# New Media & Society

## 'Why bother seeing the world for real?': Google Street View and the representation of a stigmatised neighbourhood

# 'Why bother seeing the world for real?': Google Street View and the representation of a stigmatised neighbourhood

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## Abstract
We examine how an Irish stigmatised neighbourhood is represented by Google Street View. In spite of Google's claims that Street View allows for 'a virtual reflection of the real world to enable armchair exploration' (McClendon, 2010). We show how it is directly implicated in the politics of representations. We focus on the manner in which Street View has contributed to the stigmatisation of a marginalised neighbourhood. Methodologically, we adopt a rhetorical/structuralist analysis of the images of Moyross present on Street View. While Google has said the omissions were 'for operational reasons', we argue that a wider social and ideological context may have influenced Google's decision to exclude Moyross. We examine the opportunities available for contesting such representations, which have significance for the immediate and long-term future of the estate, given the necessity to attract businesses into Moyross as part of the ongoing economic aspect of the regeneration of this area.

## Keywords
Google Street View, Ireland, Moyross, neighbourhood, new media, stigmatisation, urban regeneration

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## Introduction

In both 'old' and 'new' media settings, and within the public mind, Limerick City in the Southwest of Ireland, has acquired an intensely negative reputation over time. The blanket representation of Limerick as a place of crime, social disorder, poverty and social exclusion has increased further in recent years, focusing almost exclusively on the disputes between rival drugs gangs, which have largely been played out in Limerick's local authority estates.

Moyross is one such estate, on the Northside of Limerick City, originally consisting of 12 separate parks[1] and over 1000 households, which were built between 1973 and 1987 (see Figure 1). The area is one of the most deprived in Ireland. Levels of unemployment and early school leaving are high compared to city and national averages (Moyross. ie, 2010). In recent years, Moyross has gained infamy through the media as a site of violence and general social disorder (Fitzgerald, 2007: 7).

In September 2006, two children were burned in an arson attack in Moyross, which proved to be the catalyst for state intervention in the estate. A former Dublin City Manager reported back on the scale of social exclusion in the estate in March 2007 and the Cabinet's Committee on Social Inclusion agreed to the creation of two companies to oversee the regeneration of four estates in Limerick City, including Moyross (see www. limerickregeneration.ie).

For the most part, mainstream media coverage of Moyross is stigmatising, highlighting the very real challenges that the area faces with regard to crime and social order, but at the expense of any significant engagement with the positive characteristics of the locale or its residents (Devereux et al., 2011b). Such generalisations overlook the lived realities of the majority of residents and differences in the physical and social conditions within and across the estate, which is the site of an active and vibrant community, involved in education, job creation, sports, community media and religious initiatives – all aspects of Moyross life that are rarely communicated to outsiders (Devereux et al., 2011a).

In this article we examine how the estate is represented in a 'new' media setting, namely Google Street View. In 2010 Google Street View mapped '55,000 kilometres of Irish villages, towns and cities' (Whyte, 2010). While the application allows for 'a virtual reflection of the real world to enable armchair exploration' (McClendon, 2010), the reality is that Street View is directly implicated in the politics of representations. Initially, the Moyross estate was largely omitted from Street View, though we were offered partial and restricted glimpses of the estate from nearby ('safe') peripheral vantage points. We focus on the manner in which Street View has contributed to the process of stigmatising this socially distant estate, leading to the continuing marginalisation of Moyross and its residents. While Google has said the omissions were 'for operational reasons' (Whyte, 2010), we will argue that a wider social and ideological context may have influenced their decision.

## Approach

The use of images and video to document social life would at face value appear to be unproblematic. Such images imply a recording of a particular place or person at a

**Figure 1.** An aerial photograph showing the 12 parks of Moyross. Reproduced by kind permission. © Limerick Regeneration 2011.

particular time and as such 'the absence of a code clearly reinforces the myth of photographic naturalness' (Barthes, 1980: 278). In that context, photographs are merely 're-presentations of reality' that are impacted by the 'social, cultural and historical contexts of production and consumption' (Banks, 1995). With the continuing development of technology 'the diffusion of images' enables the 'constructed meaning' to be camouflaged 'under the appearance of the given meaning' (Barthes, 1980: 279). 'The disparity in how people engage with these meanings is dependent on the possession of "different kinds of knowledge – practical, national, cultural, aesthetic"' (Barthes, 1980: 280). As such, 'visual sociologists' are interested in the 'content', 'meaning' and social 'context of any visual representation' (Banks, 1995).

To this end, while our article is a theoretical paper; it adopts a rhetorical/structuralist analysis of the images of Moyross present on Google Street View, where we linked the images 'to intersectionality, and analysed them in regard to dominant ideologies' (Barnum and Zajicek, 2008: 115). Having done so, we document and deconstruct how the Moyross estate is represented, and theorise the interpretation that 'armchair explorers' of Google Street View are likely to arrive at when they view this location. In doing so we would argue that we have developed 'a fuller appreciation of the visual representation' (Barnum and Zajicek, 2008: 115) of Moyross by Google Street View.

## Stigmatising poor people and places

The mass media operates as a powerful institution for the dissemination of ideologies and discourses that shape national consciousness (Adair, 2001: 454). Our work is situated in the context of wider debates about how the mass media contribute to the stigmatising of the socially excluded and the places in which they live (see Bullock et al., 2001; Devereux et al., 2011a, 2011b; Golding and Middleton, 1982; Hayward and Yar, 2006: 11–12; Lens, 2002). Influenced largely by Goffman (1963), who understood stigma as 'spoiled identity', an important body of research (see Bauder, 2002; Blokland, 2008; Greer and Jewkes, 2005; Hastings, 2004) has identified how the mass media and other social forces construct and unquestioningly reproduce sensationalised negative stereotypes, which damage the reputations of the places in which the poor live, a process that results in certain neighbourhoods suffering from endogenous stigmatisation (see Aalbers and Rancati, 2008; Gourlay, 2007; Oresjo et al., 2004; Palmer et al., 2004; Warr, 2006; Wassenberg, 2004). These stigmatisation processes are complex and affect the perspectives of both those inside and outside such places (Warr, 2005).

In the Irish public mind, Moyross has a distinctly negative reputation. Devereux et al. (2011a, 2011b) examined a sample of print media coverage of Moyross over a two-year period. Coverage of the area was overwhelmingly negative. Seventy percent of their sample articles had crime as their primary theme. As further evidence of these pathologising discourses, they argue that the language regularly and routinely used by journalists is problematic. For example, a number of articles employ the metaphor of a war-zone to describe the estate. Moyross is described as 'troubled'; 'notorious'; 'a blackspot'; a site of endemic problems; or a 'time-bomb'. Devereux et al. (2011a, 2011b) conclude that coverage was highly problematic and should be seen as

contributing to the further stigmatisation and pathologising of the people and the place. Indeed, Barnes (2010) found that teenage boys in a middle-class school, elsewhere in Limerick, associated Moyross with crime, disorder and social unrest, reflecting the dominant themes in evidence within media coverage of the estate (see also Fitzgerald, 2007: 7).

## The impact of stigmatisation

The existing research literature demonstrates that negative reputations of such places can, in themselves, have a profound effect upon the life chances, experiences and self-image of those who live in stigmatised neighbourhoods (see Permentier et al., 2007, 2008, 2009). Internationally, a body of work (see Atkinson and Kintrea, 2000; Bauder, 2002; Gilroy, 1994; Kirschenman and Neckerman, 1991; Musterd and Andersson, 2006; Turner, 1997; Wilson, 1996) has demonstrated how such stigmatisation can lead to a neighbourhood being 'redlined' by potential investors, resulting in fewer or scarce employment opportunities and also negatively impacting upon service provision for residents. To overcome the effects of their estates' stigmatised identity, some residents mask where they are from – the so-called 'address syndrome' – or leave the neighbourhood altogether (see Clarke, 2009; Permentier et al., 2007, 2009; Tsfati and Cohen, 2003; Warr, 2005).

The impact of stigma is also very apparent in Moyross. While many of the residents in Devereux et al.'s (2011a, 2011b, 2011c) work vocally resisted stigmatising constructions of their estate, they also relate the ongoing impact on their emotional and material wellbeing.

> She gets really upset, she gets really annoyed and I say look do you want to leave the area if you feel that bad about it? … she hates to think that because where she is living is being run down. It's kind of a pride. It hurts a person's pride. (Devereux et al., 2011c: 221)

Residents also cited examples of how the stigmatised image of the estate is received by those who may not be familiar with the realities of day-to-day life in Moyross. 'One resident argued that people living beyond Moyross misperceive it as a "total disgrace" and a "no go estate"' (Power et al., 2012). Residents refer to the impact of their locale's stigmatised identity on their interactions with external actors, citing a number of services, to which they perceive that they have been denied equal access.

> … there was a couple of instances where if somebody was looking for a mortgage and wanted to buy a house here …wanting to stay in the area near their family and wanting to borrow maybe 40 or 50 thousand, and they would not give them a mortgage for 50 but they could give them a mortgage for 250 to buy a house 300 yards away. (Devereux et al., 2011a: 136)

Recently, a Moyross community activist highlighted that when his daughter tried to order a take-away pizza she was told that she would have to walk out to the entrance to Moyross. Christy Duhig said 'the fact is, we are being stigmatised' and he has been left 'disillusioned' by the experience (Rabbits, 2012).

# New media: empowering communities?

While 'old' media products, such as TV, radio, film and magazines, are consumed by geographically fixed, visible and easily identifiable audiences who were assumed to be 'active' in their interpretative consumption of these media products, the usability of digital technology has created the emergence of a new category of audience member. Referred to in some literature as 'the digi-life generation' (Gallie and Robson, 2005, cited in Berry, 2006: 149), the digitalisation of contemporary life has resulted in the emergence of a new degree of agency for the contemporary consumer. In this respect the new media user is more interactive, adopting multiple subject positionings in relation to the media product (Livingstone, 2004). The privatised and individualised nature of new media consumption raises further questions as to the impact and effect that new media products have on both the individual consumer and society as a whole.

Originally, the development of the Internet was welcomed as a positive development, as a technological innovation that would transform and reinvigorate the bourgeois public sphere (Carpignano et al., 1990; Habermas, 1989). It was argued that by its capacity to both host as well as facilitate the sharing of information, the Internet would increase social awareness and/or political participation, which would amount to the promotion of a new democratic order in contemporary society (Street, 1997). This idealistic portrayal of an 'electronic democracy' (Street, 1997) has received steady criticism over the past 15 years.

Firstly, research suggests that the function of the Internet has changed. In the early years, it was primarily used for informational and instrumental purposes. However, more recently, we have found that the Internet is increasingly used for social-expressive purposes, such as social networking (Tufekci, 2008: 544), blogging (Hayton, 2009; McCosker, 2008) or participating in online communities (Burrows et al., 2000). In addition, it has been noted that an increase in the quantity of information available online does not necessarily result in quality information. While information in principle can be used to inform and educate individuals, the absence of a moderating influence in the Internet means that the near-infinite sprawl of information can at times confuse, contradict other information and misinform the individual. Following on from this, others have postulated that the Internet desensitises people to social issues in their local community. For instance, Putnam (2000) contends that new technology reduces civic mindedness and political awareness.

Secondly, the technology of the Internet itself is an elitist form of communication that perpetuates a number of inequalities around its effective use and access. Reisenwitz et al. (2007) highlight the persistence of two 'digital divides'. The 'first-level digital divide' addresses the issue of access – in terms of the material resources needed to acquire a personal computer, the level of skill needed to successfully operate the device and the technological capabilities of one's geographical location. The 'second-level digital divide' exposes the more exclusionary face of the Internet as it reveals the social groups that have been traditionally excluded from the Internet – women, the aged, the unemployed and those with disabilities. Moreover, despite its initial democratic aspirations, the Internet very quickly transformed itself into a hub of commercial activity. As a result, its

primary aim has come to be an agent of global capitalism, selling goods and entertaining rather than educating and informing.

Some have commented that new media has increased the role and significance of visual representations in contemporary society, while Koskela (2004: 199 italics in original) argues that the trend in the personal uploading of images from personal web-cams and mobile phone cameras onto the Internet might be interpreted as a form of '*empowering exhibitionism*', where 'people *refuse to be humble*'. Yet as we will now see, in the case of Google Street View there is no local involvement in the creation of the images. On the contrary, this global Internet organisation captured the images of localities without consultation with communities.

## Google Street View

In 2010 Google Street View launched in Ireland (RTE.ie news, 2010) when a fleet of vehicles captured street-level panoramic and 360-degree imagery of cities, towns and villages (Newenham and Healy, 2010). This resulted in Ireland becoming the 25th country to have allowed Street View to gather images of its public spaces. From a project that originally involved capturing the street-level imagery of five US cities in 2007, Google Street View now includes all seven continents, including Antarctica (McClendon, 2010).

Many ponder the usefulness of such a technological development. Geographers, for instance, would posit that Google Street View is just the latest in a recent line of technological developments that has seen computer technology making more inroads in the teaching and research of geography (e.g. global positioning system (GPS), geographic information system (GIS); Rose, 2004: 797). Such 'geospatial technology' (Crampton and Krygier, 2006: 18) has also facilitated the emergence of a 'people's cartography' where, thanks to open source maps and Google Earth, for example, more ordinary people are exposed to maps and mapping techniques than ever before. For computer scientists, the desire to create 'consistent geo-positioned imagery' presents a huge computational and technological challenge that they relish (see Frome et al., 2009: 1; Vincent, 2007). However, the Vice President of Engineering, Google Earth and Maps, argues that Street View allows for 'a virtual reflection of the real world to enable armchair exploration' (McClendon, 2010) to help local inhabitants and other people learn more about these locations. The nature of this learning is couched as being rather benign, 'allowing you to check out a restaurant before dining there, to explore a neighbourhood before moving there and to find landmarks along the route of your driving directions' (McClendon, 2010). In this respect, Street View is directed towards the needs of the virtual tourist, who increasingly uses the Internet to plan, research and book travel arrangements (Wang et al., 2002: 407).

This functional interpretation of Street View was also endorsed by the then Irish Minister for Tourism, Mary Hanafin, who when speaking at the official Irish launch remarked that 'Street View will showcase the real beauty of Ireland's towns and countryside to millions of Internet users around the world and has the potential to deliver a welcome boost to visitor numbers to Ireland' (quoted in RTE.ie news, 2010). Clearly, Street View was recognised as being a pivotal marketing device in promoting Ireland Inc.

# Critically evaluating Google Street View

Despite such corporate and government endorsements, the Google Street View project does have its dissenters. While Street View passes itself off as an innocuous technological development for the 'virtual tourist' of the 21st century, the reality is that it is directly implicated in the politics of representations, privacy and surveillance.

It is important to remind ourselves that all maps, whether traditional or interactive, merely present us with a representation of reality. Mapping, the act of measuring and objectifying space is never a neutral process. Historically, the practice of mapping land invariably imposed physical as well as imagined boundaries on the landscape and the people who occupied it. Geography is full of examples of 'the power-knowledge relations of mapping' (Crampton, 2002: 15), such as the use of mapping in colonialism, or the practice of gerrymandering electoral districts to influence election results (Monmonier, 2001, cited in Crampton, 2002: 19). In these ways maps can create and sustain institutional power and power relations (Crampton, 2001: 241), in addition to disempowering certain communities, locations and populations. All maps can be understood as texts that show the intersection of 'the ideas of power, ideology and surveillance' (Crampton and Krygier, 2006: 12) that underpin hegemonic power relations. Thus, maps are active texts, constructing and representing reality for us, and in so doing, creating knowledge for the masses as well as an identity for those whose communities have been represented in the map (Crampton and Krygier, 2006: 15).

Thielmann (2010) identifies two types of mapping process associated with new media, 'annotative (virtually tagging the world) and phenomenological (tracing the action of the subject in the world)'. Both of these processes emphasise the democratisation of mapping through the active involvement of individual users in constructing (representations of) place. This focus on user-generated map content is common to the literature on geomedia (Crutcher and Zook, 2009). The processes described contrast with historical cartography of the same scale. Online maps represent ubiquitously accessible cartographic contributions to what geographers refer to as 'DigiPlace', a concept that 'represents the simultaneous interaction with software (information) and 'hard-where' (place) by the individual' and 'the understanding of a location based on and filtered through information about a place that is available in cyberspace' (Zook and Graham, 2007: 468). Thus, this article is concerned with the construction of Moyross as a DigiPlace.

In this context, the politics of Google Street View reside in the highly visual nature of the medium that invites us 'to make visible spatial relationships' (Crampton, 2001: 244) with places that we may or may not already know about or have yet to visit. Street View offers features such as 'zoom' and 'change orientation' (Crampton, 2001: 245), which afford the user different perspectives or vantage points on the map. In this respect the map is not the static, stable property that we typically assume maps to be. Rather, Street View can constantly present new vantage points for the user depending on their needs (Crampton, 2001: 245). Accordingly, the immediacy of the view offered in Street View can collide with the potentially global remoteness of the viewer, resulting in the development of either a fetishised relationship with the location or a disengaged voyeurism.[2] Earlier we noted how media researchers highlight that a digital divide hallmarks Internet

usage. As a result, the 'virtual tourists' or armchair explorers of Street View tend to occupy various positions of privilege in contemporary Western society. This in turn adds an extra dimension to the politics of viewing Street View.

The technology allows for 'street-level imagery' to be combined with a Street View Avatar to allow for a very naturalistic navigation around the location (Vincent, 2007: 119). However, despite this 'natural' encounter with the map and the locations, all of the images published on Street View have to be scanned and changed in order to obscure people's faces, licence plates and other identifiable markers from the images (Frome et al., 2009: 2). Google's efforts to uphold the privacy of citizens who happen to have been captured in public spaces also includes allowing the public to contact the company directly to request the removal of an image (Newenham and Healy, 2010). The manner in which Street View infringes on the privacy of citizens has been one of the most controversial aspects of the project. In Germany, hundreds of thousands of people requested that their homes be removed from the images. In Britain, many householders feared that Street View would be used by burglars to help find easy targets (Vincent, 2007: 118). Interestingly, in Ireland, the discussion about privacy and Street View did not only focus on the issue of image capture. In May 2010 it was reported that Google had removed their car fleet because the Wi-Fi data collection equipment in the cars was inadvertently intercepting and storing information received from various wireless networks that they encountered on their travels around Ireland. Once this problem was identified, all Wi-Fi-related software were removed from the cars and the data collected was destroyed by an independent body (O'Brien, 2010). It is clear from these examples that the mapping practices and technology used by Google is primed to collect a wide array of information about a place and its inhabitants. However, privacy laws and civil liberties demand that certain controls be placed on the virtual map produced. In this way, we are reminded of how the mapping practice of Street View is a thoroughly social process, one that is shaped by social, legal and political considerations. Consequently, the 'naturalistic' allure of Street View is merely a technological feature of the software rather than a realistic representation of these locations.

## Over the wall: Google Street View and the misrepresenting of Moyross

In examining representations of Moyross in a new media setting we wanted to ascertain the degree to which newer forms of media content stood in opposition or in contrast to more traditional forms of coverage. These new media settings do not fare much better than their traditional counterparts. Even a cursory scan of YouTube reveals that the dominant forms of coverage of Moyross serve to either further stigmatise the estate or lampoon its residents.

The visual mapping of Moyross by Google is of particular interest. Originally, the estate in its entirety was only visible by means of an aerial photograph. Invisibility, however, is relative. The other estate on the Northside of Limerick – St. Mary's Park – which is also due for regeneration, was only available as a basic (line drawn) map in Street View. In contrast, the Moyross estate was not entirely absent, it was merely obscured. The images of the estate were taken from a nearby middle-class estate that lies to the

west of Moyross and from various points on a road that runs along the north-east perimeter of the estate. No images from anywhere within the 12 distinct parks that make up the Moyross estate were available.

The images of Moyross taken from the western perimeter of the estate were taken from the other side of a high wall or railings. The limited number of photographic images in Street View displayed some derelict houses that no longer existed. They exhibited desolate spaces, graffitied walls and streets that are relatively car-less. In addition, images were shot from a variety of locations on the main road that skirts the estate. In common with television news, which routinely used images of the estate's entrance, the images of Moyross on Street View were of entrance and exit points to the estate's 12 parks. We saw images of Moyross over walls, over fences and *always* in the distance. There is some evidence of attempts at community renewal in the presence of signage pertaining to community development projects and regeneration. Overall, however, the images give a new meaning to the term gated community. Unlike the footage shot in nearby Caherdavin or the Ennis Road (lower-middle and upper-class neighbourhoods, respectively), it was not possible to place yourself (virtually) inside the neighbourhood. Like the imagined audience in more traditional media settings, Google Street View's audience could only witness a community corralled in a desolate space. In the case of Street View we see that, in spite of its utopian promise, new media settings also reproduce images of places that are partial, limited and pathologising.

The discovery of the 'absence' of the Moyross estate from Street View poses a number of striking questions: Does it reveal an exclusionary mapping practice by Google? What was the rationale behind this omission? Was it accidental or by design? These questions are important for a number of reasons, not least the fact that powerful and pervasive negative media representations of Moyross already abound, both in the local and in the national media (Devereux et al., 2011b). Interestingly, a search of other well-known disadvantaged areas in Ireland revealed that these had been included in Street View. This anomaly was more striking when you consider that other 'notorious' and dangerous areas, such as Inglewood in Los Angeles and the various barrios of Rio de Janeiro, have been included in Google Street View (www.thejournal.ie). Therefore the question remains, what 'operational reasons' caused them to exclude these areas from the Street View map?

When confronted by the omission and selective mapping of areas of Limerick City by local city councillors, Google explained it to be for 'operational reasons' (Whyte, 2010). However, this response was not received well by either local residents or their elected representatives. For instance, one local councillor remarked that Moyross was being portrayed as 'a Zoo, best viewed from the outside' (cited in Live95fm.ie, 2010b), while another argued

> They are not doing it for operational reasons. They are doing this out of prejudice, based on reports they have of the area. It is entirely irresponsible of them. We cannot have huge areas greyed out. If they do, it will have a knock-on effect. Companies will link into this. (Quoted in Whyte, 2010)

By the 8 October 2010, a Google spokeswoman announced that their Street View car had been deployed to continue its street imagery of Limerick City and that it had always

been their intention to provide a complete map of Limerick (www.live95fm.ie, 2010a). Google Street View has since mapped the internal structure of the estate and these images are now available for the armchair tourist. However, the 'updated' images continue to inaccurately portray the neighbourhood in that they remain significantly out of date and do not take account of recent (and positive) developments in terms of the reconstruction of the estate.

As Thrift (1997: 160) notes 'places form a reservoir of meanings which people can draw upon to tell stories about themselves and thereby define themselves'. However, when a place is consistently publicly constructed through what Lucas (1998: 148–51) describes as metaphors of filth, neglect and un-healthiness, residents can have difficulty in separating perceptions of themselves and their own lives from overwhelmingly negative and persistent portrayals of crime, social breakdown and moral disorder. In this way the negativity associated with a particular neighbourhood marks not only the place, but also the people. This integral connection between place and identity construction is explored in depth by Dixon and Durrheim (2000, 2004). Paying close attention to the role played by language, memory and the sense of belonging or familiarity related to place, they emphasise that places must not be seen as 'fixed, empty and undialectical backgrounds to, or containers of, social action' (Dixon and Durrheim, 2000: 27). Rather, places are 'landscapes of meaning' around which rich social attachments and understandings are formed (Dixon and Durrheim, 2004: 458), both by insiders and outsiders (Robertson et al., 2008). These understandings and attachments can be positive, for example, where they are formed by residents in relation to their home place, or be negative, in particular where they are shaped by those who seek to establish and maintain divisive structures of belonging and not-belonging through the creation of ideological boundaries (Dixon and Durrheim, 2000: 38–40). Indeed, the media rhetoric discussed throughout this paper is an example of the way in which language is used to position and locate both ourselves and 'others' in order to maintain inequalities and divisions. Rose (1996) emphasises the politically charged practice of public dis-identification with particular spaces, a process that purposefully highlights difference and maintains distance, something that can be clearly seen in the media positioning of Moyross as a dangerous place. Thus, where identity can be understood to be clearly linked to place, questions must be asked about the motivations behind the ascription of negative characteristics to places with full awareness of their transference onto people. Skeggs (2004: 94) notes how such language is designed to 'fix' in place structures of inequality and social immobility.

Google Street View's representation of Moyross provides an excellent example of what can be termed 'outsider' perceptions of neighbourhoods and communities. These perceptions are very often one-dimensional, crudely assigning generalised identities to places and people, and often differ significantly from what a place is like on an everyday basis. Indeed, Robertson et al.'s (2008: ix) research demonstrates that the '…external perception of a neighbourhood identity was stronger and more of a caricature than those held by people who lived there themselves'.

The importance of challenging and questioning media portrayals of places like Moyross comes from the realisation that stereotypical media constructs are both lasting and materially damaging. As both Skeggs (2004: 104) and Hodgetts et al. (2006:

497–498) argue, negative media images have real impact on people's real lives. Fitzgerald (2007: 5), in his report on social exclusion in the regeneration areas of Limerick City, identified the scale and intensity of negative publicity as hugely problematic and as impacting heavily on the ways in which socially and economically marginalised areas and their residents are perceived by outsiders.[3] Sibley (1995) further describes the process by which images and understandings of particular groups come together to form 'landscapes of exclusion', whereby both people and places are characterised as dangerous, dirty, or threatening. The perceptions people hold about neighbourhoods and about the people who live in them help construct lasting, negative reputations that are difficult to shift and that can quickly become self-sustaining. This is already an easily identifiable and well-documented issue in Limerick City, whereby certain communities are 'discursively constructed through notions of deviance, deficit and failure' (Walkerdine et al., 2001: 37). Google Street View's representations of Moyross further entrench public perceptions of it as a 'no-go' area, as only those who must live there have any reason to enter.

## Place and cyberspace

This sociological undertaking is reflective of a wider trend within the interdisciplinary field of media studies, in which interest in place has been invigorated by the increasing ubiquity of locative and location-aware media. An increased interest in the maps and mapping processes that feed these technologies is part of this 'spatial turn' (Thielmann, 2010). More specifically, the work is situated at the intersection of what Thielmann (2010) refers to as 'locative media' and 'mediated locations' (the bridge between media studies and geography, which he terms geomedia) in that it seeks to interrogate both the processes by which new media construct place and to reflect upon the ways in which place is shaped by those constructions. In doing so, this paper seeks to foreground critical questions regarding the production of representations, which Zook and Graham (2007) note are 'seldom in the forefront', as well as their impacts.

Underpinning this approach is an understanding of Street View, not as an accurate representation of reality, but as a social construction. Online maps, such as Street View are, like all maps, inherently socially constructed. It is reasonable to assert that the representation presented at any time by Street View, for example, reflects the outcome not only of internal corporate strategising and budgetary decision-making, but also challenges by and negotiations with individual residents, local authorities and national regulators (see, for example, BBC News, 2011).

## Shaping representations

Street View, we would argue, represents a particularly interesting exception to the broader trend towards participative mapping. Street View is not crowd-sourced cartography, but a process in which control over the construction of place rests finally with a transnational corporation. In this sense, the users of Street View are arguably better classified as users of a mass media, rather than a community of content-generators.

Street View reveals individual agency only in its negative spaces, the absences that represent complaints and legal challenges brought by individuals. These redacted places differ, however, from Moyross, in that they are places that Google has mapped, but is now prohibited from sharing, not places that it initially chose to delay mapping, like the spaces on ancient maps marked 'Here, there be dragons'.

## Classed cyberspace

The contrast between public responses to Moyross's representation on Street View and more infamous demands from residents and authorities elsewhere to have places removed from the map tell of the relevance of class analysis to understanding DigiPlace. While other representations regarding Street View reflect concerns for privacy, associated with the security of middle-class prosperity and business interests, concerns regarding the initial omission of Moyross from Street View reflect experiences of exclusion. Those secure in their status can better afford to present a blank space open to interpretation. Moyross, as a place undermined by a spoiled identity, could not. This distinction reflects the continuing validity of Harley's (1988) observation that the blank spaces on maps are by no means absent of meaning (Harley, 1988) or immune from interpretation. Calls to include Moyross in Street View reflected an innate understanding that map readers do not pass over negative spaces – they interpret their absence. Publicity regarding privacy concerns means that distant digital tourists may interpret such absences as evidence of power on the part of the residents of redacted areas, but local knowledge would certainly prevent such interpretations in the case of Moyross. For Irish people, regularly exposed to stigmatising national media discourse regarding the estate, the redaction of Moyross would represent confirmation that, indeed, there be dragons.

The inclusion of Moyross in Street View presents a new set of problems associated with the image management of a place necessarily sensitive to its representation and undergoing significant change. Unlike groups who are given control over their own cartographic representation (see Harrison, 2008), the people of Moyross have not, we would argue, been empowered by their new visibility. Following Lemos (2010), Street View has constructed an informational territory that overlays the lived reality of residents, and adds another layer to those constructions of the estate that they do not control. While numerous examples have demonstrated that it is possible for individuals to challenge their representation on Street View, it is always the case that negotiations with authorities are most difficult for those with less capital (economic, cultural and technical) to draw upon. However, the digital divide does not place Moyross beyond the reach of DigiPlace. Just as with mainstream media representations, exclusion from participation in one's construction does not equate to exclusion from the effects of others' constructions of you. In this sense, online representations of our social world continue to reflect the class divisions that exist offline (Crutcher and Zook, 2009).

## Conclusion

Place is fluid, not static. Moyross is still/always a place in process. Equally, the Street View representation of Moyross will need to continue to be updated. This analysis of one

period in Moyross's representation on Street View produces, however, conclusions that have relevance beyond the lifetime of those images. It emphasises that Web 2.0 is not always a force for democratisation and highlights the importance to the emerging field of geomedia of critical questions regarding informational control and the factors that inform representations (Lemos, 2010; Zook and Graham, 2007). It draws attention to the massive power exerted by global mapping projects, in that opting out may not be an option for those places without the resources to withstand the impacts of invisibility. It highlights that within such global projects, invisibility (whether sought or unasked for) is as meaning-laden as visibility; thus, those who opt out are very much still vulnerable to external constructions of their absence. The product of visibility and invisibility on Google Street View are arguable in the end the same – an invitation to users to subject places to classification.

## Funding

## Notes

1. These are 12 distinct neighbourhoods (Pineview Gardens, Delmege Park, Castlepark, Sarsfield Gardens, Craeval Park, Dalgaish Park, Cosgrave Park, Cliona Park, Hartigan Villas, College Avenue, Whitecross Gardens and Ballygrennan Close), which are referred to as 'parks'.
2. Elements of both of these positionings can be gleamed from the website www.googlesightseeing.com, where Internet users are encouraged to post images and entries about some of the 'weird and wonderful sights' they have come across while using Google Earth and Google Maps.
3. The frustration experienced by local community representatives with the negative image of Moyross and other local authority estates was noted by Fitzgerald (2007) and the Limerick Regeneration Agency (2008). Both reports recognise the implications of this negative image for the residents and also stress the wider implications in terms of investment in the city.

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