Geomedia 2021 – Off the Grid

CALL FOR PAPERS: The 4th International Geomedia Conference

Siegen, Germany, 5-8 May 2021

The phrase "off the grid" is commonly understood to refer to the voluntary decoupling from established infrastructure networks such as electricity, water or gas supply. The implication is one of material independence and a self-sufficient lifestyle. Going "off the grid" means making yourself invisible by rebuking the social and technological structures that normally organize our lives. It is entering, or returning to, uncharted territory. The grid from which you disappear is often imagined like a web that we are woven into, at once providing security – of cultural connectivity, opportunities to work, or societal participation – while also limiting individual, political or technological agency.

The grid also speaks to the geographic coordinate system, an all-encompassing global structure which makes it possible to accurately locate any point on earth. This unified grid represents a dominant ordering principle for everything "locatable". It is part of the technological infrastructure of many platforms, services and applications which fall under the definition of geomedia, most prominently the Global Positioning System (GPS). In this regard, "off the grid" is a move away from such Cartesian notions of space towards a situated relational account of (quotidian) practices carried out with, through, or in relation to, geomedia.

Going off the grid has also been seen as a form of renunciation of the conveniences of the late capitalist (media) world in order to lead a supposedly slower, less stressful and eventually less superficial life – as inspired by the transcendentalism of the likes of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. But with so many people relying *on* the grid for purposes of work and entertainment in recent times, what does this mean for our relation to geomedia? What does going off the grid look like now? This presupposes, of course, that there is *ipso facto* a grid – an infrastructure – which one can connect to freely at any time. But a great number of people do not get to *choose* to decouple from the grid – a fact that speaks to questions of access to the socio-material infrastructures underpinning geomedia and associated communities and practices.

Arguably, practices of surveillance and countersurveillance concern the implicit or even involuntary participation in corresponding infrastructures. Here, optimization for a range of tasks and activities routinely involves a certain kind of surveillance; a default setting in the running of all kinds of media platforms used for navigation, video streaming or online gaming. In this, surveillance is wrapped up with profit-seeking practices, and the extraction of value from the 'data fumes' of platform users, who enter a form of "cooperation without consensus" as they stream movies, hire taxis, host videoconferences, ride public transport, or go on dates. In these various iterations, surveillance might look different, and/or be practiced in distinct ways to traditional forms of state or corporate surveillance, increasingly dependent on technological protocols and standards that not only underpin the grid but also govern our use of geomedia. One consequence is that the relation between private and public spheres is transformed, and

introduces new questions of governance, exploitation and marginalization. It is of crucial importance, who is online, and who is offline might as well not exist. Yet these optimization processes are also subject to countermeasures that constitute new modes of existence - from anonymous accounts and the use of VPNs, to location spoofing, and other tricks and techniques to hide, erase, or obfuscate user activity and location.

Yet the grid is not all-encompassing, nor all-powerful. Whilst countersurveillance efforts resist, fight back and oppose, alternative geomedia projects imagine the grid differently – sometimes even plotting its demise. From community broadband initiatives, to independent media organizations, post-capitalist streaming platforms, and citizen science projects; there is a continued, concerted effort to build alternatives to state-based, or company-owned geomedia, operating at various scales from the hyper-local to the global. Through these efforts, organizers and participants question the foundations of our collective social and technological infrastructures, redefining what it is to care, share, distribute, cultivate or reallocate funds, resources, opportunities and ideas – bringing new geomedia, and new imaginaries of hope (or perhaps fear), into existence.

Keynote Speakers:

Caren Kaplan – University of California at Davis, USA

Nanna Verhoeff – Utrecht University, Netherlands

Suggested paper topics include, but are not limited to:

- Politics, philosophy and ethics of going off grid
- Grid as Network, Grid as Default (Geomedia and Infrastructure)
- Physical Geography/Relational Geography
- Inhabiting Digital Geographies (VR, hybrid spaces)
- Geomedia in the Global South
- Urban and Rural Geomedia
- The 'geo' in Geomedia, the 'media' in Geomedia
- Governing Geomedia (smart city, sensor media, infrastructures, surveillance & countersurveillance)
- Geomedia Activism
- Digital detox, rationing, quarantine and isolation
- Geomedia Histories

Geomedia 2021 welcomes proposals for individual papers as well as thematic panels in English.

*Individual paper proposals***:** The author submits an abstract of 200–250 words. Accepted papers are grouped by the organizers into sessions of 5 papers according to thematic area.

*Thematic panel proposals***:** The chair of the panel submits a proposal consisting of 4–5 individual paper abstracts (200-250 words) along with a general panel presentation of 200–250 words.

Conference timeline

October 31st 2020: Submission system opens

January 7th 2021: Deadline for thematic panel and individual paper proposals

January 25th 2021: Notes of acceptance and registration opens

March 15th 2021: Last day of registration

Conference website

Information about registration, conference programme, venue, social events and practical arrangements will be posted continuously on the conference website starting September 1st: www.geomediastudies.com*.*

Contact: You can reach us at info@geomediastudies.com*.*

Organizers and venue:

Geomedia 2021 is hosted by the *Graduate School "Locating Media"* and the *CRC "Media of Cooperation"* at the Department of Media Research, Siegen University, Siegen. The venue is situated east of Cologne in downtown Siegen, a lovely, off-the-beaten path industrial hub with a thriving university of over 20,000 students. The Locating Media Graduate School (2012-2021) is a German Research Foundation-funded interdisciplinary programme that researches historical and current media practices 'in motion' and 'in situ' and engages scholars with interests in locational and situational analyses and the development of new methods for the analysis and design of mobile digital media.