A CITY OF DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

INSTAGRAM1

Ryan Burns, University of Calgary

[_of-insta_'s notifications]

n0rmc0r3 started following you 2 h
n0rmc0r3 liked your post 41 m
n0rmc0r3 and painted_heaven liked your post 39 m
n0rmc0r3, jjacobs, me.llamo.maria, and 3 others liked your post 29 s

n0rmc0r3 mentioned you in a comment: @_of-insta_ your pictures are sick. I love how informative they are! you live in that city that won Instagram's new headquarters competition a few years ago, right? 4 s

● _of-Insta_:

Hey @n0rmc0r3, thought I'd respond here in a DM, in the interest of privacy! Thanks for the compliment. Yeah, I live there. It's a pretty cool experiment, if you ask me!

623

● n0rmc0r3:

yeah, it sounds like it! what's it like living there? I heard they employ, like, everyone?

624

● _of-Insta_:

That's right! Officially, they are the only employer in the city. Even the service sector employees get their checks signed by IG. It was a contract they signed with the city government, which basically handed the keys over to the company! I guess they're finally listening to us who say government should be run like a business.

625

It's amazing. All we have to do to get things we need, like file for unemployment checks or to clean graffiti up is snap a photo and tag the city's IG account! It creates a public queue, so you know how many are waiting in front of you and you know that your request isn't getting lost in all that silly bureaucratic paperwork. The city usually reposts your request in its own Story so you always know where you stand.

626

● n0rmc0r3:

whoa! that's way more efficient, and we're all on Instagram anyway, so why not? my news station said it also helps with crime because the police department can create profiles for people based on what they post. but what about that unemployment you mentioned? why isn't Instagram employing everyone?

627

● _of-Insta_:

I don't know much about those profiles you're talking about. They told us it was for providing better services... Seems a little surveillant...

628

West_precinct_PD just liked your post 1 m
West_precinct_PD started following you 36 s

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of-Insta:

I don't know why, but there are a lot of homeless people here. Probably just people who don't want to work. Instagram has jobs, if people want them. 629

And anyway, everyone in the city is given a free smartphone, so we all have access to the platform and public services. 630

n0rmc0r3:

and I don't understand why there would be homeless people...? 631

wait, what?!?! everyone gets a free phone? crazy! do you get all the apps for free, too? 632

n0rmc0r3 sent you a picture

n0rmc0r3:

that's one of our tent cities in that pic. it's on the fence outside of Amazon's office here in my city. 633

of-Insta:

Well, I guess there were a lot of people who were laid off in the transition, and there might be some people who weren't trained in Instagram's new programming language. That's probably why. I mean, the radicals say these big companies routinely lay people off to keep labour fluid, but that's just a conspiracy theory. 634

The phones they give us have Instagram already installed! Oh, and Facebook, too! So it's ready to go. I guess we have to pay for any others we want. 635

deposed_arnstein liked your post 1 h
deposed_arnstein commented on your post: *thanks for reporting so much about our neighbourhood! you're making it a better place!* 41 m

of-Insta:

Check this out - the new version of the IG app has a filter that gives us information about the city! All we do is open the app and apply the "Your City" filter, and we can see real-time information about the landscapes in front of us. So we can get a history lesson by using IG. Most retail and restaurants deliver coupons that way, too - it's easy, since they're all franchised through IG! 636

the_city_experience just liked your post 40s

n0rmc0r3:

ah, now I see why your pics are always so informative - you post using that filter that overlays info. weird, we didn't get that filter where I'm from... I just looked it up, and it's crazy! it was bigger than Pokémon Go! I wonder why we can't get it here...? 637

city_nomads just tagged you in a post: *we've just released a new line of Instagram-flavoured cocktails - experience with the new Boomerang playback function! come see us, friends me.llamo.maria, _of-Insta_, golds_kleim, r_florida* 22s

n0rmc0r3:

looks like you prefer the historic information. but how do you know where to go to find interesting stuff? 638

city_business_strategy just started a live video: *Attend our virtual town hall to hear our plans for growth for the next 10-20 years!* 4 m

● _of-Insta_:

It's usually marked in big, bold IG icons scattered throughout the city. I think they do it that way so the view will be really Instagrammable! It's where the most aesthetically-pleasing places are where we get the most interesting historic information.

639

I also found my new favourite pizzeria through the filter. I used to go to one that had been around for, like, three generations, but it closed a few years ago right when all the changes started happening. There were new pizzerias popping up that were offering coupons in the filter, and they had some cool new Silicon Valley tech and just left behind the older ones that refused to be franchised when IG took over. Plus, the new ones were right on the edges of the city's bad neighbourhoods, and those areas are now cleaned up with cool new shops and more trendy restaurants.

640

● n0rmc0r3:

oh yeah, I've seen those icons. looks like a great way to experience the city! so, lots of new places to go. awesome! did the rent go up in those areas?

641

● _of-Insta_:

Oh, well, I can't afford to go to those shops because they're too pricey. And the plazas aren't really public, but as long as I am exploring the "Your City" filter the security guards won't bother me.

642

Rent went way up there, and developers started redeveloping because of all the blight that was there. But we can still see pictures of the old buildings in the app!

643

● n0rmc0r3:

oh, they're keeping tabs on what you have open on your phone? that's a little weird... I wonder if that's why we can't get it here? anyway, thanks for the info. I'm jealous you get to live there!

644

[48 hours later]

Your friends haven't heard from you in a while! Tell them about your day using our new additions to the "Your City" filter! 12m

● n0rmc0r3:

yo, I heard something today about the overlay filter. I think some contraband information got out in the new update last night?

645

● _of-Insta_:

Really? I haven't been out today. I'll go try to use the filter and let you know.

646

You sent a photo to n0rmc0r3

● _of-Insta_:

This is so strange... I used the filter to find information about our central square, and it said something about labour protests there after unions went on strike to demand better working conditions, like, a hundred years ago.

647

I'd never read about whatever this "organized labour" thing is. I guess it wasn't put into our school textbooks.

648

● n0rmc0r3:

649

I heard it was a programmer at IG that leaked the information. she said something about superficial gestures or something. here's what our city news said: "Maria, who has admitted to the leak, responded, 'The city wants to pretend that they are more deeply engaging their denizens by soliciting likes and organizing their information with hashtags. And sure, they were probably getting more discrete interactions by those metrics, but this has completely replaced the millennia-old practice of organized political resistance with a shallow feel-good clicktivism that bolsters the corporation's bottom line.'"

● _of-Insta_:

650

Maria, at IG? Wow, I know her through a friend! I'm going to DM her and see what she thinks she's doing.

651

OK, I DM'd her. I asked what the big deal is, why she's disrupting all our lives by hijacking the filter. I said it doesn't really matter what their motivations are if life is better. She said, "I mean, to get to this level of buy-in required massive, structured, and regular layoffs that have led to the tent cities so prevalent across our landscapes. They'll give us all free smartphones with Instagram and Facebook installed, but can't provide affordable housing? People need to know that this isn't the only option, and that's why I leaked the information - to organize workers to demand stronger public services."

● n0rmc0r3:

652

so that's why your city has so many homeless people...
I just saw her on tv again. she just said, "public services should be delivered to you by virtue of your humanity, not because you use some new piece of technology the way they tell you to."

● _of-Insta_:

653

I still don't understand what all this has to do with "organized labour", so I sent her another message. She said, "Before Instagram took over, citizens had more recourse to public officials. They could demand things like better job security and unemployment insurance. It wasn't guaranteed, but with enough people pressuring the city government and the employers, there was greater chance you'd get it. But Instagram isn't beholden to anyone, ultimately, besides the shareholders. I knew the "Your City" app was designed for coupons, ads, and historic information, so I wanted to remind everyone that organized labour once had a strong presence in our city. I can't believe how fast we forgot it."

You sent a photo to n0rmc0r3

● _of-Insta_:

654

You can see the protests forming in the streets in that pic I just sent you. I'm going to go out and see what else is upsetting people, and what we can do about it.

Ryan Burns is a professor of urban geographic information science at University of Geography. His research interests are in the social, political, and institutional implications of new spatial technologies, including smart cities, open data, and digital humanitarianism.