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SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cybercafés as constellations of social practices: Exploring “place” and “technospace” in cybercafés in México

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Abstract: The term cybercafé has been widely used to refer to social spaces designed to provide access to computers and the internet. Described as a type of technospace where technology and human interaction are closely intertwined, cybercafés assume many designs and undertake different functions in society. Current literature on cybercafés in developing countries addresses mainly issues of access to the internet (the digital divide), the role of intermediaries and the learning that takes place. We complement these works by analyzing the different practices performed in three cybercafés in Mexico. Our empirical data is drawn from participant observations and interviews with customers and the staff of the cybercafés observed. Drawing from the New Mobilities Paradigm, our analysis explores the flows people, objects and networks in each place. Additionally, we consider the transformations experienced at these places and suggest that these changes respond to a mixed business model as well as to the intersection of particular objects, trajectories and situations that coalesced at different moments in these cybercafés. We argue that cybercafés are continually evolving and finding new ways to survive as technospaces where consumers find various forms of technology, goods and resources, and where interesting ways of social interactions are taking place.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This article explores the many social functions that cybercafés have in different contexts. Although cybercafés were initially conceived as places where customers could gain access to computers and the internet, they have survived in many countries in spite of increasing access to these technologies. We argue that the evolving nature of these businesses is the result of the intersection of physical and virtual elements, as well as the trajectories of the people that meet in these places. We exemplify our argument with details from three cybercafés in México: one in the business district, one in a residential area, and one in the outskirts of the city.

Subjects: Social Sciences; Cultural Geography; Social Geography

Keywords: cybercafés; technospace; place; cultural flows; New Mobilities Paradigm; networks; internet

1. Introduction

Cybercafés are establishments of varying size that may be part of government initiatives or belong to the private sector, and that can be either franchises of a larger conglomerate or independent businesses set up as commercial venues that serve multiple functions in society. They were originally conceived as a cost-effective provisional way to help people become familiar with the internet, but have survived in both developed and developing countries, in spite of the increased internet access in the privacy of homes all over the world (Mancebo, 2003).

Because cybercafés comprise complex physical, social and virtual elements, studies exploring the relationship between the local and the global (Massey, 1994, 2005) and mobilities and immobile infrastructures (Sheller & Urry, 2006) provide a useful framework to understand the practices that occur and give shape to these spaces. Under the term “New Mobilities Paradigm” (Sheller & Urry, 2006) these works embrace the spatial or relational turn (Ek, 2006) that considers place beyond the confines of its physical boundaries (Ek, 2006; Leander, Phillips, & Taylor, 2010; Massey, 1994, 2005; Schapendonk, 2012; Sheller & Urry, 2006; Soja, 1989; Wilken, 2008). Place thus becomes a dynamic nexus of practices (Leander et al., 2010), engaging “within networks of human and nonhuman agents” (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 214).

In this article we present an analysis of three cybercafés in Ensenada, a city in Northern Mexico. Current studies on cybercafés in developing countries have focused mainly on the digital divide and access to the internet (Gómez & Barón-Porras, 2011; Matus & Ramirez, 2012; Peñaranda, Vitores, Martínez, Muñoz Justicia, & Iñiguez-Rueda, 2011); the role of intermediaries (Pérez & Tinajero, 2016; Sein & Furuholt, 2012), and the learning that takes place in these spaces (Becerra, 2011; Fuentes, 2007, 2011; Fuentes & Garduño Olvera, 2007). However, to our knowledge there are no studies that consider cybercafés in developing countries as places with porous boundaries where different kinds of flows take place; nor are there studies that document the evolving nature of these places. In particular, there are no studies in Mexico that analyze cybercafés as places where different objects, people and narratives converge. By providing rich ethnographic data of cybercafés in three distinct areas (urban, residential and peri-urban), we show the convergence of people, objects and the role different agents have in the many social functions practiced in these social, physical and virtual places.

We begin this article with a brief history of cybercafés followed by a description of this type of business according to different criteria: business model, infrastructure, and geographical space. Our theoretical framework draws from the New Mobilities Paradigm and current literature that considers cybercafés as a particular type of technospace. We present our results considering the flows of people in each space, the flows from the local to the global, and the visible transformations we were able to document.

2. A brief chronology of cybercafés

The first known cybercafé appeared in 1985 in Santa Monica, California, under the name “Electronic Café Network Project” (Galloway & Rabinowitz, n.d.; Mancebo, 2003). As part of the Olympics Arts festival of Los Angeles, this project lasted initially seven weeks, implementing during this time a non-profit network whose main purpose was online artistic collaborations and cultural research. It later evolved into an international cultural research lab with over 40 affiliates around the world, in what is known as the “electronic café international” (Hanley, 2002). This first experience laid the ground for the concept of the *café* as a metaphor for a place where meetings occur in virtual and/or physical spaces, a term that continues to be used today, as it is evident in the use of terms such as cybercafés and internet cafés.

In the 1990's some cybercafés emerged in several parts of the world as businesses where people could buy access to computers and the internet, a phenomenon that has continued to grow in many countries. In Mexico the first cybercafé appeared in 1993, when the government was beginning to make access to the internet a priority (Mancebo, 2003). These places have taken distinct forms and vary across different contexts, although the generic term of “cybercafé” has been widely used to name them,¹ in spite of their differences. Furthermore, this term may refer to places that offer access to the internet but not to computers in the ambiance of a café, such as Starbucks; as well as places that offer the use of computers and the internet without selling coffee, and even to places where they offer access to internet without coffee or computers (Puel & Fernandez, 2012). In the case of Mexico we can add a different type of cybercafé: those that offer access to computers and maybe printing services, but not beverages or the internet, although other goods may be offered. More recently, the term has been also used to refer to virtual spaces where people “meet” and communicate online, in which case the word CAFE serves as an acronym for “Communication Access For Everybody” (Mancebo, 2003).

3. Features of cybercafés

A good description of cybercafés is provided by Wakeford (2003), who describes them as social and physical spaces that may combine several objects and experiences, some of which are virtual. In her observations of cybercafés in London, Wakeford identified a repertoire of combinable artifacts and resources that illustrate the diversity of possible experiences for people in these places. These are: a computer as an isolated object, a computer as part of a local network, a computer as part of a global network, systems and technological infrastructure such as the speed of the connection, staff and their knowledge, the ambiance of a café, decorative elements, a geographical setting, and food and beverages. To this range of artefacts we would add the following from our observations of cybercafés in Mexico: different goods and services (school supplies, groceries, homework tutoring), as well as spaces for offline work and socialization (areas with tables and chairs but no computers).

Because in many instances providing internet services by itself has proven to be an unviable business enterprise, many cybercafés have adopted a “mixed business model” (Liff & Laegran, 2003, p. 307) or a multiservice business (Matus & Ramirez, 2012) by offering various goods and services besides access to the technology. The diversity of ventures and the many social functions that cybercafés undertake cannot be attributed to one single cause but may be analyzed if one considers these places as the result of the confluence of several objects, trajectories and experiences in a particular social and physical space (Lægrand, 2002; Massey, 1994). They have been characterized as spaces for informal teaching and learning (Beavis, Nixon, & Atkinson, 2005), for social interaction (Lægrand, 2002; Liff & Laegran, 2003), and for leisure and recreational activities (Cilesiz, 2009; Furuholt, Kristiansen, & Wahid, 2008), among others. In fact, even though the original function of cybercafés survives, these places offer different services in order to comply with financial demands as well as with the needs of consumers and the social and physical context of which they are a part of.

Cybercafés can also be analyzed in terms of their geographical location. For instance, Puel and Fernandez (2012) studied cybercafés in China and found them to be a contributing factor to social stratification in terms of the types of cybercafés present in distinctive urban zones. These authors identified three models of cybercafés that play a role in social stratification in cities in China: the “Starbucks” model, which is a type of urban and more expensive cybercafé that caters to a well-to-do business clientele that gains thus a third point of access between their home and office; the multi-service, community and neighborhood model, located in the pericenter where the middle classes live and where universities and high-tech industries are located; and the “alternatives” model, found in the “urban fringe areas” (p. 1306) where gaming and sometimes clandestine activities take place.

Similarly, Lægrand (2002) studied the role cybercafés and other types of technospaces can have in certain rural areas in terms of processes of extension, transgression and exclusion. In the case of the cybercafés she studied in two rural Norwegian villages, she analyzed how the presence or absence of certain objects, such as a cappuccino machine, are domesticated according to particular

symbolic values attached to them by the local users (more or less urban), in order to “expand their radius of activity and their repertoire of identities in the local community, or to reach beyond the village” (p. 157).

4. Cybercafés as technospaces and meeting places

The term *technoscape* was coined by Appadurai (1990) to refer to the distribution and flow of (high and low, mechanical and informational) technology across various boundaries and borders previously considered impervious. Similarly, Lægrand (2002) uses the term *technospace* to refer to places that are the result of “the seamless web of technology and human relations” (p. 202), where it is important to consider the social, the spatial and the technology involved. When used to describe places such as cybercafés, this concept highlights that the social, the spatial and the technology are intertwined and it is impossible to clearly distinguish the virtual space of the internet from the social and physical spaces in which the machine and the user are located (Lægrand, 2002; Wakeford, 1999). Lægran adds that the technology in these spaces may adopt many forms, from a cappuccino machine to the internet.

Cybercafés are best understood when considering the relationship between local cultures and global communication, as Wakeford (2003) reminds us echoing Appadurai’s assertion that local cultures are always embedded in cultural flows of which they are a part of. Hence, the way cybercafés make visible for potential customers the interconnection between local and global processes becomes relevant, since each business creates a particular version of access to the internet as something to be purchased by different local consumers. In addition, this author adds, different customers may have different repertoires, either imagined or experienced, of urban and global mobility (Wakeford, 2003). These in turn may be enacted in both urban and rural spaces (Lægrand, 2002).

As a particular type of technospace, cybercafés can be analyzed within a framework that considers *place* in terms of the nexus between the local and the global, and between the technology and human interaction. Drawing from the work of Lefebvre (1979), Soja (1989) and Massey (1991), studies focusing on different types of mobilities (e.g. objects, people, information) have turned to the concept of place as something relational and open rather than something fixed and with clear boundaries. These studies are part of the spatial turn that has been characterized by some as a “New Mobilities Paradigm” (Sheller & Urry, 2006). A common denominator in these works is a problematization of place, drawing attention to the different elements that produce place through various social practices in which people, objects, geographical space, local infrastructures and technologies interact (Ek, 2006; Leander et al., 2010; Massey, 1994, 2005; Schapendonk, 2012; Sheller & Urry, 2006; Soja, 1989; Wilken, 2008). Place thus becomes relational, the product of embodied social practices and therefore continually in the process of “becoming” (Ek, 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006; Wilken, 2008). Such concepts of place stress the importance of social actions, interactions and the “yuxtapositions of old and new spatio-temporalities embedded in complex, layered histories” (Ek, 2006, p. 51).

Massey (1994, 2005) provides such a perspective through her notion of place as something built out of:

A particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus... “place” can be seen as a particular, unique, point of their intersection... a *meeting* place. Instead then, of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings, but where a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment, as the place itself. (Massey, 1994, p. 154)

Extending Massey’s perspective of place, Leander et al. (2010) suggest to go beyond the concept of place as a container in order to think of place as the nexus of practices, of “stories-so-far” (Massey, as quoted in Leander et al., p. 334), of relations to similar places, and ultimately, as “a multiplicity, a

product of interrelations, and thus, as constantly opened up to interactions with other places” (p. 336). Place thus becomes something constantly evolving, a product of social relations and narratives (Ek, 2006) that overlap at particular moments within particular contexts.

We find this perspective of place extremely useful for analyzing cybercafés in three distinct areas in a city in Northern Mexico: one in the central business area, one in a residential district, and one on the periphery. In the results we describe two types of flows: one of people, and one of all other local/global circulations. Additionally, because some of these places seemed to be constantly evolving, in the results we discuss some of the changes we were able to observe and the circumstances that triggered these changes.

5. Methods

Our empirical data is drawn from fieldwork conducted for a larger project that analyzes the types of activities carried out by high school students in cybercafés in urban and peri-urban settings. The study was conducted in three phases: An exploratory phase, a data collection phase, and a comparative analytical phase. We will explain each phase in the following paragraphs.

The first phase included a visit to 75 privately owned cybercafés located in different areas of the city. This initial period allowed us to establish contact with the administrators of the cybercafés in order to procure consent for our study. We gave each person a description of our study, and conducted a brief interview to gather information about the services rendered and the population served. When allowed, we took pictures of the cybercafés.

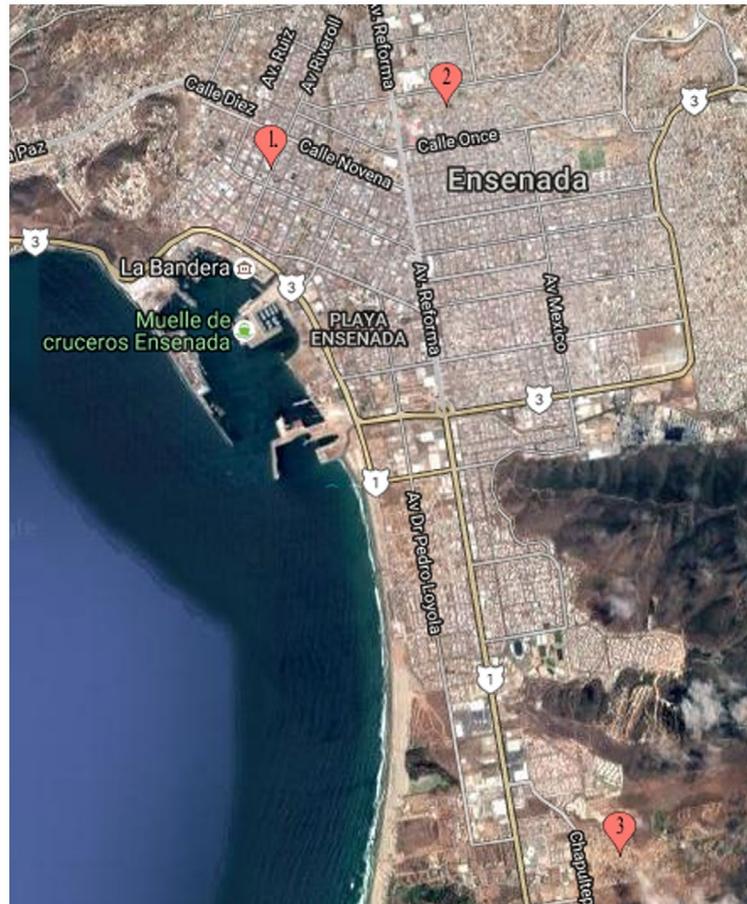
For the second phase we selected among those establishments that granted permission 10 cybercafés located in different areas of the city—four at the city center, three in residential areas, and three in the periphery. This was our more intensive phase, and consisted of a focused ethnography (Le Compte & Schensul, 1999) of the literacy practices of high school students at public cybercafés. The first and second phase lasted 16 months, beginning on September 2014. Our data included field-notes, interviews with administrators and target customers, and videotapes of the sessions.

Focused ethnographies are appropriate for studies that involve short duration field visits, and normally they include different means for gathering data, such as audiovisual technologies (Knoblauch, 2005). In our case, we first visited each cybercafé regularly during a week so that we could identify frequent customers and the routines of each establishment. We then approached target customers suggested by the administrator for their written consent to be observed and videotaped. We visited each place an average of 15 times, and observed target customers at least 10 times. Each session was videotaped and, when possible, screen activity was recorded through Camtasia, a software designed to capture screen audio and video.

In the field notes we registered the layout of the business, the objects present (books, mobile phones, various products for sale), the services offered, the people present, the types of interaction, the activities that took place, and any other relevant information for the study (e.g. changes in the setting). We also carried out several interviews with the staff and target customers at different moments, especially when there was a change in the routines or the setting (change of equipment and furniture, different products and services).

Consistent with our research method (Knoblauch, 2005), for the third phase we transcribed and coded field observations and interviews, and looked at audiovisual material to support our inquiry. For this article we analyze three cybercafés that were distinctive according to the following criteria: the location, the type of services they offer, the activities, and the customers. One cybercafé is located in the main part of town (business district), one in a residential area, and one is in the outskirts of the city (see Map 1).

Map 1. Location of cybercafés.
1: business district; 2:
residential area; 3: peri-urban.



For the analysis we each wrote detailed descriptions of the three cybercafés. We then categorized the data according to the salient features of each place and described the activities, the people involved, the relation between the local to the global, and the changes described by the participants or registered during our observations. We triangulated our data using materials from different sources: fieldnotes, transcriptions of interviews, pictures and audiovisual recordings. Finally, the three authors met regularly for three months to present and compare results. Because in focused ethnographies it is important to provide accurate descriptions of the settings in which the activities take place (Higginbottom, Pillay, & Boadu, 2013), we begin our results with short vignettes of each cybercafé and a picture illustrating a salient feature of each place. Thus the vignettes serve the purpose of contextualizing the participants and the activities adequately in their local environments (Higginbottom et al., 2013).

6. Cybercafés in different contexts: Urban, residential and peri-urban

6.1. In the middle of the city

The cybercafé *On-line* is located downtown at the corner of two streets that intersect with the main arteries of the city, and a block away from one of the busiest streets where lots of local businesses are located. A large bank sits in a further corner, a medical facility sits across, and an auto repair shop in front. There are several public schools (primary and secondary studies) nearby, and some private schools that offer high school and higher education. When the field work began there was a school just a few shops away that offered open education to students of all ages wanting to obtain a primary, middle or high school certificate, but this school moved to a different location a few weeks later. This change had a noticeable impact on this cybercafé, since there were more students present when this facility was still nearby.

On-line is a business of approximately 40 square meters with two distinct areas: the service area and the computers area. In the service area a couple of counters displayed some paper goods as well as pre-packaged instant soups. Some shelves on the wall offered different snacks and beverages. Behind the counters was a desk with a large computer on it, a chair for the staff, a photocopy machine and a printer that were not always in good working order. Next to this area were the computers, placed in rows of three for a total of 12 computers, each one in a cubicle separated from the others by wooden slabs, which allowed the users some but not much privacy. The first two rows were left for general use and the two in the back for players of a virtual game, as these computers were more potent, according to the staff. The regular hours were from 9:00 to 22:00; although on Saturdays the place was kept open 24 h for a community of gamers that met regularly at this place.

This establishment was decorated with pictures on the walls of images from several virtual games, mainly from league of legends (LoL). One of these images was replicated on all the screensavers on the computers, a distinct sign that this was considered by the staff and some users an “internet gamer” cybercafé. Both windows had metal bars in the exterior. During the day the only natural light came from the door to the street, and the artificial light from the computer screens. In the evenings the light was turned on rather late, which contributed to an overall gloomy aspect of the place. This made a stark contrast with the outside, painted in a light color; a big white sign on top advertising the name of the business and online services, with the words “internet- snack & games” written in English, and the words “copying, internet, downloading, printing, scanning and tutoring” written in smaller letters in Spanish (see Figure 1).

6.2. The neighborhood “Cyber”

Galaxy internet is located in a residential area in the Northeast of town, a couple of blocks from the intersection of two of the main arteries in the city. Opposite stands a public middle school and a bit further a teacher-training school. With a plain façade—nothing but the modest sign on the wall with the name of the business distinguishes this entrance which is otherwise identical to any house in the area—*Galaxy* could easily go unnoticed amidst the surrounding businesses and traffic, particularly when students are being dropped off and picked up at the nearby school. But the place is clearly identified by the middle schoolers who make up the majority of the customers.

Figure 1. Cybercafé in the business district.

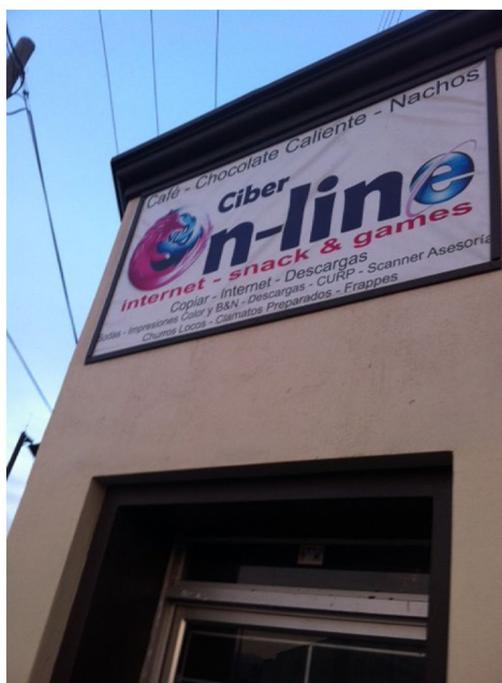


Figure 2. Study area at *Galaxy*.



The “Cyber”, as the youngsters call it, opened in October 2011. According to the owner this was a good business opportunity considering the fact that there was a middle school nearby and there were no other shops in the vicinity that offered photocopying or internet service. “The original idea was to offer a space where customers could stay longer than they needed to make a quick search on the internet or print out homework,” the owner told us in an interview. For this purpose, beside access to the technology this business also offered a comfortable space set up for students to do homework individually or in groups next to the computers area, as we were able to witness when we began our observations (see Figure 2).

6.3. On the fringe

Located on an unpaved street, the cybercafé *Techno-Flintstones* lies between wooden and cement houses, motorhomes, a mechanic workshop and a small grocery store. The community, neither urban nor rural, is a space in transition in one of the outer edges of the city. Nearby, on the main avenue, modern government and commercial buildings have been recently built. Further south migrant farm workers from different regions of the country work in the many vegetable and fruit fields harvesting the crops that are daily exported to the United States (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Peri-urban cybercafé.



This cybercafé is located within a large house owned by a family of seven who came from Central Mexico due to family and financial problems. Several members have migrated to California and have partially financed the house and the business.

Facing the entrance of the cybercafé is the service area, where a wooden and glass counter displays school supplies, traditional candies and prepackaged snacks. One of the siblings, a young woman who recently finished her degree on language education is the supervisor of the cybercafé. She sits behind the counter and controls the machines from a central computer, sells the different products and helps the customers navigate the technology. Next to this computer there is a printer accessible to all customers, who can send documents to be printed from the computers they are using. There is also a box with DVD movies on sale and a small refrigerator with canned and bottled drinks for sale.

There are eight machines in the computer area set up on two long tables with wooden slabs separating each computer station. Four computers with headphones have several videogames installed, two more computers are for general use, an additional one was being repaired and another one was broken down. Two recently repaired laptops were offered for sale on a small desk by the entrance.

Besides school supplies and DVD movies this cybercafé sells traditional candies that the mother brings when she visits her hometown in Central Mexico. Eventually, Mexican crafts were also introduced and during the Christmas season they sell toys and gifts. The cybercafé is also used by several neighbors to advertise and sell homemade snacks.

7. Flows of people

When we began our fieldwork *On-line* (urban cybercafé) looked a bit neglected noticeable by a couple of broken-down machines and chairs placed at the entrance. Nonetheless, this cybercafé was a lively place during the afternoons and evenings when the majority of customers were gamers, with people in the back talking loudly among themselves and with the supervisor, himself a gamer. It was evident that these customers felt quite comfortable in the place and some of them just lingered around, either watching other customers play LoL, talking amongst themselves or with the supervisor while waiting for a machine in the back rows, or stepping outside with the supervisor either to talk loudly or to smoke. The supervisor sometimes also stood behind the players and appeared to always be giving them tips on how to beat their opponents. The younger customers would sometimes ask him directly for advice to which he would respond promptly. Most of the people in this area were male young adults and were regular customers.

There was less interaction between the supervisor and people using the machines in the front, making this a quieter area with little or no interaction between customers. The printing machine provided a valuable service to several customers, especially to students enrolled in the nearby facility or in the schools in the vicinity. These costumers were always assigned a computer in one of the front rows, and they generally ended their sessions by asking to have a document printed. Others simply arrived with their USB's and asked the operator to print a document.

At *Galaxy* (residential area) the customers were male and female students that go in groups to print out assignments or save information on a USB stick for homework. When they go to the cybercafé individually, the seventh grade students (identifiable by the color of their uniform) are often accompanied by one of their parents. In most of these cases they only go to print out assignments already done at home or information they need for homework assignments, and only stay in the internet café for no more than 20 or 30 min. Contrastingly, older students stay for up to two or three hours, immersing themselves in an online game attempting to defeat their opponent (who is often a stranger, they said) on the other side of the network. Sometimes, while they wait for their turn in the game, they check Facebook posts in one of the windows that they leave open or on their cell phones, which they always keep in sight.

On average, most students stay for no longer than one hour. Besides the owner, who comes just to supervise the business, there is a male attendant in charge of the cybercafé. His relationship with the students who are frequent customers seems to be one of trust, and this is shown in the way he treats them. He calls many of them by their first name and the customers evidently rely on him and ask for his assistance to use the equipment or the software, or for downloading files or chatting via Skype. Sometimes they even ask his assistance when they need to do a particular assignment on Power Point, for which they pay him extra.

Although most of the customers come from the secondary school facing this cybercafé, in the afternoons another kind of customer comes: young adults who live in the area and who go to check social networking accounts or to send e-mails. We also observed three young adults filling out and printing job application forms.

In contrast, children as young as four years old come in groups or by themselves to *Techno-Flinstones* (cyber on the periphery) to color pictures on the computer screens or to play videogames. Those that come with a parent or a sibling seem to also trust the owners and their parents talk to them in a familiar manner, calling them by their names, and even asking them to watch over their children while they do some errands. Older children prefer the four computers with headphones where they can play virtual games. The most common school practice performed by both girls and boys involves finding information in Wikipedia or Google. College students are also regular customers. They usually work in educational platforms such as Blackboard where they access materials, send reports and sometimes interact with their professors or classmates.

Many of the customers are people from different areas in Mexico who have moved looking for better jobs and to be near the United States, where some of their relatives live. This was evident in the variety of regional accents in their conversations, and by the images displayed on the screens showing pictures of friends or relatives living in the United States.

Along with computer and cellphones repairs this cybercafé offers other services. The supervisor provides guidance to customers who find it difficult to use the machines and to navigate internet. For example, she may support adults to fill out online school registration forms for their children, answer emails, or even tutor students in Math or Spanish or to use word processing tools.

8. From the local to the global

At *On-line* the name of the place, the outside sign, the images on the wall, the screensavers on the computers and the overall atmosphere advertised this place as a local business connected to a wider community: essentially to the community of League of Legends gamers. As a multiplayer role-playing game LoL is a game catered largely to male players worldwide and played by teams located in different parts of the world. The supervisor and some regular male customers at this cybercafé were divided into different teams of players and virtually connected via the Latin America North server, an essential component of this role-playing, real-time strategy game. However, it was evident that this was not the only service provided to consumers, as the photocopying machine, the printer, and the rest of the computers left for customers that were not LoL players made other services available to a wider community.

The fact that this establishment visibly promoted activities within a specific multi-player international role-playing game afforded the customers the possibility to be connected among themselves and with the wider community of gamers. In this sense, the flows between the local and the global were present through the activities and interactions between a group of people located in a particular geographical region battling amongst themselves and against people in different geographical locations. Therefore, a lot of the local interaction was deeply connected to the global community with people cheering the ones playing or providing strategic information in order to beat their opponents. Thus, this environment provided customers with different forms of socialization and the possibility to enact different identities, evident in the forms of interaction between the players. Such

activities illustrate the role of technology in defining place as the coexistence of different worlds in multiple modes (Morse, as cited in Wilken, 2008), affording customers local interaction through face-to-face communication and global interaction through the LoL server.

Galaxy offered two distinctive areas: a space with six computers and a computer maintenance area, and a space for students to work at their leisure with or without computers. The latter was set up as living room for seven people with a work table, a counter with 4 chairs and electrical outlets for students who brought their own laptops, the snack area (as the owner called it) and school items, and the restroom. This space allowed students to work there for as long as they wanted if they made a minimum purchase. Printouts, exercise books, textbooks, iPods and cell phones were all visible next to the computers; students who worked in the living room generally used poster boards, felt tips and colored marker pens to prepare presentations for their classes. Only once did we notice one girl working on her personal laptop.

In addition to the computer equipment and internet connection, this cybercafé offers many other services such as printing, photocopying, scanning, telephone and fax services, computer repairs, CD/DVD burning, e-mail account creation, document editing, registering appointments at the tax office, registering school enrollments, printing out receipts for enrollment or reenrollment at a university, and even credit reports. Additionally, it offers the possibility of purchasing plane tickets and products online.

Students engaged in local interaction when working in groups but a variety of activities provide a glimpse of more global connections: for instance, when using search engines for a particular topic, when watching videos in You Tube, or when playing online games with unknown players. Additionally, the range of services this business offers connects customers with federal government offices and private enterprises such as the Credit Bureau, potential employers, and even to distant places through the travel services it provides.

Cultural flows were evident at *Techno-Flinstones* in the activities that take place in this cybercafé, some more local than others. For instance, several of the youngsters who play videogames play only among themselves, and the university students that use Blackboard interact with other local students or with their professors. However, students who search for specific topics in Google or who watch videos on You Tube extend their activities beyond the local community.

Perhaps it is among the migrant population where cultural flows more evidently extend beyond the local, either to other communities in Mexico or to communities in the United States. This is noticeable in the type of products and services provided at this place: Traditional candy and Mexican crafts from different parts of Mexico sold by the owners, in contrast with the homemade products brought by the neighborhood customers. Furthermore, the flows of internal and external migration experienced by both these customers and the owners of this establishment, and the cultural connections afforded by the technology reveal how this place becomes the product of “embodied social practice” (Wilken, 2008, p. 41). In this sense, it is the intersection of these people, their stories and the virtual and physical objects meeting at this business that give shape and meaning to this particular place (Massey, 1994).

9. Cybercafés in the process of “becoming”

The cybercafé *On-line* underwent several transformations during its four years of operations, as it was informed by the supervisor and one of the regular customers, a high school student who was a member of the community of gamers. At first, it had been conceived by the owner and the supervisor as a more “sophisticated” business with a “real cappuccino machine”, homemade snacks, and good running machines where people could feel comfortable accessing virtual worlds in the ambiance of a café. During this initial period the owner was in charge of the place and kept all the machines in good working order. There were also some tables and chairs for people who wanted to drink coffee, eat some snacks and socialize. When the owner ceased to come frequently it was his

friend who took care of the place, but not knowing much about computers some of the equipment began to break down and it became difficult to keep the place well maintained.

Gaming activities began through one of the regular customers who started playing a virtual game. Because interaction with the customers was important for the supervisor in order to keep them engaged while at the cybercafé, he decided to start playing LoL, a game he was fairly good at, and invite other customers to play with him. Thus, a community of gamers began to form around him and this activity at this cybercafé, with further physical transformations to the space such as the removal of the coffee service and the replacement of several machines with more powerful ones that could handle the demands of the game. However, we were informed that the main source of income was not the community of gamers but the students who asked for other services such as photocopying, printing and scanning.

With the change in proximity to the open education facility, the lack of maintenance of the photocopy machine and sometimes the printer, and the overall negligence of the place by the owner, it was no surprise that this place closed its doors a couple of days after we finished our fieldwork, in spite of the presence of a strong community of gamers. Although there were some hints by the supervisor that business was slow, no further information was given to us or even to the regular customers, as this fact seemed to take several of them by surprise.

Similarly, at *Galaxy* the dynamics of the cybercafé changed during the last months of our fieldwork. It remained the same during the first couple of months but it was transformed drastically the following month: The study room was taken apart and preparations were made to set up a small grocery store in this area. This reduced considerably the space for students but satisfied the neighbors' requests, who came in asking the staff for products that they were unable to find in the surrounding area. Because this was good for business, the initial idea of offering a space for offline work gave way to potential customers' demands to transform this place into a type of convenience store. Changes at this place were the result of competing discourses (those of the neighbors, the students and the owner) about what a place like this should offer; the cybercafé therefore became an "open and contested site" (Wilken, 2008, p. 46), dependent on the relationships within it as well as with other more or less similar places.

The finished, well-stocked grocery store section, as we observed in our last visit, is now separated from the computer area, a new clerk is in charge of this area and customers have no longer access to this space through the computer room. They have to go outside and enter through a new entrance. In this new space customers find both national and imported products. In addition to selling groceries—and making the most of its proximity to the United States—it displays products usually bought as gifts, such as toys, stuffed animals, backpacks and T-shirts from different brands such as Gap and American Eagle. Thus, the demands of the people in the neighborhood have broadened the flows of global goods to satisfy local needs in detriment of a valuable service this cybercafé provided to the students who made up the majority of the customers: a space for gathering to socialize and do school work both online and offline.

Finally, at *Techno-Flinstones* only computer and internet services were initially offered. However, when one of the owners finished his formal training in computers he decided to provide equipment repair and maintenance, while his sister began tutoring students. School supplies, movies and snacks were gradually introduced as the opportunity presented itself or to comply with the demands of the customers. When our fieldwork ended the supervisor, trained as a teacher, was planning an additional change by setting up a space for more formal tutoring sessions to struggling students, and to offer English lessons.

10. Discussion

The three cybercafés observed, all of them places that can be analyzed as “constellations of social relations” and of “stories-so-far” (Massey, 1991, 2005), offer a glimpse into the different forms of virtual, face-to-face communication and social engagement cybercafés can afford their customers. In particular, the types of activities that took place, the goods and services consumed by the customers, and the changing nature of these technospaces resulted from the mixed business model but also through the convergence of individual and/or group stories, trajectories and experiences. The coalescence of these experiences enabled a type of informal group membership in each place and consequently, promoted different kinds of social practices. Furthermore, these were all stories in the making, with a history beyond the confines of the cybercafés but enacted at particular moments intersecting in these places.

The surroundings, the activities, the people involved, the technology and the social and physical environments in each of these places were important elements in configuring a particular type of technospace. In the following sections we will discuss each cybercafé according to some salient features that make each place comparable but unique in its own way, be it through a specific type of activity, a target customer, or a particular environment.

10.1. A gaming club

In all three cybercafés different customers engaged in virtual games regularly, but only at *On-line* this social practice elicited the kinds of changes that turned it into the central although not necessarily most profitable activity, giving it thus a distinctive identity. Through the supervisor’s expertise in a popular online team game, the interests of some of the male costumers and the networks forged through the LoL community, *On-line* turned into a gaming club for male young adults where they could meet in the middle of the city and even stay overnight on weekends. These customers found at *On-line* a place for virtual as well as face to face interaction in the context of a leisure activity, in spite of the competitive nature of the game. According to the supervisor, profit was not the motivation to stay open 24 h on weekends but rather, it was perceived by both him and these particular customers as a kind of reward for the work performed during the rest of the week. Although the technology was crucial for the gaming activity, it was the team spirit that forged this kind of alliance and commitment between the players, and, according to one of the regular customers, this sense of belonging and the different forms of socialization and interaction were precisely what he would miss the most once this cybercafé closed its doors.

10.2. The “corner store”

As far as the type of consumers it is worth mentioning that students of different ages were regular costumers at all three cybercafés, but only at *Galaxy* the students were the target customers. At this cybercafé the proximity to the middle school encouraged the owner to set up the kind of business that would attract students by providing access to the equipment and the technology, as well as a place where they could come to work online or offline in a relaxed, comfortable and safe environment. Lack of access to internet at nearby schools, as well as the absence of public facilities such as libraries were the motivating reasons behind the design of *Galaxy*. Nonetheless, for the people in the neighborhood this cybercafé was perceived as just one more business to supply their domestic demands, convincing the owner to transform the space set up for the students into a grocery store. Furthermore, these demands gave the owner the opportunity to introduce other kinds of products profiting from the proximity to the United States. In this sense, *Galaxy* was distinctive for the students as a “cyber” gathering place, but this was not identifiable for the people living in the area, who expected the kinds of goods offered at any convenience store in a residential area.

10.3. A gateway

Lastly, at *Techno-Flinstones* the experience of the owners with internal and external migration, the location of the cybercafé in the outskirts of the city but within the confines of their own living quarters, and the similarities amongst the population in the neighborhood, many of them migrants themselves, made this cybercafé a kind of threshold between the urban and the rural, between the

private place of a family home and the public space of a business, a gateway to the technology and a meeting place for face to face conversations; a familiar place where children as young as four could be left alone and a technospace that allowed the customers to stay connected with distant relatives. Even the name of the place with its reference to popular cartoon characters from the Stone Age advertised this cybercafé as a juncture between a distant past and the current technology age. Of all the places observed, perhaps *Techno-Flintstones* best illustrates the richness of technospaces that, as Lægrand has indicated, are produced through “the seamless web of technology and human relations” (2002, p. 202).

11. Conclusion

The hybridization of these technospaces, produced through action and interaction (Ek, 2006) and the confluence of mobilities and physical and virtual spaces (Wilken, 2008) was tangible in all three places. Our data confirms that at cybercafés many kinds of flows take place: people engage in knowledge and cultural exchanges through face to face interaction or online communication, while the staff provides valuable resources for informal learning. Technology was highly visible in all three places observed and advertised in a similar manner; however, each had a mixed business model that enabled customers to perform a variety of activities, only some of which were virtual. The identities of a LoL gamer, of a middle school or university student, or of a member of a particular region, community or neighborhood were enacted and encouraged in these places. Furthermore, the setting, layout, ambiance and objects present in these cybercafés in tandem with particular stories, backgrounds, expectations and experiences of people meeting at each place contributed to the kinds of cultural flows that allowed the consumers to extend their activities beyond the local community, although this was only partly done through the technology.

We can conclude that the original aim of cybercafés to provide technological infrastructure has been transformed into a personally mediated experience. When they first appeared, it was expected that these businesses would slowly disappear as the technology became more accessible to people all over the world. Our experience in Mexico confirms that this is only partly true, but it seems that in spite of wider access to the technology, cybercafés are continually evolving and finding new ways to remain as places where consumers can find various forms of technology, goods and resources, and where innovative and interesting ways of social interactions are taking place.

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Note

1. Other terms such as internet Cafés and *locutorios* are also used, the latter in some Spanish-speaking countries.

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