

Ларго Гонзалес К.

**ЦИФРОВОЕ ПРОСТРАНСТВО
КАК ФИЗИЧЕСКОЕ ПРОСТРАНСТВО:
ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИЯ КУЛЬТУРНОГО ЛАНДШАФТА
INSTAGRAM®**

Независимый исследователь

Сантьяго, Чили, mclargogonzalez@gmail.com

Аннотация. Из-за пандемии COVID-19 социальная дистанция стала основной мерой защиты. Нам пришлось находиться в заключении, углубляя динамику социализации через социальные сети. Учитывая, что физические пространства концентрируют различные смыслы и представления, мы обращаем внимание на Instagram, который предлагает различные пространства в рамках одной и той же социальной сети. В этой статье мы предлагаем обсудить пространства Instagram как аналоги повседневных физических пространств. Исследование фокусируется на профиле пользователя, «сториз» и прямых трансляциях. Можно ли приравнять физические пространства к цифровым?

Ключевые слова: пространство и время; цифровое пространство; социальные сети; Instagram.

Поступила: 15.09.2020

Принята к печати: 29.09.2020

Largo González Catalina¹
**Digital space as physical space:
an interpretation of the Instagram cultural landscape**

An independent researcher
Santiago, Chile, mclargogonzalez@gmail.com

Abstract. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, social distance has been the main measure to protect us. We have had to remain in confinement, deepening the dynamics of socialization through social networks. Considering that physical spaces concentrate diverse meanings and representations, we direct our attention to the case of Instagram as an option that offers diverse spaces within the same social network. In this article we offer a reading of Instagram's spaces as everyday physical spaces. For this reason we focus on the user profile, stories and lives (live broadcasting). Is it possible to equate physical spaces with digital spaces?

Keywords: space and time; digital space; social media; instagram.

Received: 15.09.2020

Accepted: 29.09.2020

A few years ago, as part of the thesis for our master's degree in Social Communication, we went to the Metro de Santiago in Chile, and we observed the different types of displacement performed by the passengers. As the days and weeks went by, we could not help but notice wagons full of people travelling while concentrated on their cell phone screens. After that we began to wonder about the changes surrounding the notions of space and time connected to the use of cell phones while traveling along the Metro network. For the first time, these devices allowed us to establish different virtual spaces of communication, while being physically in a different place from where those interactions were taking place. In other words, a time and space that used to be consumed for waiting purposes, now it is occupied by conversations with friends anywhere in the world, work related messages, games or videos. This was something which Marc Augé (2012) already told us.

The current year has presented several challenges. First, we must mention the uncertainty and fear facing a global health crisis, and the

¹ Largo González Catalina lives in Santiago, Chile. She has a Bachelor's Degree in History with a Minor in Political Science and a Master's Degree in Social Communication, Universidad de Chile. She is currently working as a research assistant on issues related to digital journalism. Independently she works on issues related to new spaces of communication and technology. E-mail: mclargogonzalez@gmail.com

pain provoked by the millions of deaths around the world. Along these lines, social distancing has become the main way to protect ourselves from COVID-19. We have had to remain isolated in our homes, maintaining social distance because of the virus, transforming our daily routines and deepening the use of instant messaging systems and social media platforms. We are standing on an unprecedented world stage. But above all, this is the first time that millions of people around the world can register their experience of this historical period through their social media usage. During these last months, we have forcibly concentrated a great part of our social interactions around social media applications. This last point can lead us to think that the scenario of the pandemic has reinforced the tendency in the diverse spaces of communication through the screen.

At the same time, previous research had suggested that social media are not only consumed for leisure, but also they represent new spaces that we are living in (Boczkowski et al. 2019), and each space would have its own type of interaction and communication. Moreover, the idea of virtual spaces as places that we live in also invites us to think about the time in which they develop. We believe that the pandemic context is an opportunity to observe and reflect about this expansion in our concepts of space and time. Especially because we have been urged to concentrate on these spaces of communication in order to work, communicate with our loved ones, distract ourselves and become informed about the state of the world. What would be the consequences of this deepening of virtual spaces?

It is possible that measuring the consequences of the deepening of virtual spaces be hastened, given the COVID-19 crisis exploded only this year. However, we would like to propose a reading of the spaces and temporalities in the Instagram application, as a way of approaching an understanding of these changes in our way of communicating and perceiving space and time.

But what is Instagram and why did we choose this social media platform? Instagram is an application that belongs to Facebook, it was launched in 2010 and it is available for Android and iOS devices. Its main function is to share photos and videos of varying lengths. Although it is possible to access this application through our laptops, it is through the cell phone where we can access all its functions: upload photos and videos of the moment, broadcast live, among others. And this is the distinctive feature that interests us: the different temporalities

contained on Instagram, and consequently, the different spaces given in each temporal unit. That is what makes Instagram so attractive, because as time progresses it has been able to integrate different communication channels with a distinctive time unit for each of them. As an example of this, we refer to the case of the *stories*, a functionality that Instagram adopted after becoming popular on another social network: Snapchat. Another more recent example would be *reels*, a type of video that was popularized first by the social network TikTok.

Instagram's geography: a proposal for reading digital space

As other authors have noted, in the physical space we find toponyms that become symbols, metaphors or signs. These geographical objects would concentrate diverse meanings in the cultural landscape (Lavrenova, 2019). The idea of a physical space with multiple meanings and representations makes us think of the possibility that this could also happen with digital spaces. That is to say, digital spaces would also concentrate diverse meanings and representations.

On the other hand, previous research has compared Instagram to a runway or showcase (Boczkowski et al., 2019). Our proposal consists in identifying different spaces within such social network, this as a consequence of the deepening of its uses in the context of the pandemic of the last months. Considering the amount of time we spend on the interactions which happen in our phones, and the cultural meanings that the cell phone and social media acquire, we suggest observing and analyzing the digital spaces as well as analyzing the physical space. In order to achieve this goal, we propose to identify units within Instagram as if they were toponyms. Specifically we refer to the user profile, *stories* and *lives* (live broadcasting). For this objective we will proceed to offer a brief description of each space, the relationship of these spaces with a corresponding temporality to finally offer a comparison of each one with a physical space.

a) User profile: User profile corresponds to the gallery in which each user is positioned within this social network. This is where we can change our avatar picture, public name, user name, and select the language in which we want the account to be configured, as well as the privacy settings for the account. For example, the user can choose who

can or cannot see their profile or to who they share in their stories. It is exactly like choosing who enters into our house and who does not.

The photo gallery could be equated with a photo album, but we consider this space as something much more complex. Thinking in terms of a parallel with the physical space, we could also think of the user profile as a home, the place from which we position ourselves facing the world, namely our selection of an avatar picture, a brief description or our account and our photographs as a letter of introduction.

Unlike the other toponyms, this space is not demarcated by a time constraint. In other words, its presentation is not timed. Everything we see depends on the edits and choices that each user makes on their profile, for instance, the photos they upload and which only the user can delete.

b) Stories: As previously noted, this concept originated in the social media platform Snapchat, and it was incorporated shortly thereafter into Instagram in 2016. The concept *story* refers to the sharing of images or videos (with a maximum duration of fifteen seconds), posted simultaneously with the photos shared in the feed or home page. This material is contained at the top of the page, and we can access it by clicking on the avatar of our contacts. Generally, our followers choose to access our stories, and at the same time, we can control who sees our posted stories and who does not.

Within the stories we can find selfies, photos in general, memes, songs, funny videos, news, among others, as long as the total duration does not go over fifteen seconds. Many of these posts lead to other Instagram accounts, and most of this material carries the implicit idea that it corresponds to a recent or current situation.

The unstable nature of the web in general is not a secret. Every person who accesses the Internet has the ability, to some degree, to share, edit or delete content. What we see at one moment may disappear the next second. And this is an immanent characteristic of the stories: they should not only be brief, but also they are self-eliminated after twenty four hours. Explained differently, the stories present an ephemeral condition in comparison to other Instagram spaces, such as the user profile.

For all these reasons, we suggest that the stories would be the equivalent of a walk through the streets of our neighborhood. Some friends or neighbors may greet us, we comment on recent news and events, we share some jokes, personal experiences, and then we

continue on our way. In accordance with the ephemeral nature of the stories, communication through them also has a casual and often brief tone.

c) Lives (live broadcasting): This is a function which is present in other digital platforms as well, and it had been available on Instagram since 2016. It consists of the possibility for any user to stream a transmission in real time, with a maximum duration of sixty minutes, while being able to continue another stream immediately afterwards a transmission has ended. It should be noted that live broadcastings disappear after twenty four hours; similar to what happens with stories. As the transmission takes place, the broadcaster can see who is entering to watch the stream, read comments by other users, receive feedback, heart-shaped likes, etc. Furthermore, both the broadcaster and the other users can see how many people are «present».

While some authors have argued that social networks in their entirety can be considered staging, we believe that during the context of confinement, life has become akin to a stage. We can find a user addressing to an audience. But only after the pandemic hit us, this space has been adapted as a platform for direct communication between artists and their followers, and also as a space to access conversation sessions of various kinds, and in some cases to create entertainment, such as television streaming on the same day and time every week on a regular basis. This way every day we can access different talks, interact with people we find interesting, or even witness a conversation between people who are thousands of miles away. Therefore, we propose thinking of the Instagram lives as stages, with dynamics similar to theaters, auditoriums or even bars before the appearance of COVID-19.

Final Considerations

A few weeks ago Instagram included among its features the *reels*, a video modality that started in another application, TikTok. We believe that there is still time to observe the interactions given through this type of video, which is why it was not included in this text.

It should be noted that this proposal has a provisional nature. The last two months we have applied a survey on digital communication spaces in the context of confinement in Chile. In this survey we also tried to register people's experiences through the screen in these last

months. We hope that the results of this survey will help to complement the proposals in this text.

In any case, everything indicates that what has happened this year has deepened trends that had already been occurring with regards to our relationship with social media and instant messaging systems. It is important to observe this process carefully, so that the speeds of social and technological changes do not pass us by, but that we experience them in a conscious way.

Bibliography

- Augé M.* La vida en doble: etnología, viaje, escritura. – Buenos Aires : Editorial Paidós, 2012. – 176 p.
- Boczkowski P., Mitchelstein E., Matassi M.* Vivir en las redes. Revista Anfibia. – Buenos Aires, 2018. Argentina. – Mode of access : Recuperado de: <http://revistaanfibia.com/ensayo/vivir-en-las-redes/>
- Lavrenova O.* Spaces and meanings: Semantics of the cultural landscape. – Gewerbestrasse : Springer Nature, 2019. – 216 p.

References

- Augé, M. (2012). *La vida en doble: etnología, viaje, escritura*. Buenos Aires : Editorial Paidós.
- Boczkowski, P., Mitchelstein, E., Matassi, M. (2018). *Vivir en las redes*. Revista Anfibia. Buenos Aires, Argentina. Retrieved from : Recuperado de: <http://revistaanfibia.com/ensayo/vivir-en-las-redes/>
- Lavrenova, O. (2019). *Spaces and meanings: Semantics of the cultural landscape*. Gewerbestrasse : SpringerNature.