

ATACD Residency Report
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Residency at Media Studies, University of Amsterdam
30 June-July 14, 2008

The wider aim of my residency at Media Studies in Amsterdam was to bring together two diverse approaches to the study of cultural topologies: digital research methods and the social study of technological spaces. During the residency, I gave a more concrete form to this broad project in two ways: firstly, by using digital methods in a case study of a particular type of socio-technical space, the “green home.” And, secondly, by assisting in the development of two new software tools for data visualisation.

My residency was scheduled to coincide with the first two weeks of the Digital Methods Summer School, and as such it provided a good opportunity for collaborative work, with new media researchers and programmers in the Amsterdam digital methods group. Over the last year or so, this group has developed several web-based applications for ‘cross-spherical analysis’: a set of software tools to support the comparative analysis of blog, news, organisational and scientific information spaces on-line. My residency was in part meant to test the usefulness of these software tools for the analysis of socio-technical space, and to do so, I used these tools to further develop my on-going research, on the “green home” as a space of public involvement. Moreover, in putting digital methods to use in this way, I also explored possible resonances between such methods and social theory more generally.

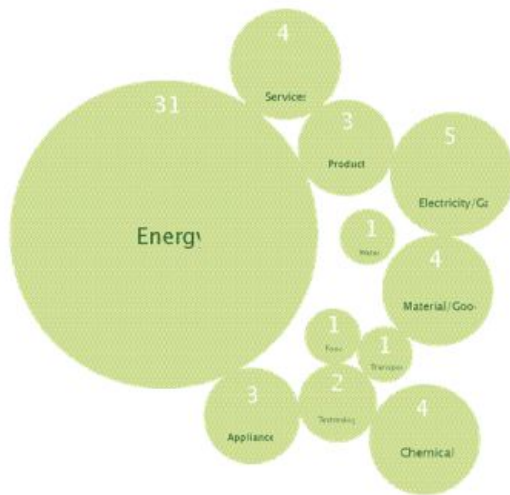
At the start of the residency, I gave a presentation exploring the relations between digital methods and theorizations of socio-technical space, focusing on particular on how digital methods could be used to devise empirical tests for claims of social theory. Taking up a particular argument of social theory, namely the conceptualization of the home as a space for post-calculative citizenship, I asked whether and how web analysis could be a way of exploring this concept by empirical means. As it later turned out, this provided the workshop with a researchable question, as we went on to conduct a small collaborative research project: a comparative analysis of three “green living” spaces on the Web. Using tools of network and textual analysis, we analysed these spaces - green home blogs, green commentary blogs, and green organisations – with a special focus on the type of objects composing these spaces. Thus, we did an object-centred analysis of the composition of socio-technical spaces, working towards a tentative answer to the question of whether these spaces qualified as post-calculative ones.

This analysis was greatly helped by two data visualisation tools that were developed by programmers of the digital methods group during the workshop. The programmers had been actively involved in discussions about socio-technical space and how digital methods could assist in its study. Subsequently, two of the participants, Erik Borra and Koen Martens, went on to design and develop two Web-based software applications for the spatial visualisation of social research data: the bubble line and dorling visualizers (see below). These tools did not only prove very useful in terms of helping to make green spaces legible. They also resonated interestingly with conceptual discussions we had earlier about socio-technical space and citizenship. In these discussions we had characterized the link between them in terms of a special talent of citizens, namely that of “seeing things out of proportion.” In green living experiments, we had speculated, citizenship takes the form of a modulation of scale, where small and seemingly unimportant things like doing the laundry and shopping for food are inflated to become important questions of public life. These ideas returned in the two tools, which visualise how objects are differently “proportioned” in different media spaces on the Web.

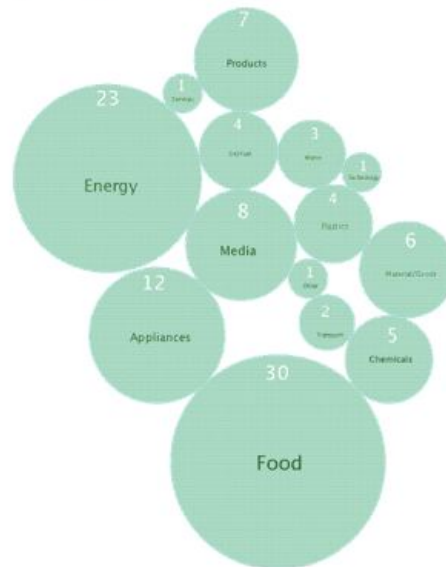
"What you can do" according to two green spaces on the Web

Tips per category, July 2008

Green issue network



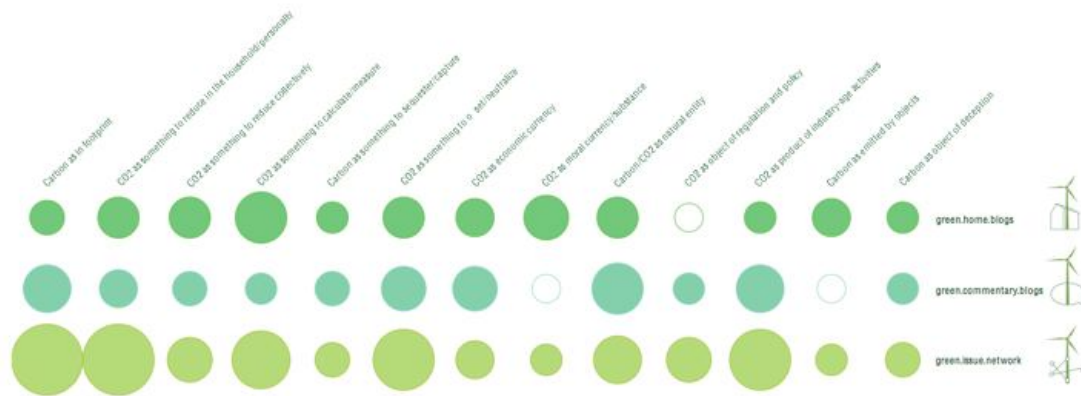
Green home blogs



Dorling visualisation, July 2008.

What kind of object is carbon?

Mentions per category in three green spaces on the Web, July 2008



Bubbleline visualisation, July 2008.

To conclude, the residency was successful, in my view, in doing most of what it set out to do, such as testing the usefulness of tools of web sphere analysis for the social study of technical spaces. The residency also produced several resonances between social theory and new media research, as we used digital methods to turn arguments of sociological theory into empirical questions, and as, what was especially surprising to me, sociological ideas came to play a role in the design of software tools for the visualisation of information spaces on the Web. (Indeed, this simultaneous development of analysis, research methods and tools is one of the distinctive features of the work done by the digital methods group in Amsterdam.) One thing for which I did not really find the opportunity was to have more general discussions about concepts of socio-informational space, and the role of devices in their organisation. However, the research conducted during the residency did do some of the groundwork to help explore such broader questions further: in doing comparative analysis of media spheres, one realizes the extent to which devices organise these different spaces (search engines, blog directories and so on). Finally, in terms of tangible outcomes, my plan is to publish the research conducted during the residency in an article on environmental citizenship and socio-technical space.