

The Tourist G(L)aze

How Google's new Glass technology is changing the tourist gaze

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kommunikation.medien

Onlinejournal des Fachbereichs

Kommunikationswissenschaft

Universität Salzburg

ISSN 2227-7277

4. Ausgabe / Dezember 2014



<http://www.kommunikation-medien.at>



Abstract

Much has been written about the Tourist Gaze ever since John Urry coined the term in 1990. John Urry, who was born in 1946, is a British sociologist and currently Professor at Lancaster University. He is well known for his work in the fields of tourism sociology and mobility, especially with regards to the Tourist Gaze. The Tourist Gaze refers to the view/gaze of a tourist when he or she is on holiday. A tourist looks at a new and unfamiliar destination in a different way as opposed to a local who is familiar (perhaps too familiar) with the destination. But for the first time since Urry came up with the concept, the Tourist Gaze is going through a major transformation thanks to the development of Google's new Project Glass technology.

Keywords

Tourist Gaze, Google Glass, technology, innovation, development

Zitiervorschlag

Nayak, Mihir Ignatius (2014): The Tourist G(L)aze. How Google's new Glass technology is changing the tourist gaze. In: kommunikation.medien, 4. Ausgabe. [journal.kommunikation-medien.at].

1. Introduction

Google Glass is a wearable, voice-controlled Android device with an optical head-mounted display that looks similar to a pair of eyeglasses and displays information directly in front of the user's field of vision. Users can also communicate with the

device using simple voice commands. Project Glass is Google's effort to develop what it calls "augmented reality" eyewear. A researcher from Boeing, Thomas Caudell coined the term in 1990 to refer to a head-mounted device that Boeing used in order to help its workers as they assembled electrical wiring harnesses for aircrafts. Augmented reality (AR) is the integration of digital information with the user's environment in real time. Put simply, augmented reality takes an existing live picture and blends new information into it. AR applications use global positioning system (GPS) to pinpoint the user's location (Techtarget 2011). Google Glass offers an "augmented reality" experience by using visual, audio and location-based inputs to provide relevant information to the wearer. For e.g. when a wearer enters an airport, flight status information could automatically be projected in front of the user's field of vision. Google started selling Google Glass to the public on May 15, 2014. The glasses also have built-in Wi-Fi and Bluetooth connectivity as well as a camera for taking photographs & videos (Google 2014, Techtarget 2013).

To represent this new development, I coined the term 'Tourist G(L)aze', a combination of the phrases 'Tourist Gaze' and 'Google GLass'. The term 'Gaze' is defined as a "steady intent look" (Oxford University Press a, 2014) while the term GLaze is defined as "enclose or cover with glass" or "lose brightness and animation" (Oxford University Press b, 2014). However, this is not merely semiotics. In this short essay, I take a look at how Google Glass has caused the 'steady intent look' of the Tourist Gaze to 'lose [its] brightness and animation'. I first analyse whether the development of Google Glass is an example of technological determinism, social determinism or mutual shaping of technology. I then consider whether Google Glass and other similar technologies should be considered from a utopian or dystopian point of view and finally, I interpret the development of Google Glass using Sawhney's Arena of Innovation framework.

2. The development of Google Glass: Technological determinism, social determinism or mutual shaping of technology?

Tourists, who by definition, are out of their natural environment and therefore unfamiliar and unsure, suffer from an inherent informational deficit (see Bretbacher and Egger, 2010; Buhalis, 2003; Egger and Buhalis, 2008). This results in a great deal of insecurity that is compensated with an intensive research and information seeking phase before the journey. Traditionally, this research and information seeking phase

used to take place in an offline, physical world with a greater shift towards online now taking place (Bretbacher and Egger, *ibid*). Increasingly, however, tourists prefer to choose places to eat, drink and visit spontaneously after arriving at the destination. Thanks to the development of Google's Glass technology, tourists no longer have to rely on either concierges/ receptionists at the hotel nor do they have to lug around heavy Lonely Planet/ Rough Guides around with them. In addition, Google's Glass technology is both contextually and locationally relevant to the tourist i.e. it makes suggestions about restaurants, bars and sightseeing taking into account the current location of the tourist. While 'location based services' on smartphones have been in existence for quite some time now, what makes Google's Glass technology different is that, for the first time, the device can not only be used hands free (unlike a smartphone) but it also projects images and information (such as nearby sights, restaurants, bars and museums) right in front of the right eye of the user, thus directly affecting the gaze of the tourist.

Although there has always been attempts in the past to guide the Tourist Gaze by using sign boards and information boards (see Nayak, 2013), these attempts tended to be either cursorily viewed or ignored altogether by a tourist flooded by the sheer amount of visual offerings in a new and unfamiliar destination. However, since Google Glass is able to project images, signs and information right in front of the user's right eye, the user has little option of ignoring this information, except by removing or turning off the device altogether.

But is it Technological Determination, Social Determination or the Mutual Shaping of Technology (see Croteau, Hoynes and Milan, 2002) that can claim responsibility for the development of Google's Glass technology? In the case of Google Glass, it is clear that Google has played a key role in both its development and its promotion. Indeed, the relatively poor adoption of Google Glass among the general public has caused Google to launch a massive marketing campaign to increase its popularity (CNN, 2014). Therefore, technological determinists who argue that Google came up with the Google Glass device through innovation and development, independent of the end user, and that Google Glass will end up dictating processes of social change would in this case be right. However, Google's reaction to the sometimes rude and even arrogant behaviour of its users, titled 'Don't be a Glasshole' (CNN, 2014), goes to show that it is not technological determinism alone that affects the use of Google Glass. At the moment, Google Glass is in its infant stages of adoption and it remains to be seen whether there indeed will be both a push and pull effect from both Google and society, thus justifying the Mutual Shaping Approach.

3. Google Glass: Utopia or Dystopia?

The development of Google's Glass technology also raises other important questions. One of them is whether the technologies such as Google Glass should be viewed from a Utopian or Dystopian point of view (see Feenberg 2010). I believe that Google's Glass technology can be viewed from both a Utopian as well as a Dystopian standpoint. From a Utopian standpoint, it can be argued that by providing contextually and locationally relevant information to the tourist (as mentioned above), Google Glass is helping the tourist to discover and engage with the destination in an improved manner.

However, I tend to regard Google Glass from a more Dystopian perspective. One of the effects of Augmented Reality (of which Google's Glass technology is a part) is that it tends to extract the user (or in this case, the tourist) partially if not completely from the 'real' or physical world. The tourist using Google Glass is no longer completely in the physical world and is absorbed by the options, choices and possibilities that Google Glass has to offer including the possibility to take a photograph by blinking, being able to video chat with someone using Google Hangouts or also being able to share things using Google+. This causes the tourist to, partially if not completely, lose awareness of his or her surroundings. He or she is more interested in the technology of Google Glass rather than the destination itself. As a result, instead of a "steady intent look" (Oxford University Press a, *ibid*) that is characteristic of the Tourist Gaze, the Tourist Gaze is replaced by a Tourist GLaze. The gaze of the tourist is "enclose[d] or cover[ed] with [Google] glass" (Oxford University Press b, *ibid*) thus causing it to "lose [its] brightness and animation". The tourist eye 'glazes over', as it were, the sights and attractions at the destination.

In addition to this loss of the original steady and intent tourist gaze, the gaze of the tourist is extremely limited and/or restricted by Google. Unlike signboards and information panels that were either put up by the destination marketing organization or the individual businesses, the Tourist G(L)aze is only able to see those signs and information decided by Google. While some may argue that Google will offer businesses and destinations the chance to promote and add their offerings to the Google Glass offering, the fact remains that the control of this information rests in the hands of Google alone, and no longer the destination marketing organization or the city administration as was the case in the past. The danger here is that commercial businesses such as Google may not have the same social and community interests as destinations. Commercial businesses such as Google are dictated by the mantra of profit, while destinations and city administrations (must) also take into account the non-profit value of a sight or attraction. A case in point here could be a little known

heritage site that does not show up on Google Glass (either because it cannot afford to advertise or be present on Google Glass or because it is deemed by Google to be not interesting enough to tourists) and is therefore excluded from the new Tourist G(L)aze. This same heritage site could, as in the case of many UNESCO heritage sites, have a universal value for the intercultural understanding between tourists and the local population but nevertheless be ignored by the Tourist G(L)aze.

4. Sawhney's Arenas of Innovation Framework and Google Glass

The Arenas of Innovation Framework is a “framework developed by Sawhney and Lee to analyze how the juxtaposition of chaos and order vis a vis Internet and its mobile extensions will play out” (Sawhney 2008, p.107). Thus the arenas of innovation framework presents us with a worthy tool to analyse the future developments of Google's Glass technology. Put differently, what does Google need to do (according to Sawhney and Lee's Arena of Innovation Framework) in order for its Glass technology to be successful?

According to Sawhney, the defining characteristics of an arena of innovation can be divided into its physical substructure (constituted by a multiple of people, whose participants are dispersed across space and the object of play of the participants is the very medium that connects them) and its social substructure (where the experimentation by the participants is driven by fun rather than commercial gain, the barriers to entry for joining the community are low and there is camaraderie and openness that facilitate cross fertilization of ideas within the community). We will now look at each component individually.

When compared to Sawhney's arena of innovation framework's physical substructure, Google's Glass technology fulfills all the 3 requirements. Although adoption of Google Glass has been slow among the general public, its adoption rates are significantly higher among the tech savvy crowd, who consist of a considerable number of people. These people are dispersed across a number of countries and continents from North America to Asia and Australia, thus fulfilling Sawhney's second criterion. This geographically dispersed community of Google Glass early adopters (or Explorers as they are known in Google speak) are thus able to 'play' around with the technology, thus cause “a new configurational potentiality” (ibid, p. 109), satisfying Sawhney's third criterion. However, it is with regards to Sawhney's arena of innovation framework's social substructure that Google Glass faces its biggest challenge. Unlike open source software that encourages a vibrant social substructure, Google Glass is a for-profit venture by a commercial company. Although the barriers for joining the Android

community are comparatively low and there is a certain level of camaraderie and openness that facilitate cross fertilization of ideas within the community, the Android OS is by no means a space where experimentation by the participants is driven by fun rather than commercial gain. Although not as commercial as Apple's iOS, Google's Android store (although misleadingly titled 'Google Play') is nevertheless a commercial for-profit zone for developers whose main aim is to create apps for commercial gain.

5. Conclusions

As seen above, the Tourist Gaze has undergone a major transformation thanks to Google's new Glass technology. The use of Google Glass by the tourist causes the 'steady intent look' to 'lose [its] brightness and animation', thus justifying its moniker of the 'Tourist G(L)aze'. Currently, Google Glass is a prime example of technological determinism with social determinism/ mutual shaping of technology playing a lesser role in its development. While Google Glass does have its benefits, I share the rather dystopian point of view of Google Glass and its control over the Glass-wearing tourist gaze. Based on Sawhney's Arena of Innovations Framework, it is clear that while Google Glass fulfills the physical substructure of the Framework, it faces some serious challenges within the social substructure, especially with regards to its predominantly commercial nature. Whether Google Glass will be able to overcome these challenges and be successful remains to be seen.

It must be mentioned here that the Tourist G(L)aze has been brought in connection with Google Glass simply because it is the first device to impact the Tourist Gaze so significantly. However, while the term G(L)aze may be a play on the words Gaze and GLass, this term can be used to refer to any augmented reality device that may impact the Tourist G(L)aze in the future. And I am quite sure that there will be other devices that will have as much if not a greater impact on the gaze of the tourist in the future. If the \$2 billion purchase of Oculus by Facebook (Forbes, 2014) is anything to go by, the Tourist G(L)aze will see greater relevance in the years to come. Watch this space!

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Kurzbiographie des Autors



Mihir Ignatius Nayak, M.A., attended the prestigious Salzburg Tourism School in Bad Hofgastein, where he graduated with Excellence. After completing his BA (Hons) at the University of Derby UK, he did his Masters in Innovation & Management in Tourism at the Salzburg University of Applied Sciences in Puch Urstein. Mihir is currently pursuing his PhD in UNESCO Heritage Communication and Tourism at the University of Salzburg, Austria with Prof. Dr. Kurt Luger as his PhD Supervisor. His research interests include tourism, intercultural communication, technology and employee motivation among others.