

The importance of place in the mobile age

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Keynote for 20th International Symposium on Human Factors in Telecommunication
Sophia-Antipolis, France, 20-23 March, 2006

As we move toward networks that can provide ever greater bandwidth, so the vision of working anywhere, anytime and of being in touch anywhere, anytime, seems nearer. For most researchers in the mobile domain, and indeed for most of the businesses operating in the mobile market place, the bonds of space and location are now thought to have been dissolved, more or less. Apart from the perplexing problem of leveraging location-based series, 'where one is' would no longer appear to matter.

I want to contend, in this talk, that place does matter, but not in the way it mattered twenty or more years ago when mobile researchers - and indeed office systems researchers at PARC and elsewhere - were trying to transcend it. I want to say that now that we have technologies that enable us to transport huge amounts of digital stuff around the world, then what we actually want to turn to at this point in time are investigations of where 'placeness' *does* matter. I want to suggest that the issue for us, now, is not to redefine location-based services, say; it is rather to re-discover why it is that people leave those settings. I argue that they leave them to get away from some of the features of these places and therefore they do not want to have these places, as it were, 'follow them around'. Nor do they want technologies that let them dissolve the distance between those places and their current location. Instead, they want technologies that support and deepen the very differences that make one place distinct from another. I will say that people go to places because of something about those places; they leave other places because something about those places pushes them away.

This is not to contradict the notion that in some ways people do want to transcend some of the features of place; it is to contend that digital and mobile technologies may have given us enough of that 'power'; what we need, as we move to the end of the first decade of the 21st century, are devices and technologies that make every space more special, more bounded by physical and digital uniqueness. I will suggest that the future holds the promise of not being anywhere anytime, but of being somewhere, for a reason: in a catch phrase, the future holds out the promise of 'where-ability': the possibility that where you are *really does* matter.