A Portal for You and Me, and Us, and Others

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I describe a project that proposes to place relatively simple communications technologies in public places in Melbourne, linked to public places in several of Melbourne's sister cities. The Portals do not display the work of particular content providers or artists, but create an "always on", real-time visual and aural connection through which individuals and the publics of each city may communicate, play, and perform, with one another, and for one another.

In this way the project aims to use mundane hardware in new ways. Rather than carrying entertainment product, advertising, or private communications, the project seeks to employ what are now ubiquitous technologies in the public good, in the public sphere, not for commercial or instrumental purposes but for whatever indeterminate purposes that emerge through use.

The portal also has potential as an instrument of research, probing the performance of mediated human interaction, public play, spectacle, emergent cooperative behaviour, and cross-cultural communications issues, among many other things. Funding has been sought but not yet secured, and this paper invites constructive criticism whilst the proposal is at a paper-based formative stage.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.4.3 [**Computer Applications**]: Social and Behavioral Sciences - Sociology

General Terms

Human Factors.

Keywords

Portal, public good, public spectacle, play, human interaction, communication, mediated communication, globalism, multiculturalism.

1. INTRODUCTION

A Portal for You and Me, and Us and Others proposes to place relatively simple communications technologies in public places in Melbourne, and also in public places in Melbourne's sister cities – Tianjin, Milan, and Thessaloniki – and between Melbourne's Station Pier and either Southampton or Liverpool wharves. These cities all have well understood historical and cultural ties. The aim is to create an "always on", real-time visual and aural link through which individuals and the publics of each city may communicate, play and perform, with one another, and for one another. The project is at the proposal stage, funding having been sought from the Melbourne City Council's "Cultural Precincts Enhancement Fund", and from the City of Port Phillip.

The project described here seeks to employ mundane technologies in the public good, and as instruments of research. The project does not entail the use of novel or innovative technology; it simply places common-a-garden projectors, cameras, screens, microphones, and speakers in public places, and links them via the Internet to create an innovative application for this mundane hardware. It is the context of use that is interesting, not the technology.
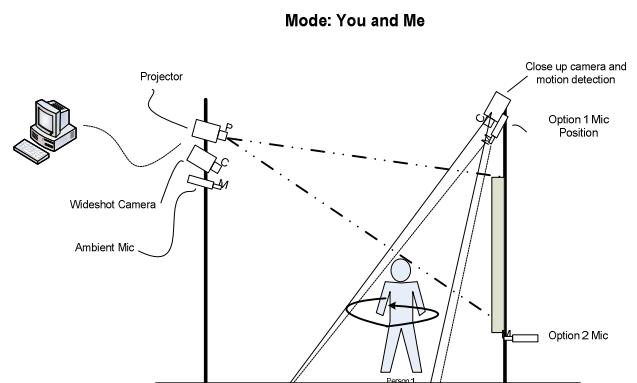

Figure 1. A Portal to be set in a laneway.

2. MODES OF USE

Portals for You and Me, and Us, and Others operates in three modes. It does not present the work of particular content providers or artists, but mediates private and public communication, play, and public performance. It is therefore consistent with the artistic project, which is to transfer subjective and inter-subjective lifeworlds to the public domain – and is consistent with the construction of a form of public sphere – by facilitating communicative acts in a public domain.

By providing modes of use the Portal lays down a structure which both enables and constrains whatever use it might be put to, and the question of the extent to which the Portal can and should structure the agency of those who use the Portal remains open to research.

Nevertheless, the hardware does of necessity establish a set of givens, and as a starting point, the fore mentioned three modes of the Portal are as follows…

1. *You and Me* – whereby personal connections are mediated between individual people in Melbourne and another place.

2. *Us* – whereby the ambient street-life of people in Melbourne and in another place is communicated in real time.

3. *Others* – whereby *You* and *Me*, and *Us*, are recontextualised historically and geographically.

These modes are further described as scenarios of use.

3. SCENARIOS OF USE
3.1 You and Me
Spontaneous and playful use of the Portal is triggered when a person happens to occupy a one-meter diameter brass-ring inlaid into the surface of the footpath in Melbourne, and at the same time a person also happens to occupy its paired ring in another place. The Portal recognizes that the "hotspots" are occupied, and focuses a camera and microphone on the occupants. "Me", a person who just happens to be standing in the ring in Melbourne, will see my own image on the small feedback screen, and the image of "You", a stranger in another place, will occupy the main screen. The situation is of course mirrored in the other place.

You and Me may well wave to each other, blow a kiss, mirror-dance, make a rude gesture, or try to strike up a conversation. The sensation of communicating in real-time with a complete stranger from another land, due only to happenstance, using body-language, gesture and voice, is a potentially powerful experience for the participants, and at the same time makes for engaging street-theatre for local observers in the lanes and streets of Melbourne and the other place.

As knowledge of the Portal becomes available, You and Me may also like to use it in strategic ways, by making pre-planned arrangements to catch up with friends or family. By meeting through the Portal, tourists, back-packers and business people visiting Melbourne and other places can "video-conference" with one another, transmitting both voice and image in real-time.

But as already noted, the Portal is public, and whilst the communication between You and Me may be one-on-one and interpersonal, the denizens of the laneways in each city will witness their fellow citizens in their successful and less successful attempts at communicating. Publics are thus created at two levels, through witnessing the live action and at the same time the screen action, and individuals become ambassadors, speaking for themselves, but also in a sense speaking for those observing, who may of course intervene in the speaker's efforts. Observers will bear witness to personal interaction, and this public witnessing of intimacy may well be in part heart-warming, in part amusing, but always interesting.

3.2 Us
When the rings are unoccupied, (or perhaps if they are occupied continuously for a set maximum time), the Portal defaults to 'Us' mode.

In 'Us' mode, the camera and microphones focus on a broader area of the street – about 10m-15m in length – taking in whole numbers of people as they go about their daily business. The sights and sounds of daily life in the laneway or street are captured and communicated as life occurs within the focal area, marked out on the ground by inlaid brass strips, and at night, by lighting. As in the 'You and Me' mode, the small feedback screen provides a reflexive image of what is happening locally, whilst the large screen and speakers narrow-cast the equivalent laneway-scene from across the world.

The denizens of the laneways, the publics of the globe, thus see themselves in numbers, in the context of city life, and in the context provided by their counterparts from across the world. Global and cultural comparisons and contrasts become evident. People, levels of activity and types of activity, time of day, all become evident. All the sights and sounds of laneway life are generated by the numbers of people who just happened to be passing through the Portal at that time, and are made available in real-time, across the world.

Used more strategically, groups of 'Us' may choose to use the Portal in planned ways. Groups of people may gather at the Portal to celebrate sporting, cultural, or other performances; events maybe narrowcast from one laneway to the other; school groups and other meetings of people may be arranged.

3.3 Others
To convey a sense of the 'Other', the Portal pulls back from close-ups of the here-and-now, and takes a wider, more distanced, "bird's eye" perspective of the city, its publics, and its urban and historical surroundings. The Portal intermittently cuts from the default 'Us' mode to 'Other' mode, and the life of the laneway is recontextualised in place and time.

In 'Other' mode, prepared file-images and sounds of the cities and its people are presented. These comprise combinations of panoramic images of the cities' urban landscapes, cartographic images of the cities, historical images of the cities, and sound-scapes of the cities. The *flaneur* is distanced from the immediate experience of life in the city by exposure to its history and geographic context, and by cross-cutting from one city to the other, comparison and contrast between the cities and between past and present is invited.

By shifting the focus in this way to a different scale in space, and to a different place in time, the life of the laneway or street becomes part of a larger phenomenon, and is seen in the context of all of the city streets, in the context of Globalism, and in the context of history.

4. SO WHAT?
To the best of my knowledge, this particular combination of communications technologies, public infrastructure, global reach, and performance art, is a world first – surprising, considering the ubiquity of the screen in contemporary life, and the simplicity of the technical design. But novelty is in itself no recommendation.

The project aims to serve two purposes, one concerned with the public good, and the other concerned with research. These will be taken in turn.

4.1 A public good

An implicit assertion is that it serves the public good to provide uncontrolled public infrastructure for the people of Melbourne to communicate directly with people in Tianjin, Milan, Thessaloniki and Southampton – in a spontaneous, improvised and direct way. The Portal opens up a public sphere to be put to whatever purpose the public desires; it is an open-access, un-moderated channel of personal, social and cultural exchange that is not available at the moment.

This claim for public good is in part a response to a symmetrical set of social concerns. The project is implicitly concerned by a retreat from the public to the private sphere – a retreat from social connection to individual agency. The project is concerned that contemporary channels of communication are dominated by private discourse and/or commercial interest. The project is inspired by a jaundiced view of our contemporary condition in which the 'public man' has fallen, the 'public interest' is an excuse, and 'public service' is hopelessly anachronistic. (See for example [1-5])

Nowhere is this more evident than the sphere of communications, though little is more important to the public interest than public communication. Our culture, our polity, and our personal well-being are all inextricably tied to communicative acts, just as our culture and our polity are tied to places like Tianjin, Milan, Thessaloniki, Southampton, and just as our personal well-being is increasingly tied to global communications.

One can imagine that a direct and immediate line of communication between disparate peoples and places, whether sought out or experienced by happenstance, contributes positively to an understanding of the global, and contributes positively to a global zeitgeist, whilst in parallel, contributing to local life on the street. Against this background, the Portals are self-consciously public, local, and global.

Which is not to say that the Portals will save the world, and one finds it hard to imagine that 'the public good' will be the first thing that comes to mind when witnessing the Portals in use. Half-whacked people will emerge from CBD clubs and bars and make their way to a Portal for a bit of crude banter. Some people will go out of their way to be racially abusive, and "flashers" may well be attracted to the potential of an international audience. The Fallon Gong in Melbourne will no doubt pose a challenge to authorities in Tianjin. Socceroos supporters will no doubt challenge their counterparts in Milan and Thessaloniki. But such is the nature of a public sphere, and such is the nature of the public, and it is in our interests that these spheres exist and be accessible, and whilst the ordinary law of the land constrains people's behaviour on the street in the usual way, the Portal itself offers no further constraint. In this sense the Portal offers a 'blank screen', to be populated as the public sees fit.

4.2 A research instrument

As an instrument for research the Portal offers a number of possibilities.

4.2.1 Publics, and public spectacle

The Portal's work in the simultaneous construction of multiple parallel publics, some here, some there, some watching the screen and others watching the communicants, provides a potentially rich field for the exploration of the construction of a public, and the nature of public spectacle.

4.2.2 Human interaction

Similarly, the Portal's work in creating multiple forms of parallel interaction among strangers, some here, some there, some interacting through the screen and others interacting locally, provides a potentially rich field for the exploration of the dynamics of spontaneous human interaction, cooperative play, competition, coordination, and other forms of social action and interaction.

4.2.3 Communication

The Portal's invitation to strangers to communicate through the spoken word, signs, gesture, and body-language, provides a potentially rich field for the exploration of the performance of interpersonal communications.

4.2.4 Cross-cultural comparisons

The international nature of the Portal provides a potentially rich field for cross-cultural comparisons of public spectacle, social interaction, and interpersonal communication.

4.2.5 Mediating communication

The 'blank screen' may or not constitute a vacuum powerful enough to seduce and hold our *flaneurs,* and convert them into interpersonal communicants and social publics. That is to say, it may not be enough to provide a 'blank screen' to communicate with, without also providing something to communicate about. To further *mediate* communication it may be efficacious to augment the screen in each of its three modes. 'You and Me' for example, might be provided with say, a virtual balloon sitting in the corner of the screen. We might use an arm-motion to hit the virtual balloon into the air, and might set about cooperating to keep it in the air. Perhaps such a ploy will be a distraction; perhaps the historical and geographical footage of "Other" mode is ill-advised, or do they add value to public spectacle, interaction, interpersonal communication and cross-cultural comparison?

5. SUMMARY

In summary then, the project is to use simple, mundane technologies to materialise a small-scale concept of a 'public good', whilst at the same time probing the construction of publics, spectacles, social interactions, interpersonal communications, play, cross cultural comparisons, and overtly facilitated communications.

6. CONCLUSION

Screens are proliferating. We view the outdoors through car windscreens, we look at our work through computer screens, we know the world through TV screens and we talk to our friends through handheld screens. Maybe we have become the cursors of our screens [6].

Common characteristics of these screens include the *individuation* of the screened experience, and *commercialization* of the service and the spectacle.

An individuated screen experience is present in the lounge-room, the office and in the hand. These screens enable us to be together, but also to the point, they enable us to be alone together. We are alone together watching the Sopranos and we are alone together on Facebook. We are not truly alone – for we alone are not alone, together we are all alone – and this is better than simply being alone. But this form of togetherness is vicarious rather than visceral, and makes for an attenuated sociality.

In contrast, the sociality mediated by the shared spectacle of the cinema screen, live concert or football stadium, provides for a being-together of a different order. We are not alone, and we are not just together in not being alone, we are together to one another. We constitute a public to one another, sharing not just the spectacle that brings us together, but also sharing the gravity and momentum of common presence, and the energy of feedback and feed-forward loops that operate within that common presence. The Portal intends to create such a public sociality; a shared presence present to us all, albeit on a small scale.

Where the Portal differs from the cinema, the football, and most other public screens and spectacles, is that commercial or artistic content is not the catalyst for the creation of public sociality. The catalyst is the simple presence of the public *per se,* and the public interest is in one another – in 'You and Me', and 'Us' and 'Others', and not in a contrived spectacle that delivers a public.

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