YouTube and Social Movements: A Phenomenological Analysis of Participation, Events and Cyberplace

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Abstract: Web 2.0 studies position new social media as creating relational connections, yielding new geographies based on increased awareness. YouTube exemplifies these media, fostering relations between geographically and politically disparate people. Moving beyond the dichotomy between space and cyberspace, this paper expands upon Wellman’s (2001) description of cyberplace, and argues that place and cyberplace form a continuum upon which filmed events can be located. Invisible Children, a non-governmental organization concerned with raising awareness about Ugandan child soldiers, illustrates the role of new media in this continuum through disseminating their videos of protests on YouTube. This analysis expands our understanding of both the links between the generation of awareness and movement participation, and media’s contribution to geographies of collective action.

Keywords: YouTube, cyberplace, participation, communication geography, social movement

We are displaced, because they are displaced
(banner at “Displace Me” event)

Thinking geographically is a key component of being aware
(Sack 1997:17)

Introduction

The development of internet technology in general, and new social media in particular, is tracking and facilitating the spatial evolution of social interactions. As geographic constraints on communication increasingly dissolve, new forms of collective action are arising that transcend traditional conceptions of cultural and spatial fixedness (Jordan 1999; Pickerill 2004, 2007; Rheingold 2003). During the previous generation of media studies, cyberspace was largely defined by the dissolution of traditional spatial boundaries (Mitra and Watts 2002). These descriptions helped cement a dichotomy between actions taken in space versus those in cyberspace (Castells 1996; Miller and Slater 2000). Since 2004, with the origination of Web 2.0 and Media 2.0 studies, this distinction has begun to dissolve (Gauntlett 2009; Kluitenberg 2006; Valtysson 2010). As Manovich (2009) argues, we have moved from media to social media. This shift is exemplified by the explosion of user-generated content, such as blogs and wikis, and the transition from media consumption to prosumption (Grinnell 2009; Humphreys and Grayson...
In this paper, I explore how the shift from media to social media requires us to rethink the spatial relations between communication and politics in everyday life. Specifically, I seek to highlight the interpenetration of places of relational communication and everyday places (Dahlberg 2010; Gauntlett 2009; Kent 2008). Through analyzing these nuanced communication topographies, we advance our understandings of what motivates people to engage in collective action, what forms that participation takes, and the spaces, places, and flows that help define the topologies of these interactions (Adams 1996; Etling et al 2010; Froehling 1997; Melucci 1996).

Previous dichotomies of the virtual/real have proved not only inaccurate, but impediments in our analyses of the relations between collective action and social media. In a study of online–offline youth activism, Wilson (2006) shows how this distinction is erroneous and obfuscating as online and offline activism are frequently inextricably interconnected. Following Wilson, this paper can be contextualized as a counterpoint to objections concerning the virtual/real dichotomy (cf Kluitenberg 2006); situated within trends in both Media and Web 2.0 studies, I argue that place is best understood as a continuum (Ash 2009; Bakardjieva 2003). As Kluitenberg (2006:10) writes “Instead of a strict separation between physical space and informational space, all technological and social trends clearly indicate that these two ‘spheres’ are becoming more and more closely interwoven”. Manovich (2009:326) looks at this inseparability in terms of knowledge, writing that in the context of Web 2.0 developments we are seeing “new kinds of communication where factual content, opinion, and conversation often can’t be clearly separated”. In this paper, I argue that this epistemological inseparability is also closely coupled to spatial entanglements. Using Flash Mobs as an example, I show how YouTube and other social media are resulting in a spatial continuum between online–offline collective actions (Gore 2010; Kluitenberg 2006; Molnár forthcoming). Along this continuum, we find Wellman’s (2001) concept of cyberplace, which I believe focuses our attention fruitfully on the spatial hybridity of technologically mediated social life. What does Wellman’s concept of cyberplace theoretically offer us that cyberspace did not? One could simply posit, after all, that space and cyberspace exist in a continuum. However, as I will explore in fuller detail, cyberplace as a spatial metaphor can be seen as opposed to cyberspace, which Adams (1997:164) argues is a metaphor about disembodiment. Cyberplace, like cyberspace, is defined by interaction; however, its interactions are explicitly embodied in space/time—or events—due to the phenomenology of perception. As such, cyberplace provides us with an embodied engagement with place, whereas cyberspace is disembodied. To stave off preliminary objections, it is not that I’m not arguing that cyberplace is a materiality, or that the internet by nature and function constructs a material place, but that the geographic function of the internet and associated new social media are to create communication linkages; these recursive linkages constitute a contemporary existential spatiality, or cyberplace, that is increasingly intertwined with our lives (Ash 2009; Intrano and Ilharco 2006). As such, this paper provides a counterpoint to Meyrowitz’s claim that technology is leading to a “placeless culture” (1985:8).
This research presents an example of the non-governmental organization (NGO) Invisible Children, and the nascent social movement it has spawned to illustrate how new social media function as a medium through which novel emotive connections are forged between disparate peoples (Ash 2009; Introna and Ilharco 2006). As documentary film is commonly used to bring awareness to social injustices, it is not that the organization’s particular YouTube videos per se are unique from a critical geographical perspective; rather, the extensive usage of new social media by a social movement expands our understanding of participation in socially produced spaces. As a result, I argue that these new technologies are forging new relational communication geographies (cf Xianhong and Guilan 2009), transforming social justice movements by expanding awareness and fostering the connections necessary for solidarity and resistance (Dyer-Witherford 1999; Pickerill 2007; Meyers 1994; Wilson 2006).

This paper explores the intersections of social movements between new social media and the continuum of place in four parts. First, the literature on social movements is reviewed with a focus on their increasing employment of technology for generating awareness. Next, the case of the NGO Invisible Children is presented as exemplary of how social movements are helping to dissolve distinct boundaries between virtual and real as cyberplace merely becomes another locus of political activity. To understand the origination of this organization, and its dynamic social movement, a brief review is then presented of the Ugandan Lord’s Resistance Army, and its role in transforming invisible children into child soldiers. Drawing on phenomenological theory, several protest “events” are analyzed, as are the relational comments and videos they have spawned. Exploring participation through these media, I argue that awareness is a key factor in movement participation and evolving geographies of collective action.

New Social Movements, New Technologies, New Places of Resistance

Scholarship on social movements has historically sought to tease apart the factors resulting in differential social movement participation (McAdam and Snow 1997). During the 1970s and 1980s, resource mobilization theory was the prevailing school of research in social movement theory and informed our understanding of collective resistance by illustrating the importance of resources for groups to carry out actions (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Mueller 1992; Oberschall 1973, 1978; for a then contemporary review of resource mobilization theory see Jenkins 1983). The strand of social grievance scholarship in turn examined how social movements coalesced when actors confronted similar issues (Holton 1978; Kurtz 2003; Melucci 1989; Morrison 1978). Political opportunity theorists added to our understanding of the forces resulting in social movement formation by stressing how changing political structures can create or negate spaces of resistance (McAdam et al 2001; Meyers 2004; Skocpol 1979; Tarrow 1998).

Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, scholars began arguing that social movements were transforming, moving away from struggles surrounding capitalism or political structures, and towards multi-scalar cultural transformations associated
with the “information age” (Castells 1996; Habermas 1991; Pickerill 2004). These evoking forms of collective action are termed “new social movements”, and are positioned in opposition to the traditional or “old social movements”.¹ New social movements are arguably not driven by the desire for resource reallocation, or for political representation, but rather to make the machinations of power visible in a global society increasingly predicated on information (Melucci 1994; Pickerill 2004). Increasingly important in these movements is the politics of self-transformation, and of collective identity (Klandermans and de Weerd 2000; Stryker 2000). As Finger (1989:21) argues for new social movements: “the relevant social and political transformations come ‘from within’ and happen at the level of the person. Therefore, the main slogan of the new movements is: ‘The personal is political!’”

Yet, despite the analytical value of the various theoretical lenses we have trained on both old and new social movements and their participants, the question remains open as to what it is that moves people to engage in collective action—particularly when they are not directly affected by a social grievance, are not situated within an arena of political opportunity, and do not access specific material or institutional resources. As Crowther and Shaw (1997:268) lucidly point out, “Movements move people. They provide the impetus, energy and resources that mobilize people for collective action”. In this paper, I argue that awareness is an under-surveyed factor driving social movement participation.² The evolution of technology might be leading to the decoupling of information from physical space (Gorman and Malecki 2002), but that does not mean that new forms of technology are resulting in a decreasing of geographical awareness; on the contrary, as we experience, however virtually, elements of the lives of people emplaced and displaced across the world, topological connections arise and are strengthened (Adams 1998; Devriendt et al 2008; Xianhong and Guilan 2009). In following the flows of information and individuals within these networks, I focus on cyberplace as one node among many of entanglements between domination and resistance (Jordan 1999; Sharp et al 2000). Social media, I argue, are becoming so integrated into our lives that the locations in which we engage them form a continuum. As a brief example, consider the increasing number of cities blanketed by wireless internet, and the ubiquity of smartphones that are online at all times (Torrens 2009). Analyzing the implications of the spatial infusion of this technology into everyday life is instructive not only for our understanding of popular movements, power, and resistance, but also for an evolving spatial context in which these forces circulate.

New forms of social media are increasingly becoming integrated into evolving forms of political protest (Adams 1996; Froehling 1997; Juris 2005; Mamadouh 2004; Myers 1994; Pickerill 2004). Flash mobs (also known as smart mobs) are exemplary of the political usage of new social media along the continuum of place and cyberplace (Gore 2010; Molnár forthcoming; Rheingold 2003).³ In essence, flash mobs are relatively impromptu social gatherings in urban spaces that are organized using social media. This movement, which developed from the “Reclaim the Streets” movement in the late 1990s, employs mass text messaging and email lists to organize pseudo-spontaneous raves, political demonstrations, and performance art experiences. In studying the links between flash mobs and mobilization, Molnár (forthcoming:5) argues that “the emergence and immense
popularity of flash mobs forcefully demonstrate that the virtual and the physical are not parallel realms but continuously intersecting social realities”. This continuity between online–offline collective action stands in stark contrast to previous dichotomies between physical space and cyberspace, and buttresses arguments for seeing place as a continuum (Broadfoot et al 2010; Wellman 2001; Wilson 2006). Examining the Philippine’s Power People II movement, for example, which mobilized through text messages to overthrow the Estrada regime in 2001 (Lande 2001; Molnár forthcoming), one finds it difficult to disentangle where resistance occurred. Rather, than specifying these actions as either occurring in space or cyberspace, seeing them located along a continuum of place is more instructive, pointing us toward their embodied interconnections. Kluitenberg (2006:8), for example, focuses on these reticulations, arguing that flashmobs “demonstrate that we are living in a space in which the public is reconfigured by a multitude of media and communication networks interwoven into the social and political functions of space to form a “hybrid space””. Within this hybrid space, Molnár found that in contemporary flash mobs, YouTube was the primary point of entry for participants, as the spreading of awareness through viral media is integral to these forms of collective action gaining a critical mass. This brief illustration of flash mobs is instructive of the importance of examining the role of evolving social media in attempts to situate collective action.

Yet, as connections between people take on an increasingly digital form, at least in part, what constitutes a social movement remains a question. Diani (1992:11 in Pickerill 2004) synthesizes various schools of social movement theory to provide the following valuable definition: social movements are defined as formal and informal networks among individuals, groups, and organizations; the boundaries of these movements are defined by the collective identity of its diverse members, and actors seek political change at various scales. Drawing on this definition, the NGO Invisible Children is exemplary of how social movements are tactically deploying evolving forms of social media along a continuum from place-based to cyberplace-based resistance. The organization’s mission is to enable political action by creating mass international awareness about the plight of Ugandan child soldiers and refugees displaced by the country’s ongoing guerrilla war. The organization generates awareness of these conditions through the production of documentary films about the refugees and child soldiers’ lives. The videos have been posted on YouTube, and shown at college campuses and high schools throughout the United States as well as at demonstrations, leading to the coalescence of a new social movement of individuals concerned with transforming themselves, political structures, and the lives of the invisible children. Through online videos, the organization seeks to create visual and emotional connections among these geographically and politically dissimilar peoples, ultimately increasing political participation through a relational configuration of place that transcends traditional spatiotemporal distinctions. I refer to such evolving configurations as “situational geographies of cyberplace”. Before exploring in depth these evolving geographies, I contextualize this study, and then briefly illustrate the history of the struggle to which the organizations’ various events are a response.
Locating Power and Politics: From Cyberspace to Cyberplace

Since the internet’s inception, scholars of media geography have examined the interplay between politics, power, and cyberspace. Resnick (1998) argues that political analyses of cyberspace have three primary dimensions: 

- politics within cyberspace—involving the internal organization of cyberspace and those who are online;
- politics which impacts upon cyberspace—the policies and legislation that impact the cyberspace; and
- political uses of cyberspace—how the technology is used to foster political life offline (Resnick 1998 in Pickerill 2004). This delineation reifies the virtual/real distinction (Castells 1996; Miller and Slater 2000). Through this phenomenological analysis, cyberplace, a term first coined by Wellman (2001), is argued to a more apt metaphor for understanding the entanglements between politics and the continuum of place. Wellman (2001) pointed out early on that cyberplace arises from social interactions with technology:

> The human use of these technologies is creating and sustaining community ties. These ties have transformed cyberspace into cyberplaces, as people connect online with kindred spirits, engage in supportive and sociable relationships with them, and imbue their activity online with meaning, belonging and identity (Wellman 2001:230).

Yet, how do evolving media forms effect the constitution of these cyberplaces? Wilson (2006) offers the insight that emerging forms of technology have historically had profound impacts on how people contact, interact, and negotiate the exchange of resources—social media in this context are simply another step in the spatial evolution of cultural interactions. Understanding the constitution of such technologically dependent places, or cyberplaces, is important for analyses of power and resistance, for “A place may be virtual—that is, constructed of networks, signals, and codes—but the gatherings it supports have real social organization and symbolic identities” (Adams 2009:98).

In advancing Wellman’s (2001) concept of cyberplace, and distinguishing it from cyberspace, I draw extensively on the work of philosopher Edward S. Casey, who has made pioneering steps in separating space and place (Casey 1993, 1996). Phenomenologically, place and cyberplace share many of the same defining characteristics. In understanding this continuity, I employ Casey’s logic (1996), arguing that the primacy of experience dictates the primacy of place. As Casey (1996:18) points out:

> There is no knowing or sensing a place except by being in that place, and to be in a place is to be in a position to perceive it. Knowledge of place is not, then, subsequent to perception . . . but is ingredient in perception itself . . . places are not added to sensations any more than they are imposed on spaces. Both sensations and spaces are themselves emplaced from the very first moment, and at every subsequent moment as well.

From a phenomenological stance, perception (and the perceiver) is where everything begins and ends. Yet, perception is not simply passive and receptive, but rather a kind of passivity in activity (Casey 1996). To perceive is also to be constituted: constituted by cultural and social structures that sediment themselves into the deepest level of perception (Casey 1996). As Casey eloquently argues:
the dialectic of perception and place (and of both with meaning) is as intricate as it is profound, and it is never-ending. Given that we are never without perception, the existence of this dialectic means that we are never without emplaced experiences. It signifies as well that we are not only in places but of them (Casey 1996:19).

All of this suggests that “place, rather than being a mere product or portion of space, is as primary as the perception that gives access to it” (1996:19).

As part of a continuum, terrestrial place and cyberplace share several defining characteristics. Like place, motion is a defining feature of cyberplace. Among the three types of bodily movement traditionally pertinent to place (Casey 1996), cyberplace consists primarily of moving within a place, and moving between places. In the first case, which constitutes the viewer’s experience of movement, moving within a place occurs as a person remains in a circumscribed space, for example wherever their computer is situated (or in the case of YouTube, where the represented action is occurring) (Ash 2009). The second type of motion that occurs within cyberplace is perhaps more contested, in that it is moving between places. The travel that this kind of motion connotes is not physical, located in traditional space, a movement between places, but rather relational. It is not transportation, but transition, and the transition is one of information, and thus awareness. In this context, occupying place through motion has the potential to become a political statement. As this analysis of Invisible Children’s various events will subsequently show, motion through cyberplace is a process of increasing the scale of one’s moral geography (Adams 1998; Sack 1997).

Similar to the emphasis on movement, another essential trait of both terrestrial place and cyberplace is that places gather (Casey 1996). More than merely amassing, place contains entities together in a particular relationship (Casey 1996:25). As Introna and Ilharco (2006) point out in their analysis of the phenomenology of “screens”:

what I actually see is not the screen itself but rather immediately and simultaneously the world it already refers to, the activities, people, or things already implied in the text and images on the screen. As we increasingly draw on screens they withdraw to become for us immediately and already the world itself (2006:72).

This is an amassing of inclusion as well as exclusion. Our perception “retains the occupants of a place within its boundaries: if they were utterly to vanish and the place to be permanently empty, it would be no place at all but a void. But, equally a place holds out, beckoning to its inhabitants and, assembling them, making them manifest” (2006:25). As Casey again reminds us:

The living-moving body is essential to the process of emplacement: lived bodies belong to places and help to constitute them. Even if such bodies may be displaced in certain respects, they are never placeless; they are never only at discrete positions in world time or space, though they may also be at such positions. By the same token, places belong to lived bodies (Casey 1996:24, italics in original).

If bodies are never placeless, where do the displaced locate themselves? Through the interlocutions of the NGO Invisible Children, the discrete positions of these refugees have become diffused through the internet; while physically remaining in Ugandan refugee camps they have also entered cyberplace, and the awareness of millions.
**YouTube and Evolving Social Movements**

New social media, like YouTube, are expanding our conceptions of “participation”, and through user-generated content, producing novel collective “events”, such as the YouTube collaborative symphony. Although not the physical agora, with thousands of new videos uploaded and millions viewed daily, YouTube is a locus of relational communication. As the internet transcends physical boundaries connecting geographically disparate peoples, activists have utilized various internet technologies, such as email, to create relational spaces of resistance through which a network of solidarity extends across space (Froehling 1997; O’Lear 1997; Pickerill 2004, 2007).

Social movements are using these evolving communication technologies in ways specific to their needs. Pickerill (2004) reminds us that this is nothing novel; in seeking to change cultural norms, historically, social movements have extensively employed then-contemporary communication technologies, such as the printing press, radio, television, citizen-band radios, mobile phones, photography, and video (2004:24). Generating awareness through the viral spread of information is similar to what Price and Thompson describe as “information intervention”, which involves “the extensive external management, manipulation or seizure of information space in conflict zones” (2002:8 in Parks 2009). Through creating linkages in these informational spaces, new social media affect the geographies of knowledge and moral concern from which social movements become galvanized.

Although activism is traditionally thought of as place specific, Invisible Children’s use of social media suggests that movements are helping to socially reconstitute the spatial structure of communication (O’Lear 1997). Seen through this lens, the internet, through its various applications, is a magnifier, one that expands the scale of an issue or event so as to generate awareness and solidarity across various socially produced scales (Jonas 1994; Purcell 2003; Swyngedouw 1997; Weeks 1999). As Froehling (1997) demonstrates, increasing scales of awareness is an integral part of the political struggle waged in part in the cyberscape. As connections are made, nationality and physical location border upon irrelevant; within rhizomic cyberplace, awareness spreads like wildfire.

**The Place of the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda**

Led by Joseph Kony, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) has worked since 1987 to destabilize northern Uganda, focusing particularly on the Gulu and Kitgum regions (Doom and Vlassenroot 1999; Dunn 2004) (see Figure 1). Despite its nominal pretenses, the army is essentially a guerilla movement, which has conducted an unrelenting campaign of terror on the countries’ civilians (Ehrenreich 1998). The LRA is renowned for the brutality and arbitrariness of its tactics, causing the displacement of thousands, whom it has continued to terrorize even in the refugee camps to which they have been driven. One of the characteristics that exemplifies the LRA’s campaign of terror, and out of which Invisible Children arose, is the LRA’s practice of abducting children to work in servitude as child soldiers (Doom and Vlassenroot 1999; Van Acker 2004).
The origin of the current conflict can most easily be traced to 1986, when current President Yoweri Museveni and his National Resistance Army (NRA) seized power from Tito Okello Lutwa’s regime (Bevan 2007). Museveni’s NRA became the de facto Ugandan government’s army, and in 1995, changed its name to the Uganda People’s Defense Force (UPDF) (Feldman 2008). The previous government’s army retreated to northern Uganda and southern Sudan, where it coalesced into the Ugandan People’s Democratic Army (UPDA). During the late 1980s, several religious splinter groups separated from the UPDA. Drawing support from these groups, Joseph Kony formed an armed movement, which ultimately came to be known as the LRA.
Purportedly concerned with overthrowing the Ugandan government, the LRA has focused its campaign of terror on the Acholi communities in northern Uganda. Before 2002, the LRA was situated in southern Sudan, engaging in border raids, during which they would abduct children. These children have felt the brunt of the LRA’s campaign; approximately 20,000 children have been abducted from their villages, and forced into servitude as child soldiers, porters, and sex slaves (Dunn 2004).

The abducted children form the backbone of the LRA’s forces; Amnesty International believes that approximately 80% of its soldiers are abducted children (Dunn 2004). The LRA employs extremely brutal tactics to maintain the allegiance of its child soldiers; children, often as young as 9 years old, are forced to beat and kill other abductees who try to escape (Cheney 2005). Fearful for their lives, children leave their villages each night, searching for safety by sleeping in the streets, bus stations, and factories of major towns, such as Gulu. In 2003, at least 1000 children were spending the night in Gulu, and more than 3000 people, most of whom were unaccompanied children, sought refuge at Lacor hospital (Dunn 2004). Authorities believe that in total there are 30,000–40,000 of these adolescent “night commuters” (Dunn 2004).

The LRA’s campaign has completely transformed the cultural landscape of northern Uganda into a landscape of violence (Gregory and Pred 2007; Oslender 2007; Oza 2007). In an ostensible effort to protect its civilians, the Ugandan government has displaced an extensive amount of its populace into refugee camps, known euphemistically as protected villages. Between 1996 and 2000, more than 400,000 civilians from the Gulu district were forcibly relocated by the military into displacement camps. Between 2002 and 2003, more than another 400,000 have been relocated in camps in the Kitgum and Pader districts (Dunn 2004).

Yet, despite these atrocities, northern Uganda has slowly begun moving closer to achieving peace (Quinn 2009). Between June 2006 and March 2008, peace talks were held in Juba, Sudan between the LRA and the Government of Uganda. The Juba Peace Talks yielded the Final Peace Agreement (FPA), which ostensibly only needed the signatures of Kony and President Museveni to end the struggle. Unfortunately, in April 2008, Kony reneged on his commitment to sign the FPA. Following the collapse of the peace talks, the LRA has become active once again, moving into the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, and southern Sudan (Jackson 2009).

Although political change in Uganda might seem elusive, in the United States the work of Invisible Children and the masses it has galvanized appear to be having a discernible effect. In 2009, Invisible Children started a campaign called “We Want Obama”. As part of this campaign, on 25 April a “World Wide Rescue Event” was held in over 100 cities throughout the world. Through YouTube videos, Facebook notifications, and other social media, the organization called on its members to sign a “citizen’s arrest warrant” for Joseph Kony either at the demonstrations or online, illustrating to President Obama the widespread interest in bringing an end to the atrocities in Uganda. As a result of this campaign, more than a quarter of a million people signed either the online or physical petitions, and on 10 May 2010, the US House of Representatives passed the LRA Disarmament Act and
Northern Uganda Recovery Act by a unanimous vote, which the movement argues is “the most widely supported Africa focused legislation in the nation’s history”. Some might write off the contribution of Invisible Children to the passing of this mandate as a drop-in-the-bucket, or as merely coincidental. However, the personal invitation from President Obama to Invisible Children’s CEO Ben Keesey and two of its founders to attend the Oval Office for the signing ceremony demonstrates the contribution that a critical mass of individuals organized along the continuum of place–cyberplace was able to achieve. This example invites the rethinking of the impact of technology on awareness and collective action, which some have noted is essentially futile, as in the case of Google Earth’s “Awareness Layers” (Parks 2009). What is it that differentiates Invisible Children’s usage of new social media from other organization’s novel awareness-generating pursuits? As I will now illustrate, it is the relationality that these evolving media forms offer that generates geographical awareness, and spawns participation by emplacing viewers within events along the continuum of place–cyberplace.

Invisible Children, Events, and Cyberplace

In 2003, three young American filmmakers traveled to Uganda “in search of a story” (Invisible Children 2011). What they witnessed, a tragedy in which children were both the weapons and the victims, both shocked and captivated them; upon returning to the USA they produced “Invisible Children: Rough cut”, which exposes the brutal reality of life for “night commuters” and “child soldiers” of northern Uganda. Confronted with the success of their first documentary, the three filmmakers started Invisible Children, an NGO dedicated to helping individuals answer the question “what can I do”. The group states that:

> By documenting the lives of those living in regions of conflict and injustice, we hope to educate and inspire individuals in the Western world to use their unique voice for change. Our media creates an opportunity for people to become part of a grassroots movement that intelligently responds to what’s happening in the world (Invisible Children 2011).

Since the limited release of their first film, Invisible Children has released approximately 130 videos on YouTube, through which millions have come into contact with the story of the child soldiers and night commuters of Uganda. With over 7000 subscribers (individuals who are notified whenever a new video is released), Invisible Children is within the top 50 most subscribed non-profits on YouTube. One aspect of Invisible Children’s usage of YouTube that differentiates it from the intersection of previous social movements with communication media is the relationality, or conversations are spawned. For example, Invisible Children’s message is amplified by the hundreds of individual “prosumers” that produce their own videos. These videos, which are found below the organization’s video in the comment section, either continue the conversation surrounding a new clip, or advocate for specific Invisible Children campaigns, such as by calling on members of congress to support the LRA disarmament bill. The existence of these comments and user-generated content draws our attention to the links between awareness, participation, and new social media. As we increasingly come to be in the world...
through the interface of social media, the generation of awareness can lead to novel forms of participation, such as user generation of video content and the continuation of a relational conversation. These comments and clips constitute “brokerage” or the spread of mobilization through the connection of previously unrelated individuals (Nicholls 2007).

In reviewing the scores of Invisible Children YouTube videos a common thread is the visual script. With pop music playing, videos largely begin by introducing Ugandan teenagers affected by the crisis, having them tell short vignettes of their lives, and then create connections through imagery of United States (and recently global) students seeking to make a difference. This script exemplifies what Michael Shapiro refers to as the “personal code” or a focus on creating connections through individual’s stories rather than the analyses of the region’s nuanced political conflict (1988 in Parks 2009). The organization’s “Face-to-Face: Fall Tour 2010”, for example, begins with seven Ugandan former child soldiers describing their lives, concluding that “war defined the past, but we will define the future”. This video was a relational preview, as it was released prior to a US-wide tour of hundreds of high schools and colleges where students got the chance to make personal connections with the actual displaced Ugandans from the video.

To help enforce these “personal codes” and further create “placial” connection between activists and college students, the organization has frequently engaged with the continuum of place–cyberplace by holding, filming, and incorporating footage of its now annual protests. Beginning in 2006, these events are massive protests, often co-occurring in various cities either throughout the United States, or globally. For example, during the movement’s first event, called the “Night Commute” (28 April 2006), the organization mobilized 80,000 people to sleep in the streets to bring awareness to the displaced night commuters. Similarly, during the Displace Me event, which took place the following April, participants were asked to imagine for 24 hours what it is like to have been displaced for 10 years. The goal of the Displace Me event was by self-displacing as an act of civil disobedience “to move your home to bring them home”. The group’s hosting of events such as these, and their filming and subsequent online dissemination, should be seen as novel spatiotemporal events situated along the continuum of place. As philosopher Edward S. Casey describes it:

to speak of space–time is to speak once more of event. For an event is at once spatial and temporal, indeed indissolubly both: its spatial qualities and relations happen at a particular time. But the happening itself occurs in a place that is equally particular. Thus “event” can be considered the spatiotemporalization of a place, and the way it happens as spatiotemporally specified (1993:36).

The filming and online viewing of the “events” further illuminates the parameters of cyberplace. Following Casey again, “there is no such thing as a pure date, a sheer occurrence that occurs nowhere. Every date is an emplaced happening. And since every date, every time, is indissociably linked with space, it is ultimately, or rather first of all situated in a “particular locality” (Casey 1993:37). What is key from Casey’s perspective is that:
What if time, space, and their projections and reduction as sites are non-simply located in places? Then place would no longer be the mere occasion for happenings positioned in an infinitely capacious space and time. Place itself would be the happening, and space and time what it occasions, what it specifies in determinate and measurable sites. The “eventmental” character of places, their capacity for co-locating space and time (even as they deconstruct this very dyad), can be considered a final form of gathering (1993:38).

This form of gathering is occasioned by “the very power of emplacement to bring space and time together in the event” (1993:38). What we find from applying Casey’s logic to Invisible Children’s events is that an online viewer becomes emplaced through their viewing. This emplacement is not in a specific material place, but an informational one, namely forged through emotive connections. Within the context of this cyberplace, some of these events are essentially continuous gatherings or conversations, the product of years of growth, while others occur in one specific place/time but have the ability to be attended continuously (Adams 2009; Rheingold 1993, 2003).

The temporal continuity of these interactions dovetails with the relational communication that frequently springs up following a clip’s posting. The phenomenon of comments in response to comments is an essentially ubiquitous feature among new social media sites (Lomas 2008). Invisible Children’s YouTube videos have generated thousands of comments over the years, ranging from asinine to profound. In analyzing these comments, various conversations appear—threads that begin and end only to begin again. What these comments speak to, whether they are from people who took part in a particular event, or those who viewed the clips online, or at a school presentation, is the intense emotional connection formed to the Ugandan child refugees and the movement’s cause. As one viewer posted on Invisible Children’s “channel page”: “You came to my college last night, and I have never been so... moved in my entire life. I am eager to get involved with your organization.” Farther down in the comments section, another individual noted: “My eyes are opened thanks to you guys. My heart aches, my eyes water, and my hands crave a part to... help out.” What these comments draw our attention to is the linkages between awareness and the galvanizing of participation. Whether an individual first became aware of the child soldiers through a school presentation, a friend’s Facebook link, or directly on YouTube is irrelevant and misses the point that new social media are recursive and increasingly ubiquitous within moments of everyday life. The intense emotional connections evidenced by these comments are rooted in perception—perception that Casey notes is only forged from place. Where that spark of awareness occurred is an event, which is the spatiotemporalization of place-cyberplace, and can occur anywhere between a demonstration and online.

What is especially intriguing in light of these comments is the blurring of the discreteness of places of “participation”. This blurring is closely coupled to porosity, another central element of the eventmental character of cyberplace, “for a place or region to be an event ... there must be permeable margins of transition” (Casey 1993:42). Porosity is a key characteristic of cyberplace, as Casey once again points out “the porousness of boundaries is essential to place. A place could not gather bodies in the diverse spatiotemporal ways it does without the permeability of its
own limits” (1993:42). In terms of porosity, the linkages between participation and awareness become particularly blurred in the context of the online clips’ role in generating new members. In response to a question a viewer posted following the clip “Who We Are” about how to get involved with the movement, another viewer responded:

if you go to the website there’s a lot of programs that you can get involved in. If you still . . . go to school, you can start a ‘schools for schools’ program, or become a ‘roadie’. Doing what you’re doing now is perfectly fine, the first step to this all is always educating people on the subject.

The perception that leads to these conversations is as we have seen spatiotemporally emplaced within an event due to its phenomenological nature; the conversations that occur within these new information spaces indicate that the awareness generated results in people being brought to the same informational space, repositioning participation along the place–cyberplace continuum. While one can participate in an event within cyberplace by viewing a clip, the quality of that participation is variable, depending on an individual’s emotional connection. One might be moved to produce a new clip as a response, to leave a message in response, or to attend a demonstration. These are all examples of contemporary movement participation.

The various Invisible Children events—both the demonstrations and their representations online—function by generating awareness of the lived experiences of Ugandan child soldiers, making visible the invisible, deincarcerating the incarcerated (Appadurai 1988). The music and imagery employed by the campaign creates visual, physical, and emotional connections between the displaced, the high school and college students physically present at the various events, and the millions who attend through participating in cyberplace. Through individually viewing videos, a collective social experience is produced; this culture is not rooted in a particular space, but its generation is constitutive of a situational place. One might argue that this virtual togetherness is illusory; however, the feeling of connection that is maintained through relational communication, such as via the capacity to make online comments about the emotional power of being at a demonstration, or be “friended” on the group’s Facebook page and remain updated about upcoming events, is very much real. This “virtual togetherness” (Bakardjieva 2003) results in a new form of social awareness. These situational geographies spawned by Invisible Children’s events and their online viewing are moral in essence. As Sack elaborates:

Thinking geographically is a key component of being aware. Awareness is creating a view of the world, and self-awareness in seeing and evaluating oneself as part of that world. This awareness of the world is accompanied by a self-awareness—of being in the world. This means that we not only see the world from somewhere, but are able to view ourselves from outside ourselves, somewhere else (Sack 1997:17).

Situational geographies of cyberplace are constituted through the generation of geographical and social awareness. By creating these connections, evolving media forms, such as YouTube, connect geographically separated people, transforming territorial segmentation into global integration (Sack 1997). So what then are the effects of forming these situational geographies? According to Sack:
The relationship between geography and awareness is reciprocal. As we are presented with the opportunity to learn more about the world, we change our view, which in turn affects how we influence places in the world. These dynamics between the geographical elements of place and space on the one hand and awareness on the other are also at the core of an extremely important part of awareness—that of moral concern (Sack 1997:20).

As this analysis of Invisible Children has shown, seeing protests and their representation as events in cyberplace illustrates the ways contemporary social movements mobilize members by expanding creating geographies of moral awareness.

**New Technologies, New Connections, New Questions**

A diverse social movement has been galvanized through Invisible Children’s events, illustrating how the continuum of place–cyberplace results in new situational geographies of resistance. This reality is not novel to cyberplace, however, but is more a function of the effects of media on the spatiality of social interactions. Meyrowitz, for example, notes that: “As a result of electronic mediated interactions, the definition of situations and of behaviors is no longer determined by physical location ... By altering the informational characteristics of place, electronic media reshape social situations and social identities” (1985:117). Within cyberplace, the relationality of new social media, like YouTube, moves people informationally to the same place. Electronic media are creating connections between people where such connections would not be previously possible. Mitra and Watts (2002) analyze the relationship between communication geographies and power, showing how the relations between power and spatial location are changing. Power is no longer something that is manifest in the center, nor emanates from the margins—with the advent of decentralized technologies it has become deterritorialized. As Allen (2003:2) poses the question, “If power is inherently spatial, and spatiality is imbued with power, then what force do these new mediascapes wield?”. More than two decades ago, Meyrowitz’s presciently posed and then tentatively answered a strikingly similar question:

> Why and how do technologies that merely create new connections among people and places lead to any fundamental shift in the structure of society or in social behavior? One potential answer to this question rests in the ways in which disconnectedness—the separation of social situations and interactions—shapes social reality (1985:23).

Through the continuum of place–cyberplace, geographically disparate communities are brought together, if only momentarily, emplaced. The power of cyberplace, therefore, is latent in its potentiality as a medium. Those who gather through it can affect change, but first they must gather.

**Conclusion**

This paper has shown the importance of moving from a conception, and analysis, of cyberspace, to that of cyberplace. As I have endeavored to show, the distinction is not simply the further development of a neologism, but rather fundamental to
understanding the individual and collective topography of the cyberscape. Just as “neither body nor place is precultural” (Casey 1996:46), so neither is cyberspace. Although social movements have historically made extensive use of communication technologies, new social media have the potential to facilitate fundamental changes in how social movements originate and operate (Melucci 1996; Pickerill 2004). For example, social movements have historically been predicated around face-to-face interactions, a reality that is certainly changing with the increase in online activism (Adams 1996; Froehling 1997; Juris 2005; Myers 1994). As Rep. Susan Davis (D-California) stated before Congress:

These young members of the Invisible Children organization know that no child should live in fear of being abducted, mutilated, or killed. With that belief, they have helped make the children of Uganda visible to us, and now, with this legislation, we have the chance to truly join in this cause.

Representative Davis’s attention to the impact of collective action on visibility highlights the conclusion of this paper: with the increasingly interwoven role of social media in our everyday lives, it has become increasingly complicated to disentangle “offline” from “online” activism. This paper has argued that political awareness couples information to the increasingly rhizomic links within a novel technologically mediated form of place. Social movements advance and achieve their goals by creating places and moments, or events, for increased public and political discourse; cyberplace is simply one end of the continuum of culturally constructed arenas of political engagement.

In surveying the cyberscape, which links international activists and these refugees, conceptions of displacement and invisibility abound, obscuring our geographical understanding of the relationships between space, place, violence and resistance (Gregory and Pred 2007; Sharp et al 2000). Although the child soldiers and refugees are ostensibly politically invisible, thousands of ordinary citizens have become aware of their plight and have been transformed into international activists, seeking to transform political invisibility into visibility. In this paper, I have argued that Invisible Children’s videos do more than merely raise collective consciousness about the unseen plight of these refugees, they also achieve their social purpose by creating novel placial connections between the empowered viewer and the disempowered viewed. These connections and the videos themselves focus on tying viewer awareness to political visibility of the viewed. In addition to increasing visibility, the organization and its massive following have had a real political impact, as evidenced by the successful “We Want Obama” campaign.

This paper is intended primarily as a phenomenological examination of cyberplace, and an academic introduction into the situational politics of YouTube; myriad related issues await other academic analyses. Despite the emancipatory potential of YouTube as a medium, neither the internet, nor cyberplace itself, is a liberatory environment (Froehling 1997, Warf and Grimes 1997). Through this paper I have shown that, like any place, cyberplace both includes and excludes. However, it is its potential to connect geographically disparate peoples in solidarity that cyberplace and terrestrial place coincide in a global, deterritorialized world of flows.
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**Endnotes**

1 My concern in this paper is not to specifically situate Invisible Children within debates over social movement theory, but rather show how evolving forms of technologies, specifically social media, are leading to novel-read not New-social movements.

2 See Jasper and Poulsen (1995) for an exception of “moral shocks”.

3 Definitions of flash mobs and smart mobs intersect at many points. See Molnár (forthcoming) for a discussion of the various types and their definitions.

4 This rough figure is based on a January 2011 summary of the number of viewers who have viewed each of the organization’s films. As both the number of viewers, and the number of additional video clips posted as responses to Invisible Children's original videos are both continually increasing, any calculation is by definition rough and dynamic.

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