

Bytes & Bricks

How social networks are changing the city

R BY [ROBIN VAN DEN AKKER](#) IN [OPINION](#) | 12 MAR 14



Esther Polak with Jeroen Kee and Waag Society, *Amsterdam RealTime*, 2002.
Courtesy: the artists.

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our friends, the location of the nearest whiskey bar or even the mood of an entire city by already happily accepted that giving up our privacy is part of the bargain. Over the years of academic research, I have conducted dozens of interviews with smartphone users – from tech geeks, from teenage girls to gay men – and, without exception, each of them accepted a fact of life.

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While Grindr offers the possibility of meeting new people based on shared interests, others serve the opposite function. For a couple of years, I studied a group of ten teenagers who were no longer close friends but who had subsequently moved from the same suburban high school to attend different universities. To keep the social fabric of their group intact while they pursued their new interests, the teenagers shared details of their lives with each other on a near-constant basis using the messaging function of the app, sending out roughly 150 messages a day each. By describing every other moment of their day, the teenagers created a kind of 'ambient awareness' – to adopt the term coined by internet theorist Clay Thompson – of the whereabouts, thoughts and feelings of each member of what must have seemed to be their own little group of exiles scattered across a close-range, urban diaspora.

All of these examples show that the smartphone is not only dramatically changing our sense of time and space, but also how we move through our physical surroundings. An app such as Foursquare enables us to share our location with friends so they can more easily meet up – as well as providing them with a platform for carefully constructing the 'online' version of their spatial identity. It also allows them to engage with their environment with semiotic layers of popular knowledge, such as critical reviews, practical tips and user observations. The Foursquare app brings us closest to what it might be like to walk through a city in the future by constantly sending users notifications alerting them to the presence and preferences of people who are 'close' to them: friends, users with similar profiles and fellow commuters who travel the same route. Foursquare persistently shifts your attention, foregrounding what normally would be a distant background.

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increasing the number of conversation partners and providing relevant information which phones, in fact, were part of the group.

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