

Cartographies of social mediasphere: a new dimension in the spatiality

Shekh Moinuddin, New Delhi

Abstract

Digital spatiality is inevitable and relatively new to spatial scientists. The dichotomies of space and place remain a nodal discussion among spatial scientists to fix it in mundane representations and interpretations. In such a flow, we encountered social media that we are using for communication purposes primarily along with infotainments, entertainments, news, sports, games, e-commerce and in many other incarnations. Spatiality and communication are inseparable metaphors wherein digital gadgets are used as features of spatial-temporal compression. The spatial layers in the social mediasphere are like layers of atmosphere and hydrosphere wherein every layer signifies variegated meanings in spatial senses. This study is about drawing contours of dichotomies in the sense of space and place in the social mediasphere of three different layers.

Keywords: *Digital, spatial turn, social mediasphere, space, place*

Spatial Turn in Digital Gadgets

Academicians use the word ‘turn’ for different manifestations including spatial. The late 1980s and beginning of 1990s is the period when spatial turn has developed as reference points across geographers. While quantitative turn was seen in history during 1960s, cultural and linguistic turn took place in the discipline and in literature during 1980s. The spatial turn has been recorded as a spinning point to validate a newer facet in social sciences in general and geography in particular.

Warf and Arias (2008) debated globalization in variegated spatial contexts which in a way altered the understanding of varied manifestation space. Specht (2018) in his arguments intentionally attached geography with media and communications as it has been related since the 16th Century.

Arias (2010) placed spatial studies in an interdisciplinary perspective where interactions of different views shaped the spatial turn giving spatiality fresh dimension. These critical engagements with the concept of space paved the way to interrogate the association of spatial science with digital spatiality and how place and space are continuously shaped and reshaped in the cybernetic and simulated world. Falkheimer (2006) established a relationship between journalism and advertising where such places can be explored as spatial metaphors. Thealander (2006) mapped the intervention of place and nature in “travel advertisements” in an orthodox manner as an entertaining resource. Kitchen et al (2018) pointed out that spatial media includes those technologies

that are assisting people to prepare maps or to recognize locations by using GIS and GPS. Development of spatial media certainly helped mapping of the spatial coordinates far more precisely.

The spatial turn made it possible to map the spatiality inherent in the social media. However, the issues encountered in studying of digital spatiality are nothing like wandering in the forest. First, available literature in the concerned digital spatiality is extremely limited despite ample literature on geography of communication or media studies or media governance. The geography of communication concerns itself with spatial distribution and patterns of communication infrastructures while media studies study the content, history and effects of different types of media. Media governance is related to the rules and regulations, social, cultural, economic and ideological influence upon media. Second, social media is more often discussed on the coffee table but thinking in line to conduct research is not a straight path. Third, collecting relevant data from social media is a tough task and is far more time consuming to process such data. The present discourse grabs this as an opportunity to map the production of digital spatiality in the context of space and place.

The social media functions in variegated forms and representations to include infotainments, entertainments, news, sports, games, movies, videos, politics, social and many others. Each segment has a particular subject and is made objectively but almost all dimensions are common in such a way that all are nearby to display spatiality in its representation. Social media is a house of infinite information and each available content serves a peculiar purpose

whether entertainments or infotainments or misinformation or disinformation. For instance, the nature of Facebook or Instagram is all about entertaining in various capacities. Facebook depicts the spatiality whereas viewers can easily perceive the same in myriad ways. When audiences were not aware of such shared images or foods or culture, the use of the media pushed them to explore the spatiality more. The cognitive imagination of audiences would then shape the spatiality further in terms of what they enjoyed, when they would imagine to have been there. The same spatiality behaved differently when audiences were unacquainted with such spatiality in varied spatial order. In other ways, the shown spatiality creates a perception among the audience whether the place is secluded or familiar. Similarly, Instagram too creates discourses in dual perceptions whether space or place. If audiences are familiar with such spatiality on platforms that they would have been there, in that case, it can map as a place wherein familiarity of such spatiality gives a sense of acquaintances. However, the same spatiality would behave differently in cognitive imagination when audiences were not familiar with such spatiality. The unfamiliar spatiality may look strange, weird, foreign, mysterious, and exotic. The contents on Instagram or Facebook or Over the Top (OTT) media- Prime TV, Netflix, etc. are extensions of digital spatiality. For illustration, the noise or sound can be perceived in social media in terms of simulation spatiality where fantasy or horror can shape through cognitive mappings as per the level of grasp or to understand the same aesthetically. The contents across social media can be easily mapped either in terms of space or place, depending upon how they have been perceived or viewed.

The way someone is perceived may be considered as an inherent knowledge that human beings conceived such traits of knowledge through their lineage and from the existing world of knowledge. And, it is the way someone received and stored such spatial knowledge through a lineage process. Tuan (1977) mapped such traits in terms of preceptories in a child that how their senses shaped with the time to conceive the space and place differently in terms of behaviour, interactions, and activities. Tuan figured out the myths that how the perception of sight does matter to map spatiality. “Human beings not only discern geometric patterns in nature and create abstract spaces in mind; they also try to embody their feelings, images and thoughts in tangible material. The result is sculptural or architectural space, and on a large scale, the planned city” (Tuan, 1977:17). Hence the efforts of perception and vision does shape the spatiality further where one could fix accordingly in the sense of object, organ, or else manifestations. For instance, we perceive the shape and exterior of anything whether it is skin, metal, fire or gust of wind mainly through sensory experiences. The taste of preceptories allows us to realize the spaces of exterior that we can discern through spatial experiences which can be construed in different manifestations.

Mapping Place and Space in Digital Gadgets

The production of place and space is part of spatial manifestations as viewed by geographers to validate the spatial extent. Both space and place are often mapped as domains and ‘fundamental stuff’ in spatial science literature. Geographers talked about the continuum of place and space in their own spatial manifestations. The extent of spatial

mapping is not static; rather it is dynamic in nature- something that geographers have been debating over a period of time. The order of place and space can rarely be separated from each other; and that both can be mapped in terms of localities, territory, time-zone, settings, media scape and network society, etc. Over the years, geographers engage themselves in mapping the continuum of spatiality whether at global or local order (Moinuddin, 2021). Both the words have been categorically used by the Marxist and humanistic geographers with regard to the different perception of spatiality. Marxists perceived spatiality in materialist sense while humanistic tradition mapped the same as “sense of place” and “sense of domination and resistance”. The “sense of place” maps the lived practices and day-to-day actions of the people in the spatial context while the “sense of domination and resistance” maps such spatiality that is socially produced and consumed.

The geographical thinking took a critical turn after the Second World War when geographers started exploring “spatial science” both quantitatively and qualitatively. During the 1950s and 1960s, the quantitative revolution in geography placed inordinate emphasis on quantification and empiricist methodology associated with positivistic approaches which the behavioural and humanistic geographers found unacceptable due to its assumption of value free science inherent in quantification. The humanistic and behavioural approaches placed greater importance to subjectivity paving the way for greater acceptance of qualitative analysis in geography and viewing space in this light. The historical and geographical materialism during the 1970s took another project where spaces were mapped as embedded and intersectional to study the social relations

which can be socially formed and disbursed. Tuan (1977) mapped place and space wherever place does not have any specific scale, and considered as “fields of care” that imitates people’s emotional connections in terms of ‘topophilia’ (the love of or emotional connections with place) and ‘topophobia’ (fear of certain places or situations) to locate the aspirations and worries that are attached with the place. Foucault (1986) talked of spatial manifestation in terms of spatial thinking as “heterotopology”- where he decreed space over time and further endorsed the dimensions of space that are shaping spatial relationships. Heterotopology is “worlds within worlds” that mirrors the outer world in the sense of institutional, cultural and discursive spaces such as the cemeteries, prisons, gardens of antiquity, ships and many more. Lefebvre (1991) argued that absolute space is seldom mapped; rather it can be studied through the process of social actions in the sense of relational and historical space where every mode of production creates a different spatiality. Soja’s (1996) treatment of “Third Space” is an extension of the “First space” and the “Second space” which are indeed hybrid space, discussed in succeeding paragraphs. The discourse on space in geography in the past eight decades has moved a long way from Hartshorne to Castells. Hartshorne in 1939 defined the discipline of geography as an orderly, accurate, rational description and interpretation of the earth surface. He mapped the place as a location which has exact and orderly information. In contrast Relph (1976) emphasised “placelessness” in the context of high-rise buildings and connected suburbs- a result of modernist architecture and urban planning that has a “dehumanising” effect on people related with such places. Agnew (1987) recognized three

principal connotations to map the extent of geographical understanding. First, place as location- specific in terms of longitude and latitude on the earth’s surface; second, as the context to distinctive and group identity and third, as a locale in relation to day-to-day activities. For instance, an exact location in ‘India’ may be considered as a ‘place’ that can be further studied systematically, descriptively and orderly. Harvey (1989) observed that places are produced with the changing cultural notions in time-space compression that in some way pushed homogenisation and differentiation in myriad representations. Massey (1991) analysed the relationship between space and place in terms of “progressive sense of place” where flow is surrounded by spaces. The notion of flow indicates the relational, social and cultural places that are situated in the communities under globalization. Auge (1996) suggested ‘non-places’ in shape and size of super store, shopping malls, aerodrome, road and multiplex theatre and similar. Castells (1996) mapped the ‘space of flows’ in the sense of ‘network society’, shaped by electronics and communication revolution in the last few decades.

The perception of place is often mapped by people in a sense of emotions and sentiments that is often considered as inseparable from place. Agnew (1987) suggested that the perception of place is often acquainted with an imagination of belongingness that is inseparable from place. For example, if one has been living in Delhi for years but has attachments with his/her hometown that are inseparable from the person despite fewer physical association with the latter. Cultural geographers consider such a place in the sense of personal and group identities whereas each

individual considers it as utmost and distinct identity in the spatiality (Keith and Pile, 1993).

Sack (1980) suggested that space is required in a sense of thinking whereas spatial interactions are established through varied identities and representations. Dear (1997) in his “postmodern bloodlines” underscored the role of space in social theory as critical and radical in terms of representations in everyday life. Miller (2011) put forth digital culture as a way of lived experiences when digital gadgets determine daily requirements whatsoever. People use digital gadgets in their daily experience. Digital culture is established and is considered as part of cultural manifestations in spatiality. Digital turn is a usual digital phenomenon that is determining and influencing the daily actions of the users. Mediascapes are now studied to map the dynamics of spatiality in various connotations and denotations in terms of image politics (Moinuddin, 2017).

Contours of social mediasphere: the case of Twitter

Twitter is a platform that promotes micro blogging in politics, entertainments, infotainments, news, culture, sports, administration, and governance and many more. The nature of contents is not restricted to only spatial, rather found in different manifestations in Twitter. Twitter is like a cybernetic space or simulated space whereas the perception of spatiality can be deciphered in terms of interactions and activities (Moinuddin, 2021). Twitter indeed has spatial features like individuality, locality, and thinking. Twitter is designed to work as an intermediary between the users. As a platform Twitter often reminds us of the

dimensions of digital spatiality. This micro-blogging site is designed to be installed as an app in smartphones or laptop/desktop or iPad. The smartphone or laptop/desktop and iPad can be called primary space in terms of the screen that is necessary in the cybernetic and simulated understanding. The screen represents a place in different manifestations wherein we experience apps in varied configurations. Screen is important in the making of digital spatiality and the first stage from which the user can go ahead in order to unlock the screen either by password or pattern or other sensorial functions. Without touching the screen it is not possible to map the digital spatiality. Screen space can be likened to the “first space” (Soja, 1996) or “spatial practice” or “perceived space” (Lefebvre, 1991) or primary space. Therefore, to map digital spatiality, a smartphone or laptop/desktop or iPad is needed first, and then the required app- whether downloaded or installed in the instrument. The gadget behaves as the “first space” or primary space that is unlike physical spatiality wherein physical features are located. Twitter app serves as the secondary space or “conceived space” or apps space or the “second space” (Soja, 1996) or the “representation of space” (Lefebvre, 1991) in digital manifestations when perceptions shape the spatiality in terms of materialism and technological determinism. Digital spatiality is all about digital features including primary space, secondary space and tertiary space (Moinuddin, 2021). The accessibility of the App is a systematic digital process wherein users must follow the digital process to locate the location of the app in the smartphone. Therefore, unless being into secondary space no one can open the app (social mediasphere). The accessibility of the app can be deciphered through a symbol. For instance, a blue sky-coloured bird is a symbol of the Twitter app. Twitter’s

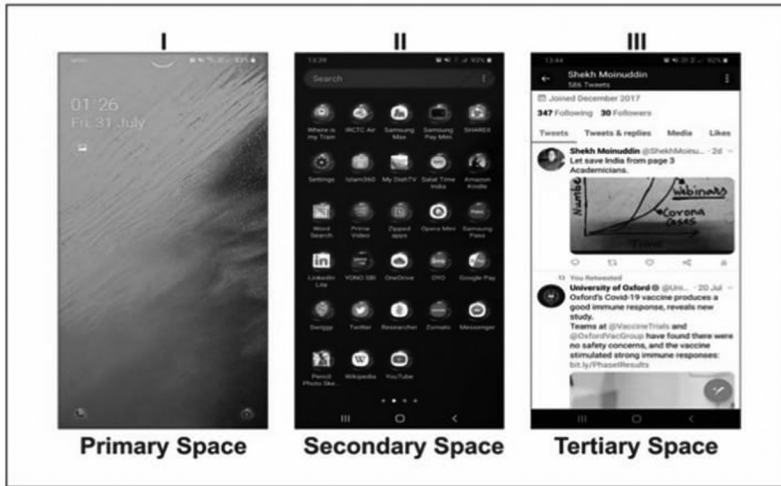


Fig. 1: Social Mediasphere

spatiality is a broadening of algorithms layered with information and knowledge. A user cannot operate Twitter without scrolling in a sequential order: from “first space” to “second space” and in the terminal “Third Space” (Soja, 1996) or “lived space” (Lefebvre, 1991) or tertiary space. Tertiary space determines the space of presence or space of perceptions that provides spatial understanding in mundane representations and interpretations. In other words, social mediasphere can be mapped as tertiary space. Social mediasphere is like life in nature where viewers can shape their perceptions accordingly. For example, the contents on Twitter are found in vivid capacities wherein some users might be familiar with it, and if so, the contents behave as a place for them. But at the same time, some users might not be familiar with such contents. In that case, the contents work as space for them. Third Space can be viewed as “lived space”. For instance, Twitter shapes the perception similar to what a natural scene (mountains, river front, sea shore, boundaries/territories, etc.) shapes the

perception of visitors. Twitter’s spatiality can embody both space & place understandings in binary representations simultaneously. Twitter functions as space when it is termed as nameless territory unless someone should have proper knowledge or acquaintance to venture spatiality. Moreover, smart phones behave as a place when someone knows the password or pattern to unlock the screen and is acquainted with operational steps. The spatial manifestation is based on how the user is acquainted with the operational approach of smartphones and other digital gadgets.

Social mediasphere (Fig 1) is a three-layered cybernetic manifestation and extent of such spaces can be discerned in mundane representations and interpretations. The cybernetic simulation is a kind of digital spatiality that can be deciphered differently in varied contexts. For example, a software engineer conceives cybernetic simulation as algorithmic configurations while others conceive the same as platforms for communication, interactions and lived activities. The simulation is nothing but

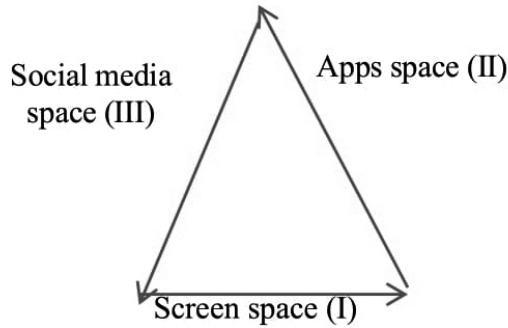


Fig. 2: Triangle of Social Mediasphere

a cognitive imagination that is found in digital packaging where the users are using the contents based on digital consciousness, cognizance, understanding, interests, knowledge, and information and many more. The digital spatiality would not be shaped as a place unless a user is familiar with such details to unlock the screen, in such a combination the screen behaves as a place. Digital spatiality is three layers spatial understandings wherein each layer suggests a specific design and purposes. Screen space is a primary space to interact while apps space functions as the secondary space to choose the specific apps to execute works and one should click social mediasphere for further work to be done for interaction. Social mediasphere is like the atmosphere and hydrosphere where each layer signifies a different meaning and representations; it is a composite mosaic of virtual layers that exists across digital gadgets in terms of screen space, Apps space and social mediasphere.

Social mediasphere (Fig. 2) is a delineation of triangles where systematic scrolling can only help to map social mediasphere in digital manifestations. The scrolling of smartphones follows three different sequences of stages in the shape of a triangle where users can move forward or backward to explore the digital spatiality. The

spatial pattern is different in each layer when smartphones experience space like Apps space and social mediasphere.

Conclusions

Digital dimensions are not static; they are dynamic in spatial sense when each layer in the digital gadgets is supposed to infer different imaginations and cognitive spatial understanding that we experience in mundane representations and interpretations. Digital gadgets bring both communication and spatiality to map the daily dynamism of spatiality. Spatiality and communication are two intimate allegories which are connected through systems, webs, linkages, power, politics, images, space, place and time, etc. The imagining of spatiality is blurred without human interface and human relationships. The imagination of digital spatiality is based in 'real' and 'imagined' understandings where conception of space and place is both 'real' as well as 'imagined'. The screen behaves as both space and place simultaneously. The meaning and extent of space and place in digital gadgets is not much different from abstract or social space/place except cognitive imagination to perceive and conceive of digital spatiality. The extensive use of digital gadgets in day-to-day activities is continuously shaping and reshaping the new spatiality.

References

- Agnew, J. A. (1987). *Place and politics: the geographical mediation of state and society*. Boston. Allen and Unwin.
- Auge, M. (1996). *Non-places: an introduction to super modernity*. New York. Verso Books.
- Castells, M. (1996). *The rise of Network Society*. Oxford. John Wiley & Sons.
- Dear, M. (1997). Postmodern bloodlines. In Benko & Strohmayr (Eds.) *Space and social theory: Interpreting modernity and postmodernity*, Oxford. Blackwell.
- Falkheimer, J. (2006). When place image collides: Place branding news journalism. In Jansson, A., & Falkheimer, J (Eds.) *A geographies of communication: The spatial turn in media studies*. Nordicom, University of Gothenburg.
- Foucault, M., & Miskowicz, J. (1986). Of other spaces: Utopias and heterotopias. *Diacritics* 16(1), 22–27.
- Hartshorne, R. (1939). *The nature of geography*. Annals, The Association of American Geographers. Retrieved, https://files.cercomp.ufg.br/weby/up/214/o/Livro-The_Nature_of_Geography.pdf.
- Harvey, D. (1989). *The Condition of post-modernity*. Oxford. Blackwell.
- Keith, M., & Pile, S. (1993). *Place and the politics of identity*. London. Routledge.
- Kitchin, R., Lauriault, T. P., & Wilson, M. W. (Eds.). (2017). *Understanding spatial media*. Sage Publications.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space* (Donald Nicholson Smith Trans.), Oxford. Blackwell.
- Massey, D. (1991). The political place of locality studies. *Environ Plan A* 23, 267–281.
- Miller, V. (2011). *Understanding digital culture*. Los Angeles. Sage Publications.
- Moinuddin, S. (2017). *Mediascape and the state: a geographical interpretation of image politics in India*. Cham/Switzerland. Springer.
- Moinuddin, S. (2021). *Social Media and Digital Shutdowns: Spatiality, Political Economy and Internet Shutdowns in India*. Cham/Switzerland. Springer.
- Relf, E. (1976). Place and placelessness. In Hubbard, Kitchin, & Gill (Eds.) *Key texts in human geography*. London. Sage Publications.
- Sack, R. (1980). Conceptions of geographic space. *Progress in Human Geography*, 4(3), 313-345.
- Soja, E. (1996). *Third space: journey to loss angles and other real and imagined places*. London. Blackwell.
- Specht, D. (2018). Did you find the world or did you make it up? Media, communications and geography in the digital age. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 13(2), 1–13.
- Thealander, A. (2006). Blank spaces: the mediation of nature in travel advertisements. In Falkheimer & Jansson (Eds.) *Geographies of communication: the spatial turn in media studies*. Gothenburg. Nordicom.
- Tuan, Y. F. (1977). *Space and place: The perspective of experience*. Minnesota University Press.
- Warf, B., & Santa, A. (2008). *The spatial turn: interdisciplinary perspectives*. London. Routledge.

Shekh Moinuddin

Centre for Culture,
Media and Governance
Jamia Millia Islamia,
New Delhi-110025

E-mail: moinuddin3shekh@gmail.com