight celebrities and media moguls, earning money for appearing at nightclub openings and modeling for companies such as Nike (Knight 2008, Balch 2009, Mavrakis 2008, Barrionuevo 2009).

In this sense, Fotolog portraits are quintessentially about performance, self-obsession, vanity and materialism, with users wishing to appear the most fashionable, "cool" and gain the most followers of their distinct "look". In Figueres, emphasis on appearance, trendy clothes and fashion is also conveyed via Fotolog images. However, more attention is spent on increasing one's online fame amongst offline friends – "nonymous" rather than "anonymous" persons (Donoso and Ribbens 2010: 436) – than in courting international recognition. Figuerenc uploads typically show self-portraits taken in mirrors or reflected in windows, posing, wearing the latest fashions, trendy hair cuts, skater gear or various other teen status markers. Some are overtly sexual in nature, while others are mundane household snapshots with one's pet or siblings, at a party or walking around Figueres town center. In addition to self-portrait snapshots, it is also common to see family photos, groups of friends on the beach, dancing in a club or drinking at a party, with scenes of Figueres city or the Costa Brava providing a backdrop (see Figure 4). By following networks of friends on Fotolog, one can observe various incarnations of the same special evening posted the next day by individuals who had both been present.

[5] It is not possible to provide an exhaustive typology of photo styles here, including objects, landscapes, cartoons, jokes, nationalist imagery or celebrities. See Barone (2010) and Recuero's findings from Brazil (2008: 4-6) for comparison.

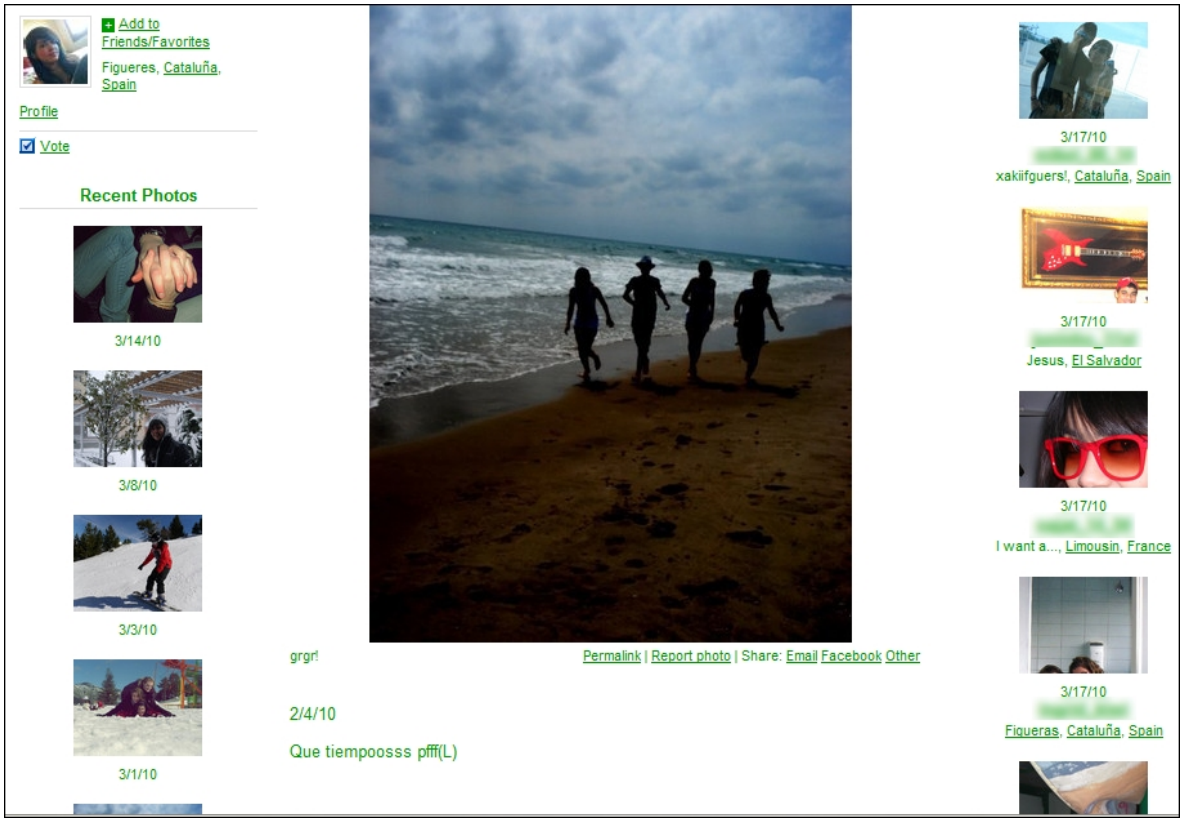

Figure 4: Example of a typical Figuerenc teen's photo page on Fotolog

As such, the interactive space that youths construct through photo-sharing on Fotolog can be seen as continuous with their offline environment and intertwined with existing relationships. Since the "flogger" and his or her closest friends are the prime subject of Fotolog activities, there is, by default and intention, no anonymity involved. Masking one's face would be at odds with the social performance. The foremost feature of Fotolog in Figueres is that it is a social mechanism for the display of carefully decorated and presented selves shown in the images to be highly social beings, fashion-conscious and with many friends. It is not a forum for anonymizing the self because this would be against the norms of interaction on Fotolog as much as on the street in Figueres. Just as the *passeig* is an arena for flaunting friendships and fashions, so is Fotolog.

In early studies of Internet sociality, it was argued that the textual descriptions which make up a majority of social interaction on the Internet stripped participants of the "bodily idioms" that Goffman perceived as central to the presentation of self in public (Goffman 1969, quoted in Hardey 2002: 575). Turn-of-the-century websites and Internet chat rooms may have relied almost entirely on text and thereby rendered invisible the "outward signs of dress, bearing, posture, movement, facial decorations and emotional expressions that are usually so important in determining how individuals respond to us, and how we come to perceive ourselves" (Hardey 2002: 576); but with the present generation of social networking sites which are steeped in user-generated graphics and imagery, this is no longer the case. Instead, new media can be used to effortlessly reconstruct face-to-face co-presence.

The captions beneath the uploaded images are equally central to the practice of photo-blogging, as one user explains: "I use [Fotolog] as a personal blog, to collect photos and to share them with my friends and family". The blog posts/photo captions can be lengthy and recount the in-depth thoughts and feelings of the flogger (which are sometimes tangential to the image), or simply contain a short explanation of the photograph ("this is me at the beach"). A majority of entries are devoted to sharing some lengthy quote from a Catalan, Spanish or international pop song, a poem or a joke (cf. Recuero 2008: 7). Posts can also be personal, about events and markers in time that are relevant to the user, keeping their "audience" updated on important things like, "We passed our test!" referring to a slanted, hastily snapped self-portrait photo of ecstatic girls embracing and grinning ear to ear. They are usually playful and fun updates illustrated with snapshots from one's life, such as explaining what they did the night before or where they are going at the weekend (the beach, a concert, a wedding, to see family, shopping).

Fotolog posts also often link to other media, including YouTube clips of popular bands and artists. As a whole, then, the uploaded images and added captions represent a personal presentation to the audience. Together, they serve to keep visiting friends updated with mundane details of everyday life as well as link them to other types of media – songs, texts, videos – that are deemed important, fashionable and reflect the flogger's awareness of specialist knowledge. Flogging is not just about sharing pictures, but about constructing a common, shared media environment, reinforcing fashions, values and impressions of the world. The interaction between a flogger and their commenting followers cements a feeling of "staying in contact" and "knowing" one another.

As one teen explains, "I update everyday with a photo and a text, like a personal diary. I share it with the others and I visit their fotologs to hear from them [know about them] and to be in contact". The social aspect of the blog post is also reflected in the common practice of listing the names of friends in the post as a "shout out" to them directly, denoting one's inner circle of important people. This is not a practice for outsiders or strangers, but for closely monitored and trusted "insiders". Thus, taking part in sharing photos of oneself on Fotolog means being present in a social space not unlike the Rambla and likewise recognizing the presence of others whose company and approval one wishes to attract.

Comments

After posting a photo and adjoining text, floggers wait for their friends to leave comments, which, in turn, largely remark on the photo itself, stating that the girl or boy looks "beautiful" or "gorgeous", followed by greetings, kisses, hugs and statements such as "nice photo", "how are you?" and "hope everything is well". There are limits to the number of comments a free account can receive (20 per photo), and it is therefore desirable and prestigious to receive the full amount. Being the "first" friend to comment is also significant, so that timing is not exempt from this purportedly asynchronous

communication. In fact, since most floggers are likely to be online at the same time (after school or at weekends), the posting and commenting can take place virtually simultaneously as an ongoing conversation that can be traced from photo to photo among two or more friends. Timing is also a factor because it is likely that the next day a new photo may appear and take its place. The entire experience is ongoing and repetitive, but each instance is fleeting and timely.

Comments are therefore short and frequent rather than dependent upon elaborate contents (cf. Horst and Miller 2005). These "small communicative gestures" are constitutive of technologically sustained enactments of phatic communion and it can therefore be argued that in this "phatic media culture, content is not king, but 'keeping in touch' is" (Miller 2008: 395). Recalling, however, the source of the analogy between the *passeig* and Fotolog behavior, such fleeting and generally content-irrelevant exchanges meant to solidify personal relationships are not new or unique to the online setting, but grounded in offline expectations of public interaction.

Because comments are a significant part of the reciprocal exchange and solidification of social bonds on a public stage (other users can observe how many comments and "friends" you have), it is common for commenting visitors to request that the member also "pass by" their flog and leave a comment in return, or to thank a member for already having visited and commented on their latest photo. These comments, from two separate flogs, reveal two instances of this type of reciprocity:

> Wow, how sexy this photo is
> my SEXY[6]
> Love ya, gorgeous! :P :P[7]
> PLEASE COME TO MY FLOG
> bye !!!!!!!!!!!! (L)[8]
>
> Thanks for stopping by [my flog] and now I'm visiting you …
> and nice photo …
> a kiss,
> take care!

Additionally, users can "F/F" other people (become a friend/follower) and this is often followed by a request that the member reciprocates this relationship, adding to the social prestige of both parties.

The "friending" and commenting process is also analogous to Malinowski's (1922) classic anthropological portrayal of the Kula Ring as a network of exchange and reciprocity, which Miller and Slater have likewise compared to "web rings" or networks of hyperlinks that "expand the fame of a website creator by placing them in an expanded

[6] The English word "sexy" is often used; this has not been translated. The remainder of the quote has also been translated to appear in my approximation of the tone of language in the original, which was written in Spanish slang.
[7] The :P represents an emoticon of a face with its tongue sticking out, used in a playful manner.
[8] (L) is a shortcut key used in MSN messenger. In the MSN program, it creates an icon in the shape of a heart. Outside of the program, it has no effect, but it is so recognized that it is used in any context to stand for the emoticon that would have appeared in MSN messenger.

circulation of symbolic goods" (2000: 20). Similar to guestbooks and web rings of the Web 1.0-era, leaving comments on blogs, Fotologs or other social networking profiles provides an incentive for both parties to increase and expand their ties to other members. Collecting F/Fs is therefore a typical activity, but the strongest and most active ties – estimated by the rate of daily reciprocal comments – remain between those who have an ongoing offline relationship (such as classmates).

Overall, commenters show their affection and appreciation for their Fotolog friends by praising their photos and texts, commiserating with them on difficult days and congratulating them on important milestones, such as when one user posted a note that she and her friends had passed their exams:

> when I saw your SMS at 5 in the morning, I got up and looked at the note right away
> hahaha
> I'm not there to give you a hug, but you know that you have me!!!
> We'll talk [soon], okay?
> muaaaaaaaaaaaaa[9]

It is significant to note that this exchange also references different modes (cf. Recuero 2008: 13 on "multimodality") of communication and spaces, beginning with an SMS, then moving on to Fotolog, followed by an attempt to create a sense of co-presence through physical affection and concluding with a promise to talk soon. There is no attempt here to construct a virtual relationship solely on the basis of Fotolog comments; rather, this is one of many forums for socializing, all of which share commonalities with, and connections to, offline life. Comments therefore often include notes like "see you later", "are you coming out tonight?", "we have to go to Girona this weekend!" or promises to get in touch, either in person or via another medium, like MSN messenger as likewise indicated in this comment left by one male flogger in response to another:

> you have already seen this photo taken by me last Monday
> with the snow
> it was really pretty
> plus two days without school
> hahaha
> well, take care handsome[10]
> mua[11]
> we'll talk on msn

Fotolog profiles are technically publicly available on the web to anyone who happens to come across them (they are indexed by Google), but personal pages are usually shared by URL from user to user while offline (e.g. at school). Contacts from afar could, hypothetically, participate in this online *passeig* and alter the Figuerenc reliance upon proximity as the foundation of friendship and intimacy. However, despite these potentialities, evidence suggests that the main focus of Fotolog among Figuerencs remains strongly tied to place, reinforcing one's local friendships.

[9] Untranslated from the original; signifying a long kiss
[10] "guapo" and "guapa" are generally sexually neutral terms of affection between two males and two females as well as sometimes more suggestive terms between males and females
[11] phonetic spelling of the sound a "kiss" makes

Since Figuerenc floggers are likely to also socialize with their F/Fs in the city center at weekends and after school, and communicate with them by telephone and messenger, I argue that Fotolog should not be seen as a "virtual" or less real *passeig*, simply an additional social arena; another Figuerenc space, and another place to walk around and chat with friends. Fotolog friends are geographic neighbours, colleagues, family, friends and classmates. This reveals that online sociality is not "another social world" (Kazmer and Haythornthwaite 2001: 510) aiming to become a "replacement" for the offline, just a new configuration; another part, another plaza.

New leisure forum for old leisure practices

In engaging with their friends and acquaintances on Fotolog, teens embark upon a web-based promenade around the site, stopping for short greetings on the pages of their friends, catching up on the latest gossip, commiserating with each other, observing their friends' clothing and style, all the while adding new contacts to their social circles by "strolling" through (browsing) the networks of their friends and friends of friends. The addition of short comments on a friend's photos is akin to fleeting conversations, a wave, hug or kiss on the cheek on the street. Logging on to Fotolog to browse around and chat with friends is therefore similar to the once daily ritual of doing the same in the town and on the Rambla. Moreover, the activity itself reinforces the importance of seeing and being seen in a public forum in order to successfully *fer vida social* (have a social life).

It is no coincidence, then, that the expression *fer una volta* or *dar una vuelta* - to go for a walk - is sometimes used by participants to describe "strolling" through the Fotolog pages of contacts, adding, sharing and reading comments or greeting, laughing and joking with friends. In analytical terms, the practices surrounding the figurative walk and chat on the web via Fotolog has much in common with the once popular *passeig* through the city deemed by young people in Figueres as old-fashioned. Both activities are important channels for keeping in touch and reinforcing friendship on a very basic level. Because Fotolog also includes pictures, it similarly matches the attention to physical appearance and impression making (Goffman 1969: 13) that is characteristic of the *paseo* throughout Spain. That the simplicity of Fotolog fits so well with the Spanish (and perhaps also Latin American) sense of self-presentation characteristic of impression-making in public may help to explain the site's striking popularity and quick adoption by circles of friends.

The Fotolog "ritual" of daily posting and commenting can be seen as the (Durkheimian) "social glue" which binds youth friendships together in the same way as the *passeig* can be seen as a ritual which binds Spanish society by combining the presentation of self (individual) with a larger meeting of society in the process of making spaces human. Whether on the street, or at home in front of the computer, acting as a social being in Figueres means engaging in a public performance of self, society and relationships therein. Combined with the fact that many Figuerencs feel that traditional leisure spaces in their city are losing importance, Fotolog represents a novel revival of certain elements of the *passeig* in cyber-spatial format, at least for the younger generation.

In sum, the Internet need not be demonized as a destroyer of traditional forms of interaction; in fact, it can enhance and resuscitate them. Fotolog may not bring Figuerencs back to the Rambla, and I similarly do not argue that this one website is responsible for bringing the dynamics of the Rambla to the web. It is possible that such an analogy can be applied to the social web as a whole, or perhaps even the entire Internet. Instead, via Fotolog and other social networking platforms, Figuerencs choose to recreate styles of sociality which are most familiar to them and suitable to their lives as a whole.

Conclusion: continuity and change

I argue above that web-based interactions can be interpreted as an extension of traditional leisure practices. Yet, returning momentarily to the Rambla that sources this unique social performance, clear disjunctures between old and new leisure activities are evident. First and foremost, when Figuerenc teens are online creating a place-like environment by uniquely blending old and new forms of interaction on Fotolog, they are categorically not spending time in the city center[12]. Though predicated on physical appearance, browsing Fotolog is a sedentary activity. By substituting still photography and text-based chat for face-to-face speaking and gesturing, photo-blogging can only mimic the older form of leisure that I suggest it strongly resembles. So does Fotolog fulfil the prophecy held by Internet sceptics that the web is responsible for killing traditional outdoor leisure activities via impoverished computer-mediated communication?

Viewed from this perspective, the Internet looks convincingly like the cause of the Rambla's decline, not its saviour. Some deeper socio-urban context is needed. Both young and older residents of Figueres report deliberately vacating this traditional public space for a number of complicated reasons (detailed in Barone 2010), all virtually reducible to a common denominator of increased immigration, changing urban demographics and perceptions of increased crime/risk and disaffection. These issues are causing native Figuerencs (Catalans/Spaniards) of all ages to spend their free time away from the densely crowded city center in favour of private homes and rural retreats.
In short, the Internet is not the culprit. Figuerencs in general – and children and teens in particular – are spending more time indoors; and, when indoors, they are often using their computers. The need or desire to remain in constant contact with friends and family has not been lost, and Fotolog (with other social networking sites) allows for an approximation of co-presence that enhances the amount of time people spend in some form of regular interpersonal communication alongside other media like mobile phones. The Internet is therefore not the source of the Rambla exodus, but it benefits from the spoils by supplementing unfulfilled needs for sustained human interaction. Moreover, the Internet and the city are not opposed ends of the spectrum in a street vs. web tug-of-war given the media-saturated environments in which young Figuerencs live their lives. Figuerencs youths continue to prioritize street-based activity and to seek "social

[12] To be clear, mobile browsing – connecting to the Internet via a wifi-enabled device while in the streets - was a very rare activity throughout my fieldwork in Figueres (see Barone 2010).

validation" and "social control" (see Donoso and Ribbens 2010: 443-445) through the development of relationships that cross, often indistinguishably, between offline and online life.

The availability of technological tools allowing different leisure practices within the home has, in this case, aptly coincided with changing social realities in the city. Understanding new leisure practices among youths therefore requires recognizing important transformations as well as equally significant continuities with older ways of doing things. Attention to physicality, personal appearance, co-presence and embodied expression link the cultural phenomenon of the *passeig* to the way Fotolog has been incorporated into teen leisure practices, uniquely modified for media-intense, young Figuerenc lives. As one Figuerenc flogger explains: "Fotolog … I suppose [I use it] because it's something amusing and you notice the support and opinions of people and this makes you feel good". Far from revolutionary, the type of mundane, quotidian interaction that youths crave online is not greatly removed from the social strolling of their parents and grandparents, but Fotolog is a much cooler place to hang out.

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