

Celebrations of place anchor free-floating Internet

May 6 2014

The Internet has fallen in love with place. From wildly popular Instagrammers like the photographer behind Humans of New York, to globe-trotters leaving digital travel notes on the story-sharing site Findery, to cloud-based services that help brands pitch themselves through location-based storytelling, the digital masses have discovered the thrill of writing about where they're at.

With social media applications that let us share real-time stories about places we love, live or linger in, users are adding a new layer of intimacy to their online experience while tapping into their inner raconteur.

"Our increased sense of isolation that technology has helped create is making the physical reality of place that much more important," said Silicon Valley author Andy Smith, who has written about using social media to create good in the world. "This trend of telling and sharing stories from real places is like a counterbalance to the placelessness of our online world."

The irony is rich: While we increasingly inhabit an online world that seems to be both everywhere and nowhere, we're using the same technology to celebrate actually being somewhere.

"There's a new appreciation for the here and now," said Caterina Fake, the co-founder of Flickr whose new startup, San Francisco-based Findery, links people around the world by letting them share "notes," or mini-dispatches, from wherever they are. "What's more and more

important to people is the place they're actually standing in right now. What is it about this place, versus some other, that's special? That's what people are telling stories about."

Tapping into a basic human instinct to share location-based experiences, whether it's a meal at a taco joint in California or a Buddhist ceremony at a shrine in Sri Lanka, entrepreneurs have unleashed a steady stream of websites, in-the-cloud mapping services, and mobile apps we can use anywhere we go.

Many are commerce-driven, as retailers and other businesses use crowd-sourced storytelling as a marketing tool to sell us Colombia-grown coffee beans and Colorado ski resorts. Others are products of someone's passion, like Placing Literature, a crowd-sourced website that maps out scenes from novels in real locations. Zoom in on the map of North Oakland, Calif., then click on a little black book icon to read about a scene from Michael Chabon's "Telegraph Avenue," where "Archy is seeing Elsabet Getachwe, daughter of the proprietor, and is later confronted by his wife while he is sitting in a booth talking to Elsabet." The scene's location is, as the contributor's note points out, "the real location of Asmara restaurant."

The common thread among all of these tools is simple: to harness technology to capture and share the narrative of a place. And it's a practice that resonates with our mobile society.

"It's our need and desire as human beings to share our experiences and memories with each other," said 22-year-old Ben Butler, who recently launched his own digital marketing company in Pennsylvania that weaves storytelling into its campaigns. "We have to do it. And that's what storytelling is all about."

Butler's firm recently did marketing for a car show that has taken place

for decades in Pittsburgh, asking people to share online their earliest memories of the event. Giving attendees "a platform to talk about their visits over the years, like 'my husband took me to the show on our first date,' connected their experiences with the place in a very powerful way," said Butler. "Sharing their stories, they helped each other remember why they loved the show so much in the first place, and why they had to come back."

The place-centric stories flooding the Internet these days range from full-blown multimedia "visual stories" on the StoryTravelers website, to the tiniest of tweets like Luke Seemann's (at)whatschicago. His automated bot trawls Twitter for any post starting with the words "Chicago is ... " and then pulls them into a sort of film strip of text. The result is a compelling, if at times racy, snapshot of the Windy City. From the gritty ("Chicago is a war zone") to the pretty ("Chicago is really good at spring"), the feed offers an evolving short-burst narrative that traditional guidebooks or even travel websites couldn't touch.

For San Jose, Calif., freelance writer and inveterate world traveler Cassie Kifer, the need to narrate was so strong that in 2012 she started *Ever in Transit*. The travel blog translates her day-to-day life into a series of dispatches, whether she's writing from a hiking trail near Machu Picchu or exploring the ethnic food scene in the South Bay.

In an intimate look inside Tokyo's Tsukiji Fish Market, she uses words and photos to share her excitement about seeing the "stars" of the show - the bluefin tuna. "These are the high-quality fish that might sell for as high as 30,000 yen (\$300) per kilogram," Kifer writes. "If you've seen the documentary 'Jiro Dreams of Sushi,' these are the fish that Jiro himself might use at his restaurant."

Inspired by other bloggers who bring their own special places to life online, the 34-year-old Kifer now lives to do the same.

"I see travel as something I do every time I step outside my front door," she said. "I see stories everywhere I look. And I use Pinterest as my scrapbook of places to share with others, in the moment, from wherever I happen to be."

One of the more prominent online narrators is Brandon Stanton, a former bond trader-turned street photographer whose photos and mini-stories of New York City residents on the Instagram site Humans of New York have become a sensation. Roaming the city with his camera, Stanton snaps a photo, then asks a question of the stranger before him, spurring answers that run from whimsical to heartbreaking. In the process, his mini-profiles offer followers a richly textured portrait of Manhattan and the human spirit that fills it to overflowing.

It is the way this arsenal of new digital tools magically connects us through the word descriptions and images of a shared place that Findery's content manager, Amanda Law, finds so powerfully beguiling.

"Being able to share these stories online really humanizes technology for me," she said, adding that narrative tools can make a place come alive online, and in the process kindle an instant connection between storyteller and reader. On her site, said Law, "you have all these people leaving notes about places they've been, and because we've been sharing these little stories, when I meet some of them in person I feel like I'm meeting a long-lost friend."

SHARING STORIES ABOUT PLACES

-Placing Literature, a website that maps out scenes from novels in real locations. Its slogan: Where your book meets the map.

-Atlasa, a social-mapping tool that helps users plan trips. Its slogan: Find your dream trip, plan your vacation, share your travel stories.

-StoryTravelers, a tribe of visual storytelling artists. Its slogan: We tell stories that travel.

-Findery, a map-based note-sharing app for travelers. Its slogan: Every place has a story.

-SpeakingPhoto, a tool for adding voice-overs to photos. Its slogan: Say more than cheese!

-Trover, a website and app for sharing travel photos. Its slogan: The best of everywhere.

-Explory, a storytelling app. Its slogan: It's a studio in your pocket.

-Storyrobe, a storytelling [app](#). Its slogan: Live. Create. Share.

-Gogobot, a crowd-sourced trip-planning website. Its slogan: The go-to place for places to go.

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Citation: Celebrations of place anchor free-floating Internet (2014, May 6) retrieved 12 September 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2014-05-celebrations-anchor-free-floating-internet.html>

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