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Placing Myself on the Map: Social Networking as Participatory Surveillance

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An emergent trend in the context of social networking websites and services is geographical tagging. Geotagging is a way to add geographical information to media such as websites, RSS feeds and images in order to help users find a wide variety of location-specific information. Social networking sites and services such as del.icio.us, Flickr and Google Earth facilitate geotagging, which contributes to the building of a place-based folksonomy.

This brings a spatial dimension to the already extended information infrastructure of Web 2.0. Besides adding to the knowledge about the user's thoughts (blogging software), their likes (social bookmarking services), what music they are listening to (e.g. Last.fm), the practice of geotagging shares information about the whereabouts of the user and – in some cases – the people in the vicinity of the user. Furthermore, a number of specialized social networking sites and services have emerged – sometimes known as “mobile social software” – that specifically make use of geographical information. The main purpose of these is to facilitate social, romantic or business encounters by associating time and location data to social networks. Examples of this trend include Plazes.com (detecting location and connects the user to things nearby) and My MoSoSo (uses wi-fi peer-to-peer ad-hoc mode to facilitate networking with people within a two-minute walk).

In my talk I address questions relating to the ethical potentials of this kind of “participatory surveillance”: What can we learn about surveillance through social networking and vice versa? What are the existential implications of the surveillance practices in social networking? What are the characteristics of the subjectivity taking part in geo-based social networking?