the social life of wireless urban spaces

by keith n. hampton with oren livio, craig trachtenberg, and rhonda mcewen

The widespread deployment of "Wi-Fi" and high-speed mobile phone data services now allow people to incorporate Internet use into their everyday experiences in public spaces. In the summer of 2007, we set out to document how the social life of urban public spaces like parks, plazas, and markets was changing as a result of these new technologies. Our focus was on the relationship between the use of wireless technologies and privatism: the tendency for people to minimize exposure to diverse others in exchange for private interactions with close intimates.

While contact with others is generally primitive and fleeting in these spaces, urban public spaces can be provocative, disruptive, and contested settings. These spaces promote exposure to diversity by minimizing the segregation of people based on lifestyle and social characteristics—particularly important at a time when mass media and core discussion networks are providing less and less diversity of messages.

Walking in the shoes of William H. Whyte, who investigated the social role of urban design in *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1980), we spent 350 hours observing seven public parks, plazas, and markets located in four cities in the United States and Canada: Bryant Park (NYC), Union Square (NYC), Rittenhouse Square (Philadelphia), Reading Terminal Market (Philadelphia), Union Square (San Francisco), Dundas Square (Toronto), and Nathan Phillips Square (Toronto). These sites, geographically and culturally diverse, were chosen so that we might capture a variety of Internet experiences and observe variation specific to local culture, place, and design. Over four months, we observed 1,300 people using the Internet in these spaces, surveyed over 200 people, and made comparison observations on people reading, listening to music, talking on cell phones, and playing video games.

By taking our notebooks and cameras to these spaces, we explored how wireless Internet access brings new uses and new life to public spaces—and how it pushes out existing public life. Some wireless users are cut off from their surroundings, but for most, interactions between on- and off-line experiences increase exposure to social diversity. Our findings about the complex relationships between Internet use in urban public spaces, exposure to social diversity, and maintenance of social networks are documented in the following images.

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Rittenhouse Square (Philadelphia) Photo by O.L.
Urban public spaces are increasingly places for the use of mobile phones (left), computers (right), and other devices connected to the wireless Internet (middle). Twenty-five percent of the people we interviewed reported that they hadn't ever visited the space where they were observed before wireless Internet was available. Overwhelmingly, those using the Internet in public spaces were single, white, male, and in their 20s and 30s. They are heavy users of public space, averaging two visits of 1-2 hours every week.

Bryant Park (New York City) Photo by O.L.
While some public activities put people in "the thick of things," wireless Internet users prefer niches—corners and places behind planters, walls, and vendor stands—where they find shelter from the sun and other people. Internet users rarely travel in packs: most come alone and stay alone (79 percent).

Nathan Phillips Square (Toronto) Photo by R.M.
Cell phone and wireless Internet users are less attentive to their surroundings, even in response to unexpected stimuli (like loud noises), than are users of media like books and music.

Union Square (San Francisco) Photos by C.T.
Internet users actively work to shield themselves from the gaze of others, though ten percent engage in at least one extended interaction with a stranger while in a public space. Another 12 percent were seen participating in more modest exchanges.

Thirty percent of wireless Internet users reported that they'd met someone new in a public space (one in six kept in touch over time), but few attribute this serendipity to use of the Internet in public.

Bryant Park (New York City) Photos by O.L.
The more devices present, the less in-person interaction: the majority of public Internet users are online communicating with people they know, but who aren't physically present.

Half of wireless Internet users are participating in the public sphere more broadly, spending at least some of their time in public contributing to a blog or consuming online news or political information.

Bryant Park (New York City) Photo by O.L.
Only in Bryant Park did we observe the clustering of Internet users such that their activity limited other people's opportunities for interaction. But this was not directly the result of Internet use. In Bryant Park more people said they were primarily there to "work," so they were less open to sociability with strangers and co-located companions. Bryant Park's abundant supply of small, desk-like tables and chairs supports this behavior, while amenities like shared seating foster more interaction elsewhere.

Bryant Park (New York City) Photo by O.L.
In *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces,* William H. Whyte wrote that what most attracts people to public spaces is other people. While relatively detached from public spaces, wireless Internet users still make for good "people-watching." We also found that the core discussion networks of wireless Internet users in public spaces are much larger and more diverse than the average American's. For some, particularly younger cohorts, wireless urban spaces may provide more opportunity for exposure to diversity, deliberation, and political participation than the fleeting interactions offered by traditional urban public spaces.