Recombining Place:
COVID-19 and Community Action Networks in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The lockdown response taken by many governments in flattening the curve of coronavirus infections has of course increased the reliance on digital tools to enable work (for those able to do so) and social interaction. There are emergent, somewhat contingent, and coproductive dynamics at work between platforms and urban life and space with the contextual specificities of each, no doubt, leading to different ICT-informed solutions. In South Africa, the state has taken a phased but stronghold approach with unfortunate impacts on livelihoods and food security, especially those in the informal economy and those with part-time or insecure employment. The community action network (CAN) initiative started as a means to enable neighbourhood assistance through WhatsApp groups in Cape Town. In this article, the author reflects on how this initiative reflects the early hopes of William Mitchell (and others) that saw the potential for informational spaces to become more democratic as interfaces of connection. In Cape Town, one may see Mitchell's vision fulfilled.

KEYWORDS

Coronavirus, Platform Urbanism, Recombination, Technology

1. INTRODUCTION

The South African government moved swiftly in addressing related public health concerns, after the first case of Covid-19 was reported, in early March 2020. A phased lockdown programme evolved that includes 5 phases, each with their own suit of measures in relation to public movement and economic activity. A mass community screening campaign was implemented at the end of the first lockdown period, targeted at preparing the country's public health service for an increase in infections amongst low-income households. The greatest concern is spread in informal settlements and other dense urban areas that have limited basic services. In examining the country's response, a number of tensions arise, mostly associated with the spatial inheritance of Apartheid, since many of these danger areas are also underserved by the public health care system. The government has used community screening and door-to-door testing to stay ahead of spread, using a social vulnerability index. Much of this relies on a deployment of community health care workers to enable localized screening and testing, systems that exist due to the AIDS/HIV and tuberculosis challenges in the past.

The South Africa case displays a tension between top-down public health measures that mimic 'international responses', informed by state-appointed experts, and the differentiated, localised

responses on the ground. This article reflects on the use of technology by community groups in response to the pandemic, recognising that technology-informed responses to Covid-19 are informed by local regulatory regimes and patterns of appropriation. As a theoretical approach it acknowledges that techno scientific responses are situated and contingent upon local knowledge systems and ways of knowing and doing. Here I focus on the notion of recombination, first explored by William Mitchell in 1996, and more recently by Sarah Barns in her work on platform urbanism (2019).

The relationship between 'face to face' communication and online experience is informed by many technologies. Barns refers to McQuire (2008, in 2019) in reminding us that remote 'being together' through radiotelegraphy, radio-communications, and now electromagnetic spectrums have been part of the unfolding of industrial modernity since the nineteenth century. Either this separation has become entrenched or we have become exceptionally good at traversing both. What draws people together in public space, if part of community, protest, storytelling, or mediated performance, or in this case through crisis, are malleable themes threaded through many forms of media. Civic life has always been influenced by media and place. The more recent technological innovations have complicated and to some extent, accelerated these relationships (Barns 2019).

What is shaping the community response to Covid-19 however, are not the technologies *per se*, but the interface between technology and users. These exchanges traverse scale where local actions are tied together through intention and a shared crisis, with the technology, in this case the use of WhatsApp, providing the platform for action. Practice evolve, imaginaries flood our expectations, as digital technologies are recombined and appropriated in the ongoing socio-technical evolution of urban spaces. Already in 1996 William Mitchell asserted the power of human agency in co-producing the 'digital age' - almost quaint in these times of 'fake news' and online bullying. The application of this idea to the notion of co-created space is nevertheless still valuable. Practices, imaginaries and expectations are negotiated on an ongoing basis as digital technologies are appropriated and recombined in this example of community network in the face of a pandemic.

2. PLATFORM URBANISM AND RECOMBINATION

Over the last two decades a scholarly interest has increased in the participatory cultures of networked mobile use as the smart phone has become increasingly embroiled in urban activism and community mobilisation. Barns argues that this was an emergent form of platform urbanism, the term originating with her work. The contribution of urban informatics as providing more "fluid, mobile and networked imaginaries…" in understanding the makings of the smart city means that the user is not passive: "Engaging with platform services is today an integral part of being an urban citizen and as such involves many different kinds of value-sharing, not only the value extracted by technology companies." (Barns 2019: 576). In what is referred to as an architecture of interaction, this 'read-write urbanism' recognises the agency generated through techno-social assemblages, or participatory cultures of networked mobile use.

Platforms constitute a technical architecture and are implicated in urban infrastructures. The recombinant nature of platform architectures (Barns 2019) incorporates cross operability, that is well illustrated in the following quote on Uber: "…characterized by one platform underwriting a critical infrastructural function of another, in the way that Google Maps' digital map platform for instance serves to "infrastructure" the visual interface experience for Uber riders." (Leszczynski 2019: 191). The term 'platform urbanism' builds on this functionality by recognising the implications in terms of labour, the economy, governance, infrastructure maintenance and distribution and the social and cultural practices that constitute urban life. This feature of contemporary urbanism has found its place in the global South, and increasingly in African cities.

Rather than interpreting technology disruption as new, as a rupture of sorts, I would argue that some forms of continuity are present and that these are particularly pronounced and brittle in the African context. They relate to what exists geographically and materially, and the social and

institutional structures that form the backdrop to its socioeconomic landscape. The question begs: if public interventions are scarce, do home-grown platforms offer a closer attachment to place and therefore better opportunities for progressive sociotechnical evolution? I probe these possibilities by reflecting on aspects of the South African coronavirus experience thus far.

3. COVID-19 IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa's coronavirus response displays the inevitable tensions between health system readiness and the scale and speed of infection. With the highest number of cases in Africa, the country has tested almost 3 million people and screened an estimated third of its population (SA Department of Health 2020). Bed capacity in public health care facilities has been reached or overwhelmed in many of the provinces, with 377 doctors and over 2000 nursing staff infected (*Ibid.*). At the time of writing, almost half a million cases had been recorded with just over 300 000 recoveries, and 7800 deaths (SA Department of Health 2020).

Under the first lockdown period, in what is known as Phase 5, the limitations on economic activity, took its toll on the economy and livelihoods. One of the most tragic externalities is increased food insecurity. The lockdown measures favour large-scale food suppliers and retailers and have not considered how the very poor access food. As Battersby (2020) points out: informal vendors provide food in small, affordable units, with short-terms credit to consumers, whereas spaza shops (an informal version of corner shops) are important actors in the food value chain. Following a survey by Statistics South Africa, the proportion of respondents who reported experiencing hunger since the start of lockdown increased from 4,3% to 7,0%, indicative of the risk of greater food insecurity in the country as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Statistics South Africa 2020).

Combined with overzealous enforcement with reports of police brutality in some of the country's poorest urban areas, the country's Covid response is increasingly viewed as militarised (Grootes 2020). Excessive aggression is part of the legacy of law enforcement in relation to public health in South Africa. Slum clearance programmes under the British colonial regime as well as during Apartheid were enacted with brute force motivated by a public health discourse claiming to serve the 'public good'. South Africans are understandably suspicious of such claims, with the Covid-19 pandemic surfacing these worries.

4. RECOMBINING TOWARDS CARE

Whilst generally seen as displaying the most obvious manifestation of spatial inequality in South Africa, Cape Town has become the centre of a community-based response that has gained traction across the country. Cape Town Together, a collective of community actions networks (CANs), was established in March 2020, by a group of health professionals, teachers, activists and artists to promote solidarity across class and race lines in the looming face of the pandemic. Groups in Gauteng province and the Eastern Cape, as well as alliances with church organisations and local ecumenical advocacy networks have formed. The aim is to enable community assistance at a neighbourhood scale through WhatsApp groups. The Facebook page reflects a diverse array of actions that range from food delivery, care for the elderly, local advocacy and information dissemination. Through Facebook pages and groups, WhatsApp groups and use of Zoom and local TV and radio, a collective multi-media platform for communication and mobilisation has emerged, signalling that: "… during the lockdown and period of uncertainty, we are in this together. (Heywood 2020).

The function of the WhatsApp group is central, with other forms of smart included in relation to local priorities. Knowledge dissemination reflect place-based histories and resources, with many using the networking capacity of individuals to overcome constraints to movement. This social network of networks is a juxtaposition to the one-size-fits state response (Dexter 2020). Each network formulates its own analysis of what the most pressing issues are and using local resources, formulate

self-organising neighbourhood initiatives. The CANs (there are over 60 groups in the Cape Town metropolitan area alone) share a core set of values, continuously reaffirmed on the group Facebook site, with each then following its own autonomous frame for problem solving.

Place is absolutely central to CAN. As is explored in other postcolonial readings of technology deployment, heterogenous networks of socio-cultural connections, economic relationships and material and virtual glue, potentially animate the qualities of geographic location (Moon 2020). Scheepers *et al* talk about coming together in virtual space, with affinity networks or sub-groups that evolve in accordance with neighbourhood priorities. "We think that collective action becomes more possible in community. We have tried to take an approach that says: organising to create community must have the goal of creating belonging. Belonging creates the conditions for collective thinking, action, and change." (Scheepers *et al* 2020).

The tyrannies of space also resulted in the unevenness of opportunities in South African cities. Technology potentially transcends such divides. The networks Cape Town span a range of income groups and backgrounds. A partnering model was adopted to enable linking within communities but also across neighbourhoods (Auerbach 2020), reflecting the agility of this modular approach. The result has been sharing of information and ideas, two-way learning with food relief being a major emphasis. A radio interview with one such pairing reveals collaboration that included: fact checking fake news, transfer of mobile phone data and electricity service top-up payments. Mention is made also of partnering with Uber drivers to enable food delivery within lockdown restrictions.

CAN has received recognition from mainstream politicians such as the Gauteng Premier who acknowledged the need for the state to partner with such initiatives. What emerges from a scan of responses on social media is an intention to hold the state accountable given fears of an overwhelming securitisation of Covid-19 prevention. This is the legacy of community organising in South African cities: an uneasy pivot between trust and collaboration. What Ellis calls a "simmering trust deficit" is developing however, as the brutal and uneven lockdown measures touch ground. (Ellis, 2020). The uneasy alliance between state and local interest groups is emblematic of what Simone refers to as the struggles that go beyond the material elements of sociotechnical systems but the capacities that manage and produce knowledge surrounding them (2015: 376).

5. RECOMBINATION AND COMMUNITY MOBILISATION: THREE THEMES

Upon reflection there are three themes that I would like to posit as analytical devices for thinking through the example of CAN in relation to platforms and recombination. The first is around the agency that emerges through such socio-technical assemblages and how this remediates public life. As part of the assemblages of material, human and data, digital platforms have become a banal part of everyday urban life and their impacts are inherently spatial. The recombination of software, digital platforms and local infrastructures into endogenous responses to city issues are worthy of exploration, as a flip side of this coin.

It is worth pausing on the contextual embedded-ness of CAN in relation to the qualities of place. The recombination of infrastructural 'bits' into a network of platformed mobility provision, is bound to impact spatial relations. The material dimension is significant when considering the precarious nature of living in a pandemic, yet it also relates to the temporal and spatial fixtures of cities. it speaks to the function of technology convergence and also the centrality of platforms to urban life. As a "form of techno capitalism that entails a diverse, on-demand workforce." (Pollio 2019: 761), the co-constitution of platform structures and urban space through a deepening of the geospatial dimensions of the platform economy (Söderström & Mermet 2020) represents different styles of platform formation with geographically distinctive approaches within the same platform. (Stehlin, Hodson & McMeekin 2020).

The second theme relates to how values travel across space, as we see in the partnering of CANs. The footloose nature of platform urbanism, or the ways through which data infrastructures

are assimilated into our granular urban networks (Barns 2019), reveals the potential for connections that traverse places, yet maintain the same implementation values. The shared principles of CAN, as highlighted on the organisation Facebook page, means that substantive issues are foregrounded, and that they are directly related to place. They are also informed by people's lived experiences. What emerges strongly is a spontaneously sociotechnical spin whereby the technical, political and material are interchangeable discussed on social media platforms. Tensions between local vestiges of place-based regulation, as seen in the use of police force, and the increasing political and network capacities of what some would define 'the informal', do emerge. What McFarlane terms translocal learning (2011) are socio-technical entanglements with strong connections to place, as platform urbanism recombines within local contexts of place-based dynamics and institutional frames.

The third feature I would like to reflect on is the hybrid nature of the pandemic response. The relationship between the digital and material is hybrid, and often described as continuously interconnected and co-constituted (Kitchin & Dodge, 2011; Leszczynski, 2019; Zook & Graham, 2007; Odendaal 2014). The contextual depth afforded by situated approach reveals how urban life is sometimes "rigged together from whatever is at hand" (Simone 2011: 356) and then reassembled into a socio-technical configuration that brings with it new (or renewal of old) spatial manifestations. The deployment of CAN, for example, is foregrounded by safety concerns, mobility challenges and marginal livelihoods that do not simply disappear once digital platform relations assemble. However, the relationships between these phenomena; material elements of the city, the relationships between interest groups, the exchange of information, all of these are recombined into assemblages that may very well disrupt existing relations. Easterling refers to infrastructure space becoming a "medium of information" (2014: 96), with the platform element providing the software currency to reorganize and reshape space.

Endogenous disruptive actors bring a different dimension to this dynamic that does speak to the generation and evolution of socio-technical dynamics that are more contextually sensitive. I would argue that the literature on platform urbanism and indeed, smart city writing that focuses on the dynamics of place, generally lack this dimension of enquiry. Uncovering the dynamic of place required different questions to be asked, where technology appropriation is approached as a complex practice of translation and appropriation. Moving away from blanket solutions (Lawhon et al 2017) and blanket readings of infrastructure systems, such as the top-down approach taken by the South African state, runs the danger of ignoring the subtleties and dynamics of hybrid places. In fact, Philip, Irani, and Dourish refer to "hybrid knowledge practice" (2010: 9) as a frame for understanding power, history, identity and epistemology in understanding these sociotechnical stories.

6. CONCLUSION

Running a city on information, as envisaged by William Mitchell in 1996, ideally enables more democratic and citizen-oriented ways of place-making. The emphasis on digital platforms, as initially sketched by Barns (2019), acknowledges the embodiment of technology through smart phones and its interface with platforms, as an extension or possibly, enhancement of contemporary urbanism where, "…platform users will always be sharing, trading or 'co-producing' value." (2019: 121). The cultural vertices of place are sometimes indiscernible but potentially powerful when articulated as part of a campaign of raising place-based awareness. I would argue this creates opportunities for progressive sociotechnical evolution that is more mindful of place and therefore more effective in enabling care.

The state's Covid 19 response has been decisive at best but seen by many as insensitive to the peculiar needs of place. The state's response co-exists with home-based care networks and grassroots communication systems in a hybrid, the complexion and complexity of which is determined by spatial and socio-economic parameters. Whilst there is literature on the performaties of care within the home (see Power and Mee 2020), where the domestic home is taken as the central location for care work, the broader articulation with social systems of such is less pronounced.

Understanding the specificity of techno science in South Africa, in relation to the Covid-19 response, requires uncovering local techno scientific practices as well as the tensions between the local and the universal. Imposing and importing a science-led response to localities, ignores the many locals. In exploring what a postcolonial STS can look like, Law and Lin (2015) argue for the creation of alternative knowledge spaces in understanding these practices. These are the spaces "… where sociotechnical change reaches a level of communal consciousness." (Moon 2010: 191).

Future research is necessary to understand this hybrid nature of such community-led responses, how it contests expert-led programmes that are insensitive to the uniqueness of location. These are early days and evidence is scant. Whilst many dashboards are available to read trends and predict cataclysmic futures, Moon's call (2010) for ethnographic interrogations of how postcolonial societies construct their own logics of technology and place, practically and rhetorically, will reveal the material-semiotic translations (Lin and Law 2015) in such times. This requires consideration of the circulation of global ideas and practices, together with the situatedness of how local heterogeneous socio-material relations configure (Law and Lin 2015).

The aim of this article was not to create an analytical binary between state-led and community-led initiatives, however. Lin and Law (2017) argue for a postcolonial version of the STS term symmetry, a conceptual space of multiple centers, many points of disjuncture and no one post-coloniality. The recombination enabled through digital platforms in the CAN case reflects a hybrid, malleable and granular response to the coronavirus crisis. A critical engagement with the heterogeneity within, acknowledges internal contradictory epistemologies and interpretations of socio-technical solutions to this global crisis.

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