



E-gentrification: Digital Community Engagement, Urban Change and Digital Rights to the City

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INTRODUCTION

Gentrification is a persistent characteristic of urban change. It once was identified with inner-urban working-class locations, but is today observed globally in diverse urban and rural settings, gentrification being ‘triggered by the variegated dynamics of capitalist reinvestment in the built environment worldwide’ (Mermet, 2017, p. 418).

A forceful criticism of gentrification engages the ‘rights’ framework initially proposed by urban theorist Henri Lefebvre (1996 for example see Balzarini & Shlay, 2016; Mazer & Rankin, 2011), the digitalization of public space and the growth of e-government indicating that the contest over the ‘rights to the city’ today is conducted in physical and digital spaces (Shaw & Graham, 2017a). The location of urban governments’ widespread use of digital platforms for urban development dialogue

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within this analytical frame therefore leads to digital platforms being seen to be not just sites of consultation, dialogue, or even participation and co-design, but also sites of struggle.

We explore two assemblages in this chapter in which digital ICTs contribute to gentrification processes and trajectories, and argue that using digital community engagement may, in Lefebvrian terms, ‘produce’ digital and physical spaces that reinforce ongoing gentrification processes. Assemblages are a way of thinking about relationships and are, as detailed below, messy, complex, diverse in their material and social configurations, open-ended and contingent (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 175). We therefore draw on the qualitative data obtained in the DEMUDIG project to investigate how these assemblages work, reasoning from this that digital community engagement may be complicit in gentrification processes in areas in which gentrification is a pervasive characteristic of urban development. We also demonstrate that the assumptions and practices of local authorities in this domain may perpetuate the association between gentrification and inequality, this running counter to the city and state government objectives of using digital ICTs to widen community engagement and participation.

We propose the portmanteau term *e-gentrification* to describe the association between digital community engagement and gentrification, a coining that can be compared to the minting of the term *e-government* some years ago for a new assemblage of technology, governance and power. E-gentrification is, however, not exclusively focussed on technology and does not have defined parameters or constituents. It instead seeks to illustrate how digital ICTs are associated with the practices and social imaginaries (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015) that are constitutive of gentrification. We, therefore, in this chapter, analyse e-gentrification through two socio-technical assemblages (Müller, 2015; Müller & Schurr, 2016) and through theorising a co-constitutive relationship of digital technologies, urban development and community engagement practices.

Imaginaries are political resources that mobilise investment and social action (Bory, 2018). They ‘draw a meaningful boundary around a loose-knit ‘bundle’ or more tightly woven ‘complex’ of practices, to generate forecasts regarding practices that are intimately connected or co-dependent’ (Strengers et al., 2019, p. 111). The imaginaries that we draw from the literature on digital ICTs and cities, envisage a democratic future for digital participation. These imaginaries are technologically progressive and imagine: (1) citizens as rational actors who

require only knowledge and/or digital access to participate, (2) continued investment in digital community engagement infrastructure and (3) ideal mediated/engagement spaces that accommodate alternative views and politics.

The chapter explores the concept of e-gentrification and is structured as follows: we, after a literature review that discusses key concepts used in the chapter, provide some historical and demographic context for two inner-urban municipalities, Melbourne and Maribyrnong, that are the empirical focus of the chapter. A discussion that draws on the interview and survey data gathered in the DEMUDIG project then follows. Drawing on Cardullo (2017), we argue that patterns of e-gentrification exhibit specificity and contingency, their trajectories across the two municipalities displaying distinctive and shared elements. Two assemblages that connect processes of gentrification with digital community engagement are identified in this section. They are: (1) creativity and innovation, digitalisation being a part of a creative/innovative/smart city assemblage, and (2) decision-making and participation, digitalisation influencing patterns of engagement and influence. We argue that these assemblages encode gentrifying practices, and that introducing and implementing digital technologies in these scenarios is an indicator of gentrification. The rationale may also, however, be conveyed through a discourse of progressive and cosmopolitan urbanism. Analysis of the data also indicates that this is not a monolithic story, and that digital technologies may, as online and offline boundaries blur, offer new ways of asserting the ‘right to the city’, particularly where customised and inclusive digital participation is built into the design and implementation of community engagement processes.

LITERATURE REVIEW—THE SOCIAL IMAGINARIES OF DIGITAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND GENTRIFICATION

Digital community engagement and participatory governance is, as detailed in Chapter 1, the subject of a significant and expanding literature, a field that is furthermore dynamic and contested. Kubicek (2010), for example, is sceptical about claims of the democratic and deliberative qualities of digital engagement platforms in urban planning. Schäfer (2015) argues that digital public spaces have widened participation and deliberation, but have fostered a less civil discourse than is found in face-to-face

settings. The trajectory of practice is underpinned by the view that digital platforms enhance democratic and inclusive participation, the trajectory therefore being firmly set towards their increased use. We, in the two subsections below, explore three imaginaries that convey the trajectories of digital community engagement, these focussing on spatial organisation, democratic and inclusive participation and the rational citizen.

Digitalisation and Gentrification

Scholarship has, through focussing on new forms of spatial and social organisation and on new modes of governance-produced technological innovation, evolved significantly. Castells (1996) described the emergence of new forms of social and spatial governance from digital technological innovation as ‘networked urbanism’. Later scholarship has questioned whether networked technologies have enabled new forms of urbanism, or reinforced existing social, economic and spatial patterns such as gentrification.

UK urban sociologist Glass (1964) coined the term ‘gentrification’ to describe the replacement of working-class communities by higher-income households that move into inner-city areas, distort housing markets and change neighbourhood characters. Later scholars argue that gentrification is a more complex and contingent process than that conceived by Glass’s stage model. The discussion of gentrification must, however, be set within an analysis of the structural features of advanced capitalism. Gentrification, furthermore, takes different forms at different times and in different places (Shaw, 2008; Swanstrom & Plöger, 2020).

Gentrification may, therefore, not involve replacement or relocation, Shaw and Hagemans (2015, p. 323) observing in a study of two Melbourne suburbs that,

Transformations in shops and meeting places, and in the nature of local social structure and government interventions, cause a sense of loss of place even without physical displacement.

This evolving conception of gentrification provides a context for our specific focus on the association between digital ICTs and urban change, as viewed through a gentrification lens. A common theme in the literature, which further assists our conceptual framing of e-gentrification, is

the impact of digital ICTs on the production of space. Our use of Lefebvrian theory goes beyond the discussion of the interpenetration of the digital and physical which is prominent in the urban design and social behaviour in urban space literature (Jachna, 2021), to engage with the way in which space is shaped and occupied. Lefebvre developed his influential concept around the idea that urban space is a ‘work of art’ of the space’s users that is appropriated by the everyday practices of the people who inhabit it (Lefebvre, 1996 [1967]). He believed that the right to the city suggested something more than the right to be physically present in the city space, for example, the possibility of this space being shaped to its inhabitants’ needs and desires (see also Harvey, 2003, p. 939).

Shaw and Graham (2017b) extend this analysis by exploring the reproduction of power through code, content and control of urban information and the production of abstract space by informational monopolies. They conclude that Lefebvre’s original separation of the right to the city and the right to information is complicated by virtual urban spaces being dependent on the flow of digital information (Ardichvili et al., 2003; McShane & Middha, 2021). Bringing these constructs together leads beyond the simple right to access the information or the outcomes produced by these systems. It leads to the requirement of transparency around the algorithms themselves and, with the increasing use of machine learning, around the kind of information used to train these new technologies. This implies that citizens should be in charge of the conceptualisation and the decision-making processes associated with these technologies (Anastasiu, 2019).

Technocratic forms of governance enacted through control centres, apps and dashboards increasingly mediate everyday life and shape urban futures. Examples of this include the introduction of placemaking practices, including those that sort, classify and police (Kitchin, 2017; Özkul, 2021). Such smart cities represent, to Hollands (2020), a technology-led stage in the process of city neo-liberalisation and gentrification and a ‘high-tech variation of urban entrepreneurialism’ (p. 305) that seeks to attract a creative class and to evade engagement with notions of social justice. Shelton et al. (2015) demonstrate the complexity and diversity of the ways in which the smart city idea is implemented in particular places: ‘smart city interventions are always the outcomes of existing social and spatial constellations of urban governance and the built environment’ (p. 14). Florida (2003), contrasting these critical views of technology as a gentrification factor, sees technology as a vital ingredient (along with

talent and tolerance) in attracting a new creative class to cities, gentrification reworked through the construct of the creative economy, being an implicit feature of Florida's work. This is furthermore observed in his silence on the displacement of an underclass required to service the creatives (Peck, 2005).

Swanstrom and Plöger (2020) argue that the existence of knowledge-based industries is now an essential ingredient of gentrification, the knowledge exchange and innovation of these industries relying on a new combination of digital and face-to-face networks. The advent of mobile connectivity has enabled the spatial convergence of these networks in places such as cafes and co-working spaces, which are described by Forlano (2009) as 'codescapes'. The spatial geographies of the codescape are reflected in the uneven distribution of broadband infrastructure, which is famously conceptualised by Graham and Marvin (2002) as 'splintering urbanism'. Digital ICTs are seen by some analysts as being constitutive of advanced capitalism, and interwoven with gentrification. Other analysts, however, contend that digital communication networks can support community and working-class solidarity, and press wider claims for spatial justice (Cardullo, 2017; Shaw & Graham, 2017b). More pessimistically, Easterling (2016) traces the retreat of the modernist, state-led infrastructure project of service and spatial justice promotion through public provision, in the face of neoliberal ideologies of public choice, privatisation and personalisation. She argues that this trajectory is supported by digital ICTs. As Plantin et al. (2018, p. 299) suggest '[p]latforms rise when infrastructures splinter'. The 'platforms' of greatest concern for our purposes are the digital engagement sites that many governments, particularly local authorities, have instituted in recent years.

Neoliberal Urban Governance and Citizen Participation

The development of digital platforms for citizen participation in urban governance is, despite being influenced by commitments to open government and placemaking, also emblematic of the 'smart city' (Cocchia, 2014). The European Commission (2014), for example, describes smart city making and digital community engagement as 'co-creative', 'inclusive' and 'participatory'. Garau et al. (2020), however, perceive techno-determinist underpinnings as undercutting participatory governance claims and as relying on the implementation of this form of rationality by civil servants and community engagement personnel. The onus is

therefore on the individual citizen to navigate and negotiate the services and opportunities available, their choices being guided by their ‘commonsensical’ constraints’ (Cardullo & Kitchin, 2018). This neoliberal urban citizenship model, which views people as beneficiaries or choice-hungry consumers, is rejected by scholars who favour a rights-based framework (Cardullo & Kitchin, 2018; Cornwall, 2002), a rights-based approach paying equal attention to invited spaces (those initiated by government agencies) and spaces that are invented or citizen-initiated (Cornwall, 2002).

Digital participation has been seen as overcoming a democratic deficit, statutory rights being given to some citizens in institutionalised deliberation, such as in Brazil (Cornwall, 2002). There is also, however, a recognition that digital participation may not necessarily enhance participation in the ways envisaged, prompting some governments to use offline methods (Cortés-Cediel et al., 2021). Many Australian cities are, even so, forging ahead with the implementation of digital participation in diverse ways, the main advantages of this agenda being seen to be the enhancement of participation and knowledge sharing (Fredericks & Foth, 2013). Following Cornwall, we situate participation as a practice, and therefore open up space to discuss the bundling of digital community engagement and gentrification as an assemblage.

THEORISING E-GENTRIFICATION: ASSEMBLAGE THINKING AND THE RELATIONSHIPS OF DIGITAL ICTs, COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND GENTRIFICATION

Assemblage theory (AT), which is the theoretical underpinning of this chapter, illustrates how digital community engagement can be used to produce digital and physical spaces that can shape and reinforce ongoing gentrification processes. AT has influenced scholars across disciplines who engage with urban development and digital ICTs. We analyse e-gentrification in this chapter as a contextual, plural socio-technical assemblage (Müller, 2015; Müller & Schurr, 2016) that co-constitutes dynamic relationships of digital technologies, urban planning and development and community engagement practices. We use assemblages as a way of thinking about these relationships, which Anderson et al. (2012, p. 175) describe as follows:

an ethos of engagement that attends to the messiness and complexity of phenomena...committed to process-based ontologies that challenge conventional explanations by focusing on materially diverse configurations; emphasiz[ing] the open-ended, unfinished nature of social formations.

To reiterate, an assemblage approach rests on three main contentions: (1) assemblages are constantly being made and unmade, (2) assemblages constitute spatialities—not just physical spaces but also topological spaces and (3) causality operates as a non-linear process: it is not located in a pre-given sovereign agent, but in the interactive processes of assembly (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 180). These topologic spatialities are not defined by physical boundaries or linearity, but by relational proximities (Müller, 2015). AT furthermore questions clear cut distinctions, for example, between infrastructures, technologies, sites, data, producers and consumers, Dahlin (2020, para. 28) arguing from a media studies perspective that a plural approach to studying media as an ongoing socio-technical assemblage is useful, as *‘such an approach can successfully reveal who, where, and what works and how it is held together’*.

Critics of AT question its resistance to acknowledging power, and its equal ascription of agency to human and non-human actors. AT, however, rejects presupposed or external notions of power, and concepts such as the social order or other exogenous structural features. It instead looks at situations through which power, if found, is built or assembled (Dahlin, 2020; Mc Guirk et al., 2016).

AT sees the relationship between human and non-human actors as being within fluid and locally situated networks (Müller & Schurr, 2016), alternative ways of ordering being opened by questioning how certain assemblages came to be. This means that new and sometimes existing features, events, technologies or phenomena that were never considered to be a part of that assemblage, are noticed and analysed. We therefore pose the following questions to highlight new connections and relationships.

1. How is the digitalisation of community engagement connected to ‘smart city’ or ‘digital first’ strategies?
2. How is digitalisation implemented to promote more democratic and inclusive participation?
3. How is digitalisation dependent on the concept of the rational citizen?

A focus on the local does not, however, restrict our analysis to a geographical space. Conceptualising assemblages as spatial involves the study of their topology, their bordering and unbordering, and the exchange of practices, knowledge and materials across different kinds of spaces. Digitalisation enables this exchange, so creating new and dissolving other previously rigid boundaries. Assemblage is an ongoing process rather than a static phenomenon, the Deleuzian term ‘agencement’ perhaps best expressing the dynamism and contingency in the way relationships are formed and continued (Anderson et al., 2012).

This discussion summarises the broad approach we apply here. The next section briefly explains the historical gentrification and digitalisation processes of the two municipalities, the section after analysing the survey and interview data gathered in the two cities.

MELBOURNE AND MARIBYRNONG: SETTING THE SCENE

Melbourne and Maribyrnong are two of 31 municipalities or local government authorities (LGAs) that make up metropolitan Melbourne (Fig. 7.1), the capital of the state of Victoria, Australia. Unlike Madrid and Oslo, Melbourne does not have a single metropolitan scale government. The Victorian local government sector also has comparatively weak fiscal and statutory powers, and limited formal opportunities for participatory governance. The Victorian state government is notably responsible for large urban development processes in metropolitan Melbourne, urban development being increasingly developer-led or organised through public–private partnerships, which is consistent with Victoria’s early and aggressive adoption of neo-liberalism (Costar & Economou, 1999). These features lead to planning conflicts between jurisdictions, and may transfer the political risks of poor development to local government.

Urban development is a sensitive political issue in Melbourne. The Victorian government has recently mandated local authorities to enhance their community engagement processes, including those conducted through digital ICTs. Metropolitan Melbourne has been one of the global north’s fastest growing cities in the last 2 decades, largely driven by high rates of immigration. Policy and business figures voiced concerns in the late twentieth century that the Melbourne LGA, the metropolitan centre, had become a ‘doughnut city’, largely empty outside of business hours and at risk of experiencing the social and economic problems of

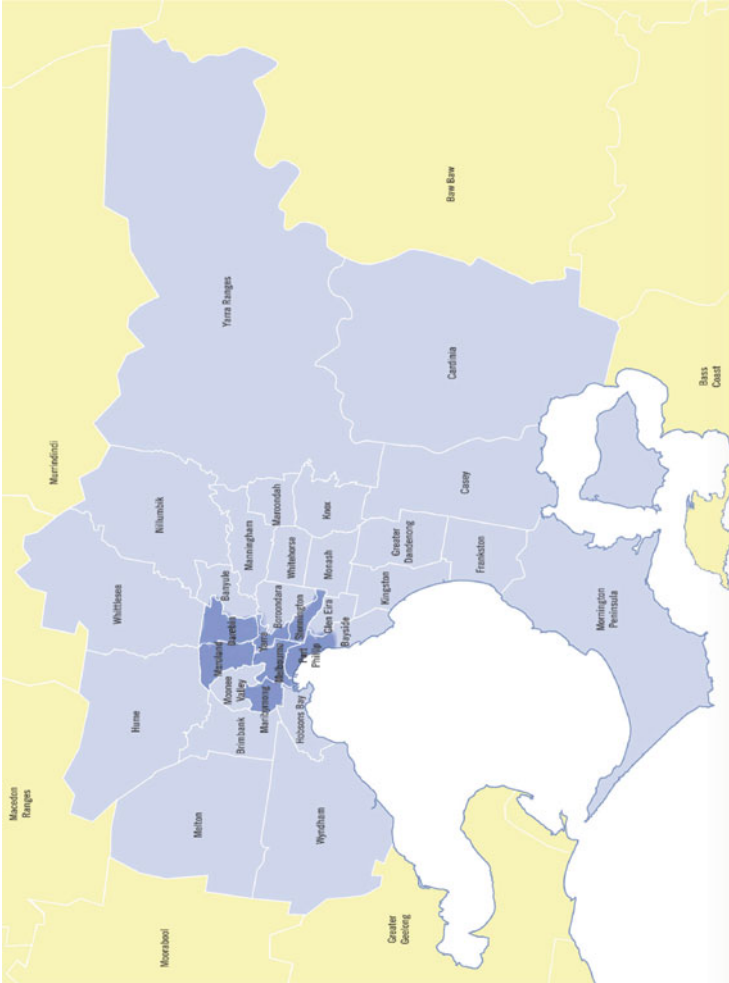


Fig. 7.1 Map of metropolitan Melbourne (surveyed municipalities in darker shade)

similar cities elsewhere in the world (Collie & Gleeson, 2018; Department of Infrastructure, 1998). Action by the Melbourne city council and by an influential residents and business group to promote the concept of ‘liveable Melbourne’ saw a repopulation of the urban core, and the development of significant creative, night-time and student economies (Collie & Gleeson, 2018; Gilbert et al., 2021), Melbourne’s population growing rapidly from around 35,000 in 1990 to around 180,000 today.

Maribyrnong, with a population of 97,000, shares a western boundary (the Maribyrnong River) with Melbourne. The municipality traditionally contained a mixture of residential and industrial precincts, and typified the culturally diverse, working-class character of metropolitan Melbourne’s western suburbs. It has a more recent experience of gentrification, characterised by the replacement of inner-urban industrial sites with high-rise apartment towers, working-class residents increasingly being replaced by professional class homeowners. In 2014 the Victorian state planning minister forecast a boom in apartment construction in Footscray, Maribyrnong’s commercial centre, predicting a ‘new South Yarra of the west’, a fanciful reference to one of metropolitan Melbourne’s most prestigious suburbs (A.B.C. Radio Melbourne, 2014). Footscray’s proximity to the city has made it an attractive site for medium and high-density housing, the area being primed for a regeneration-style intervention by concerns over social problems, the declining quality of public infrastructure and the welfare of its residents. The neighbourhood is changing rapidly, the current population mix consisting of professionals, established migrant groups, recently arrived communities (notably from Horn of Africa countries), and an older population base predominantly of Anglo-Celtic ancestry.

Both cities are afflicted with spiralling housing costs, Melbourne scoring poorly on international housing affordability scales. Gentrification has therefore taken both classic (working class displacement) and novel (a creative city imaginary) forms across the neighbouring cities.

This chapter is based on the analysis of the data obtained from the Melbourne component of DEMUDIG’s semi-structured interviews and qualitative data. This data was generated by open-ended survey questions, an approach which is consistent with AT’s methodological stance that sense-making proceeds from empirical detail (Mc Guirk et al., 2016; McFarlane & Anderson, 2011). Data from interviews includes conversations with civil servants (including council planners and community engagement experts), politicians (including local government councillors), digital engagement providers and resident activists.

THE PRODUCTION OF E-GENTRIFICATION

Our data analysis identified two assemblages in which the digital, community engagement and urban development come together, and shape and are shaped by each other to produce conditions and spaces of e-gentrification. The topological characteristics of assemblages instanced above (contingency, fluid boundaries, and the exchange of knowledge, practices and materials across sites) are evident in the two assemblages explored below. Also evident is the departure of these assemblages from the imaginaries envisaged for digital community engagement: the unwavering trajectory of digitalisation, the inclusive and participatory enhancement credited to these platforms, and the rational citizen.

Creativity and Innovation

Interview data clearly show Melbourne's self-conscious image as a city of creativity and innovation, expressed through an assemblage of digital, social, physical and institutional settings. Digital community engagement is situated within this imaginary (Dowling et al., 2019, p. 439), this image being described at length by a digital engagement consultant to the City of Melbourne:

It is certainly a city that prides itself on innovation...yeah innovation and more a culture of place. There is a lot of emphasis on food and drinks, cultural aspects and sporting and...kind of being an urban lifestyle... places like Collingwood have this kind of urban environment...when somebody starts to do something, and other people watch that, they want to do the same but different. So, I think it builds on itself, the environment where innovation can happen. Because the bar is being raised... principally because there are companies that are driving this, and not just tech companies but community engagement as a practice.

Mentioning Collingwood is significant. This is an inner-urban working-class suburb, once a centre of manufacturing and now Melbourne's high-tech and design precinct, and one in which factory workers were long-ago priced out of the local housing market. Community engagement consultants such as the narrator in this informant's narrative, help craft this vision and 'raise the bar' of innovation.

Melbourne's creative city imaginary is enacted through international cultural and local business networks, illustrating its flexible topology.

Melbourne was an early participant in UNESCO's Creative City Network (formed in 2004) through membership of the City of Literature program, and through the city's enthusiastic promotion of the Creative Spaces program in which artists were offered short-term rentals of space for studios in under-utilised buildings (Creative Spaces, 2021). This acknowledges the consequences of property financialisation and gentrification, while simultaneously positioning artists as a resource for Melbourne's creative city imaginary. Digital ICT plays a key role, the scheme operating through a web-based artists and space 'matching market'.

Melbourne joins such initiatives seamlessly to a range of 'smart city' projects such as City Lab, open data sets and Smart DNA (an interactive city map), the Participate Melbourne portal and other 'smart' initiatives being indicative in Melbourne of 'how a smart city should operate...useful innovation that folds seamlessly into how we live our lives and improve our day-to-day experiences' (City of Melbourne, 2021).

Claims of innovation are downplayed by Dowling et al. (2019, p. 439), who characterise web-based community engagement as 'entry level digital citizenship'. However, the international circulation of digital engagement practices that are indicative of the globalised and non-boundaried nature of smart city discourse, challenges local government officials to make judgements about technology choices. As Melbourne's digital engagement consultant comments:

The internet, man, it's all out there. Look, there is a whole bunch of stuff, in social media, pop up applications. So, you would think why does the government not use that? But the government has particular requirements, they can't just pluck a tool off the internet. They have to worry about where is the data, who is hosting the data, what information are you collecting, is it accessible, like we talked about Universal Design. So, we have to take those tools and shape them to the single ecosystem that supports that stuff.

Yeah, I think they like...the possibility of doing it, but in most ways the technology is leading, the tech is here, their skills are way behind, and what they can do with technology.

Several scholars argue that these global practices are a form of gentrification, practices in which cosmopolitan forces prevail over local choices (Cornwall, 2002). Most pointedly, municipal government deficits in

digital engagement resources and skills may impact participation, attenuating some citizen voices and inflating others.

Dowling et al.'s (2019) caricature of council web portals as entry level digital citizenship is underscored by the strong preference of the two councils to engage with citizens through this type of platform. The web-based platforms correspond to Barber's construct of 'invited spaces', and as sites of citizen participation that are established by governments to counter political apathy or cynicism (Kersting, 2013). Interviews with officials indicated, however, that control and skill-related rationales also contribute to this preference. Data on community views on development projects, and proposals circulating on social media, are seen as too messy or unreliable, the councils also admitting to lacking the skills and resources needed to manage this data and mode of engagement.

When asked if the council has assigned someone to specifically handle the platform, the official answered,

No, they [the community engagement team] do everything. [The] team are IAP2 trained, they do and design the community engagement, they design surveys, they design the online content.

Similarly, a civil servant commented in the survey on resource issues,

In my experience, there is not a lot of support and resource for digital engagement teams. Nor is there understanding that it's a unique role that combines not only understanding in community engagement methodologies but experience in digital interactions and experience design.

Kersting's (2013) construct of *invented spaces*, in contrast, usefully describes the practice in which groups of residents build support in development issues through social media sites. The issue of who gets to participate and how they participate is discussed in detail in the production of the next assemblage.

Decision Making and Participation

This assemblage relates to decision-making and participation, we argue here that the distinctive social and economic contexts of urban development in Melbourne and Maribyrnong produce variegated patterns of digitalisation and of its acceptance as an engagement strategy. State

government mandates and local authority intentions promote the broadening of the span of consultation, by including traditional ‘hard-to-reach’ groups through digital platforms. The Maribyrnong officials interviewed in the research, despite this, do not echo Melbourne’s enthusiasm for such initiatives, one official referring to community engagement as ‘...*the flavour of the day*’ and to digitalisation as further evidence of local authorities being compelled to ‘... *move with the fashions of these things*’.

Neither Melbourne nor Maribyrnong officials, however, view the local population they govern as a single community. Class, ethnicity and location are instead seen as determinants of digital engagement, resulting in hierarchies of participation. Interview data suggests that local officials have a range of views on the implications, despite evidence of a persistent digital divide in Australia, one report estimating 11% of Australians as being highly excluded (Thomas et al., 2021). A community engagement professional commented in response to an interview question about digital inclusion:

I think it [the digital divide] is a legitimate point, but it loses its efficacy as an argument every day that goes by. Particularly in Australia ten years ago that was more of a legitimate discussion to be having. Yes, it’s true you need at a minimum a mobile phone, internet connection. But 95 % of people have mobile phones. And there will always be people that don’t have mobile tech and don’t know how to use it. And it’s not for them.

The above assertion assumes that digital access equates with digital literacy, and that information sent out digitally will be addressed rationally, and in the way intended by the professionals or the government. Furthermore if ‘it’ (digital engagement) is ‘not for them’, who are ‘they’ and what do ‘they’ want? As a City of Melbourne communications officer commented:

Certainly, face to face is targeted at migrants, or resident organisations, non-English speaking backgrounds, or disabled people, so they are targeted at them. And often those people haven’t heard of Participate Melbourne, so that is an indication for me that the online people are different.

Another community engagement consultant listed how they came to know which groups preferred the digital process or were left out of it.

We did do a big piece of research about how people in the city of Melbourne wanted to be engaged across ages and industries (residents, businesses, large businesses, small businesses)...so we knew that if we wanted to target large business or the business community then Participate Melbourne wasn't the most effective tool, but it was a very effective tool for other groups... Ironically, the business community, the most preferred method of engagement for those communities was letter.

This interviewee disagreed when asked whether online and offline participants were similar, explaining how they engaged different population cohorts:

For example, there were quite a few groups in the city of Melbourne...some very large high-rise communities, a high percentage of African residents, Vietnamese residents, we were not capturing any of those online. So, we deliberately had face-to-face techniques for those groups. Similarly, with the elder Chinese community, who often required interpreters as well, for translation. And in the indigenous community, every engagement we did had a process for engaging indigenous communities. That was kind of a standard approach, so we did not rely on them to come through online, we did not rely on seniors to come through online and...homeless communities for example. So, we knew that we needed to reach out to those in a different way.

The ethnic and class assumptions informing these comments were reinforced by a Maribyrnong planner's reference to the 'squeaky wheels', the most active users of digital tools. The confluence of social class, digital resources and political engagement is noted by a Maribyrnong community engagement officer:

There is one small area here that now has the highest number of educated people... Their average income is higher. They bought the property when it was cheaper, and now they are sitting on more than a million-dollar homes. They are barristers, masters, PhDs. They are very vocal in what they want, we tried to put parking fees, and they ran a campaign with their educational and financial resources to refute our strategy.

Distinctions were also made in terms of location and length of time spent in the area, which contrasts the socio-economic status of new residents. As a Maribyrnong planner commented:

Lots of suburbs in Melbourne have become gentrified. So, I think that when a suburb becomes gentrified, the expectations rise. The new residents coming in want clean streets etc. So, we have to allocate more budget to making the city look good. Their concerns are very different from new ones. The previous residents are happy to have a roof over their heads, and their bread and butter. Today's society is different to them. It becomes hard for council to do stuff, as the expectations go bigger and bigger.

The interview data indicates stereotyping and segmentation of local populations, and a perception of *difference* which runs counter to the aims of inclusion underpinning engagement strategies. The different methods used and weights given to certain data may, at the same time, create an imbalance in which feedback is considered. Some local councils realise this and have made efforts to collect data in one location through combinations of digital and physical methods (Harvest Digital Planning, 2021). As a community engagement officer from Maribyrnong put it, it may be fruitful to run face-to-face engagement events in non-gentrified areas

In contrast there is Braybrook, which is the poorest suburb. But property evaluations are saying that property is going up there too, so that area will go through that process [gentrification] too. You do have the older, different ethnicities and what I want to do is working with language ambassadors. I want to train community members in IAP2, have them as qualified facilitators, and call on them to run engagements in their language rather than rely on our interpreters. I just think to get people, not only language, but also bringing in the trust.

Web and social media spaces are powerfully utilised by some cohorts for the community organisation of the ownership, control or management of urban spaces, assets or resources. One long-term resident activist termed the focus of these cohorts as being on ‘*very much local things*’ rather than ‘*big picture urban planning*’:

They're very vocal, coming from a completely different demographic again... so they don't necessarily get involved with the local RAG [resident action] groups but they set up their own, which means that they follow their own particular interests.

This cohort, according to the resident activist, is unwilling to join established resident action groups, but has:

more people who know their rights ...Maybe not so submissive to authority. They expect a bit more and it all goes hand in hand with higher property values and higher rates. They are more willing to get up and complain about it...Certainly social media like Facebook has made it more possible for them to do that. Then you just take the next step and become more formalized, and then they become a movement.

Recognition that digital engagement may not be as inclusive as forecast, indicates an awareness of the limitations of this form of engagement. The interview data suggests that the class dynamics of gentrification (Slater, 2006) do operate in the digital environment. We suggest that digital engagement is associated with gentrification, and that non-gentrified, culturally diverse neighbourhoods therefore require more focussed, inclusive and trusted ways of engagement.

DISCUSSION: E-GENTRIFICATION AND THE RIGHT TO THE MAKING OF THE CITY

The two assemblages discussed above illustrate how the digital becomes associated with gentrification in diverse ways. The ‘right to the city’ proposed by Lefebvre, reworked by scholars looking at digitalisation processes (Marcuse, 2009; Shaw & Graham, 2017b), presupposes universality in access to the city, and that participation in decision-making determines what the city becomes. The two assemblages discussed above illustrate that these rights cannot be taken for granted. The arguments presented in this paper are not against digitalisation per se, or digitalisation of community engagement, our contention instead being that how these processes are initiated, to what purposes, and what impacts they have on people’s lives, require scrutiny.

The first assemblage, through its focus on spatio-temporal context, illustrates that both the rhetoric of ‘creative’ and ‘smart’ and their association with digital ICTs may push councils along digitalisation pathways, without councils necessarily having the will, skills or resources to implement digital community engagement. It also illustrates that the rhetoric of creativity and innovation too easily plays into imagining digitalisation as visionary, so neglecting functionality and weakening the prospects of inclusiveness. The second assemblage focusses on assumptions of technology-based engagement and how inclusive it can be, not only physically but in terms of use by rational responsible citizens. The question

that this analysis raises is therefore who is targeted, who is expected to and actually uses digital technologies, and whether these are social media or bespoke digital platforms? As Cardullo (2017, p. 410) comments “[t]echnologies we take for granted in our everyday practices demand in fact induction, participation and care”. Digital engagement cannot be assumed. Technologies need to be fostered and supported by connecting to everyday practices.

Digital community engagement is part of wider governance processes which determine the right to have a say in how a city or a place develops. Some may see the local activism of a new gentrified population, or an increase in property values as positive aspects of gentrification. These outcomes may, however, significantly shape how rights, decisions and actions are understood and exercised (Shaw & Hagemans, 2015). As Shaw and Hagemans remind us, gentrification has inequitable effects, e-gentrification recognising that some residents have financial, cultural, human and digital capital which support a greater capacity to exercise influence through online platforms. The benefits of such engagement may not be equally distributed, even if the earlier association of gentrification and displacement are not seen. As Shaw and Hagemans (2015) conclude from an analysis of two gentrifying Melbourne suburbs:

The nature of local social structures and governance are also important to sense of community. Changes in one’s position in the neighbourhood structure— one’s ‘place identity’—and in government interventions, initiated by different groups with different interests, can contribute to a sense of loss of stability and control, and similarly constitute a type of displacement.

Our concept of e-gentrification, as illustrated by the assemblages, describes how digital community engagement becomes part of the practices and arrangements that transform an existing trajectory of gentrification processes. A positive feedback loop may also operate here, digital community engagement favouring the gentrified or the well off and they favouring it, so shaping urban development or urban policy processes.

Assemblage theory questions the naturalisation and hegemony of relational and socio-material dynamics, suggesting points of political intervention and possibilities for reassembly (Müller, 2015). We argue that if an inclusive and democratic participation process is the shared urban imaginary, then the relationships and associated issues illustrated

in this chapter may introduce sites for intervention that make digital community engagement more inclusive and democratic. Some of these are

1. The political allure of innovation and creative peer pressure that shapes the implementation of digitalisation may overlook contingencies and capabilities embedded in everyday community engagement practices. Intervention may involve rethinking different potentials of digitalization and its uses.
2. Resisting a normative view that e-participation by only some groups is acceptable, COVID-19 and lockdowns having shown the importance of including all groups in participatory processes. A hybrid approach may be needed in response to the non-participation of some groups (in the digital phase of disasters), and localised solutions such as smaller and focussed community oriented/community leaders' groups within digital platforms may be required.
3. Public spaces, whether offline or online, may need to cater to different modes of participation and non-participation. Inclusion may require better design and implementation of participatory processes themselves, but also the better balancing of expert and lay knowledge.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have argued that the digitalization of public space and the increased use of digital ICTs in governance processes foregrounds the contest over the rights to the city. This is due to the right to have a say in making the city being inseparable from the right to the city. We asserted that who takes part in decision-making and how decisions are made are crucial to who gets the right to live and be in the city, and to whether cities are inclusive and democratic. We have argued that digital community engagement is part of an assemblage of digital ICTs, of urban development and gentrification, this assemblage viewed through two socio-technical assemblages: creativity and innovation and decision-making and participation. Relationships between various elements, groups, organisations, communities, materials and infrastructures are analysed through this assemblage approach, to

show how digital practices and infrastructures become a part of gentrification processes at the study sites. These assemblages furthermore, and in contrast to the socio-technical imaginaries, demonstrate how idealising digitally connected citizens does not deliver successful digital engagement. Contingencies in the platforms and national and global politics and processes defy clean and planned out technologically determined trajectories. We furthermore question the view that digital engagement may reinforce participation and can, of itself, include pluralistic views and ideas about a shared urban future.

A major contribution made by this chapter is to show how and why digital community engagement should be seen as vital to conversations about gentrification. This paper takes a normative view that gentrification may hinder imaginaries of a just, inclusive and democratic city. It is important to recognise, when thinking about issues of gentrification, that the methods and tools of digital community engagement also play a part in the progressive policy responses.

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