Digital Narratives & Urban Artivist Networks

A theoretical-methodological approach

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the disciplinary and thematic convergences of digital media art, urban life and social activism (in the digital plan), merging into a cohesive exploration of digital narratives and their role in supporting and boosting urban artivist networks. In fact, digital tools provide unique opportunities to broaden the scope and impact of socially-engaged art, primarily through artivist practices, while highlighting and emphasising inspiring existences and positions concerning urban rights and building citizenship.

As such, in this exploratory essay, we seek to stress the importance of building counter-narratives from the grassroots based on ways of life, habits, customs and everyday experiences historically overlooked by dominant systems while at the same time building a theoretical-methodological framework to deconstruct urban strategies and practices and support different forms of self-representation. We will use two complementary dimensions to build our approach: (1) collecting, interpreting and processing data and (2) giving visibility to the referred alternative narratives. Regarding urban processes and physical spaces, these dimensions follow Lefebvre's structural thinking on the production of social space and the right to the city [1] [2], pointing out activist methodologies, e.g. those following principles of social justice, human rights, inclusion and equity, among others giving voice and space to the vulnerable individuals and communities.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Applied computing** → Arts and humanities; • **Human - centered computing** → Collaborative and social computing.

KEYWORDS

Socio-spatial practices, social activism, urban networks, counter-narratives, digital media art, artivism

1 INTRODUCTION

Writing this article with four hands sets up an experimental exercise to cross different disciplinary fields and personal backgrounds, with architecture and urban studies being a familiar language for introducing guiding ideas, such as the production of space and the right to the city [1] [2] -- what space is being produced, for/by whom? -- and digital media art studies providing the platform for developing, transmitting and triggering several forms, types and dimensions of urban activism associated with artistic performances and daily routines in urban settings.

Emerging from the convergence of two individual research projects, Gender in Map. Women empowerment in planning and urban development[1], by Isabel Cristina Carvalho, and Refugee Research for (Post)Covid-19. National Measures and Local Actions in the Algarve: A Digital Tour for Access to Adequate Housing and Living Conditions [2], by Sílvia Leiria Viegas, both developed at the Research Centre in Arts and Communication (CIAC, UAb and UAlg), this collaborative and exploratory essay crosses common grounds (gender issues, urban planning and development, housing and living conditions, empowerment, etc.) partially responding to both projects. At the same time, it establishes the theoretical-methodological foundations for developing new critical thinking through digital narratives [3] and collaborative artivist interventions about socio-spatial practices supporting and boosting urban community networks.

This conceptual guide draws on our experience of reflective work about and with "other" individuals and communities, developed over more than a decade, and at the same time enhances guidelines for future fieldwork; for example, the research carried out with communities, mostly women, in rural settings and situations of urban appropriation through urban social farming practices by Isabel Cristina Carvalho; and regarding activism about housing issues in African contexts and concerning immigrants (and descendants) in Portugal by Sílvia Leiria Viegas.

Digital tools are increasingly accessible to a large number of people and tend to facilitate new methods of creation and distribution of information accessible to an ever wider population. Digital technologies reshape and redefine society and culture - following the concept of digital culture [4] - implying new forms of networked communication, socialisation, and cultural and artistic production. Digital content is constantly being updated and expanded, and urban community networks try to leverage this digital plane to share new information, being therefore important to ensure that their

message is preserved in the immensity of the digital world. We highlight the work of Manovich [5], Cultural Analytics, where the author addresses several methods for the computational analysis of cultural data, identifying different patterns and trends while studying how society expresses itself through the visualisation of data, images and videos, building at the same time new ideas about digital culture. This approach brings quantitative analysis into a cultural study and pushes the boundaries of digital humanities. It demonstrates the potential of data science and visualisation to understand cultural patterns and trends.

The growing practices of digital artivism, in an interdisciplinary confluence between art, activism and urban space, require a theoretical-methodological approach to gather, archive and give visibility to urban community networks and related artivist practices to support and enhance their efforts for social change. We will therefore focus on these artivist networks, highlighting the relevance of the digital world as a platform for identifying, imagining, building, and storing shared evidence, exploring and experimenting with ideas. We will use this applied learning to capture and construct a visual kaleidoscope of narratives that reveal different perceptions of self, other(s) and the relationships established within their social experiences. In fact, we want to know how the practices of digital artivism can give visibility to fundamental problems and socio-spatial asymmetries, but also to immaterial and intangible cultural practices, thus promoting a paradigm shift towards a more equitable and just society. Therefore, this information must reach a wider public, maximising its impact and simultaneously potentiating new networks that promote socio-spatial change.

Our article aims to build a theoretical-methodological framework to help support and deconstruct everyday urban life strategies and practices at the origin of different forms of associativism, minority resistance, activism and social mobilisation, these being disseminated by digital media arts.

In this context, we will use Lefebvre's structural thinking on the production of social space and the right to the city [1] [2] to identify the spatial dimensions reflecting and stimulating these dynamics, grounding experiences, on the one hand, and the participatory urge for long-term problem solving, on the other hand.

For this, a comprehensive understanding of an activist methodology – following principles of social justice, human rights, and intersectionality – linked to community-based placemaking is essential to guarantee an approach based on principles of inclusion and equity. This approach allows listening to marginalised communities' different voices and perspectives at all stages of the artistic research process.

The article is structured as follows: after this brief introduction, we present a broad framework concerning the main disciplines and subjects here under analysis - digital media art, urban life and social activism - and the theoretical-methodological approach identified for this essay, consisting of (1) collecting, interpreting and processing data, and (2) giving visibility to bottom-up alternative narratives on everyday experiences informing and supporting artivist practices and strengthening networks.

2 DIGITAL MEDIA ART, URBAN LIFE AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM (IN THE DIGITAL PLAN)

As an intersectional disciplinary field, crossing both arts and technology, digital media art can act as a bridge between the physical and digital worlds while at the same time configuring a means of narrating, preserving and sharing usually concealed urban experiences. It allows the visibility of intangible cultural practices, socio-spatial asymmetries and community struggles and can act as catalysts for social, political and urban transformation by influencing general perceptions and inspiring an environment of empathy and understanding [6]. As such, digital media art has the ability to highlight existing hidden problems and also offer new perspectives of possible problem-solving in the current urban setting.

In this context, digital media art serves as a platform for presenting a unique mode of storytelling, one that amplifies the fragile and vulnerable voices, bringing public attention to generally neglected social issues, on the one hand and, on the other hand, boosting the construction of collective and engaging urban narratives, challenging the dominant ones. It also facilitates participatory and collaborative approaches and provokes interaction, fostering engagement and connection for collective responsibility and action while playing an important role in community-building. In this sense, by encouraging active participation and dialogue, digital media art stimulates critical engagement and inspires advocacy for equity and justice, significantly contributing to the discourse on urban issues and social and spatial justice [7] [8] [9].

Everyday life routines and practices gradually produce and transform urban environments, either through the individual/common appropriation of space (and the appropriation of power used to exercise appropriation of space), according to the needs, habits and customs of individuals, or through their participation in the production of space by influencing the strategies and intentions of what Lefebvre [10] would identify as a space of political nature. This produced space results from the normative and bureaucratic top-down production that ultimately inspires the necessary changes for inclusion while instigating social activism and participatory action to pursue social and spatial transformation to build fairer and better worlds.

Community building sometimes results from these dynamics and common needs. When sharing common spaces, e.g. neighbourhoods, public spaces (some also appropriated by "other" social practices), etc., the material effect provides visibility to such lives (those of otherness) and socio-spatial transformations. In turn, individuals with common origins, cultural backgrounds and similar struggles, when dispersed in the urban environment, lack a material expression of their condition, making them invisible [11] [12]. In this context, a new gathering space, namely a digital space, can emerge, allowing individuals to build and/or belong to new or other communities.

Digital media art emerges as a medium capable of recording, documenting, visualising, communicating and sharing complex processes and practices, challenging and/or supporting distinct representations of these socio-spatial interactions. It also facilitates a communication channel for marginalised voices to declare their right to the city, stating its potential to increase communication effectiveness and further collective identity and solidarity [13]. In

this context, it is also important to rethink traditional paradigms of authorship, social activism, and community building, to understand how participatory practices can influence the creation, circulation and understanding of narratives that drive social mobilisation.

Digital media art is intrinsically interactive and contains a participatory dimension that allows the public to interact with the artistic creation, showing the potential to actively incorporate and explore participatory culture [14] and collective responsibility within the scope of social activism. New forms of civic engagement, collaboration and expression emerge, aiming to question, raise awareness and drive social and political discourses.

Art and activism have been inseparable in various social movements throughout history. The development of digital technology has expanded the scope of activist art, resulting in digital artivism. In a world increasingly marked by digital interactions, digital artivism emerges as an essential tool for social mobilisation [15], generating new and potentially more far and wide-reaching forms of resistance.

These repercussions were naturally felt in the spatial dimensions of social interactions, referring to Lefebvre's notions of social space and the right to the city [1] [2], to which the post-digital context now adds new layers of complexity and potentialities.

Interdisciplinary digital media arts research in urban studies demonstrates the potential to facilitate expression and engagement, amplify and preserve marginalised narratives, act as a catalyst for change, and enable participatory and collaborative approaches [16] to the construction of 'other' communities. It promotes new means of expression, highlighting the possibility of new visions and readings, allowing us to comprehend the complexity of urban spaces and their social mobilisation. Furthermore, it also allows social artistic research for building and/or consolidating equitable communities.

3 THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Developing work mainly related to human rights, Urban Artivist Networks in dialogue with people who, through their everyday lives and the physical spaces associated with them, or through the activist role they assume in defence of the rights related to situations of marginality, give voice and face to particular forms of resilience and resistance that challenge the dominant system.

These networks disseminate critical counter-narratives that expose structural asymmetries, giving them visibility and highlighting the problems they cause while at the same time making their actors visible and easily identifiable as spokespersons of a collective, and thus more vulnerable to possible reprisals. On the other hand, this same visibility and protagonism can translate into a greater room for manoeuvre and negotiating power with decision-makers, thus, into the conquest of rights.

In this sense, regarding ethical issues, it is crucial to ensure that the participants clearly express their intentions and conditions for involvement. At the same time, they should be informed from the outset of the potential and real implications - personal and collective - of their positioning and engagement.

Therefore, ethical protocols must be ensured early, including those related to digital activism, with different levels of privacy,

consent and confidentiality, and rights and responsibilities. Furthermore, encouraging diversity within the participating communities from an intersectional perspective helps provide an environment of trust and enables sharing experiences.

3.1 Collecting, Interpreting and Processing Data

The first stage of data collection, interpretation and processing clarifies our positioning as researchers in the research process. It results from a close dialogue between theory and practice, following the work we have carried out at different times and in different geographies, and unfolds in the following steps: (1) defining the focus of the research and clearly identifying the underrepresented or poorly represented minority communities selected to work with, their practices and experiences, guiding our view on the subject; (2) respecting and encouraging self-representations and the projection of individual and/or collective voices contributing to a better understanding of the research problem from the perception of those whose voices are being presented with precision and authenticity; (3) understanding the political, social and cultural structural context, with its power dynamics and different forms of expression, contributing to the analysis of the socio-spatial framework and the recognition of needs; (4) following the idea that "one must break down, by theoretical analysis, what is given in a practical synthesis" [17], therefore, using relevant theories that criticise dominant power structures helping to emphasise the importance of subaltern voices in the defence of human rights, e.g. the right to the city [1], social/spatial justice [7] [8] [9], critical pedagogy [18], feminist urban theory [19], critical race theory [20], decolonial studies [21], among other valid inputs for analysis; (5) defining types of information, selection criteria and dimensions necessary for understanding the reality under analysis to achieve the intended objectives.

The second phase of data collection, interpretation and processing concerns the methods related to the individuals and communities involved, as these influence the research project (ways of collecting and analysing data, forms of representation, analysis, techniques and tools), all of which impact the findings. In this context, we highlight the importance of the following approaches: (1) participatory action research (PAR) [22] implies engaging communities in collective thinking, problem-solving and empowerment through, e.g. participatory observation, workshops, focus groups, interviews, community mapping, etc. When crossed with the artistic field, PAR contributes to co-creating artistic works, namely installations and performances, all the while fostering dialogues and building skills with (2) iterative cycles of action, reflection, and applied learning [23] for building spaces for dialogue: come together, share their experiences, views and collectively construct alternative narratives; in this context, (3) collaborative processes between researchers, participants and practitioners [24] involve the co-construction of knowledge from practices and transformation, which is informed by this situated knowledge emerging from the grassroots. Crossing this situated knowledge with the [25] concept of "Renaissance Teams", interdisciplinary collaborative teams (art/science) stimulate dialogues between different perspectives and competencies, promoting the desired multidimensional approach, (4) which includes the use of multi-methods and different techniques emerging from different disciplinary fields (urban studies,

architecture, geography, ethnography, visual anthropology, digital art, communication, etc.) enhancing the scope of the research project. For instance, oral research methods (with techniques like interviews, oral histories, etc.) mainly contribute to capturing narratives (writing, recording and transcribing), while visual research methods (with techniques like photovoice, participatory video making, etc.) mainly contribute to the construction of an iconographic tour. These methods and techniques help collect and process information with individuals and communities, generating the various associated records (oral and visual) and supporting (5) art-science practice-based research in a specific location and/or with specific individuals and communities "[. . .] to develop solutions to complex problems, co-create new knowledge [and/]or to collectively transform multi-faceted challenges into new ways of understanding and meaning-making [26].

The third phase of data collection, interpretation and processing concerns the production and return of co-constructed original knowledge. It includes the following outcomes and outputs: (1) methodological tools that are dual in nature and function and are used to analyse and transfer knowledge through arts within the iterative process configuring an outcome in itself. It allows a permanent (2) critical analyses and data interpretation to identify social patterns, practices and norms that promote and perpetuate dominant conditioning while undermining "other" narratives. However, they also allow constructing those situated "other" counter-narratives. These highlight different perspectives and can be disseminated by (3) digital media, e.g. media coverage, social media (Instagram, Twitter, etc.), and (4) eventual resulting digital artefacts, e.g. interactive installations, data art and urban projections, digital storytelling, virtual reality experiences, performances, etc.

3.2 Giving Visibility

The outcomes and outputs resulting from the production and return of co-constructed original knowledge have the ability to provide further visibility to: (1) everyday life experiences; (2) bottom-up participatory narratives; (3) artivist digital networks and how the strengthening of these networks, potentially contribute to the improvement of everyday life experiences and urban practices.

As mentioned earlier, (1) everyday-life experiences involve grassroots problems, socio-spatial asymmetries, and immaterial and intangible realities. These are here understood as cultural geographies in practice [27] intertwining with urban life, referring to urban cultures and spatialities. These everyday-life experiences entangle disembodied backgrounds resulting from individual, collective and urban transformations. What is more, digital media art can shape, enable and represent these experiences and transformations while simultaneously creating shared emotional landscapes and new socio-spatial imaginaries.

In this context, different types of evidence contribute to understanding and bringing the physical and intangible world closer to the digital one while increasing their visibility, such as through e.g. (a) infographic evidence related to data visualisation of urban systemic dynamics and processes (e.g. demographic shifts, economic disparities and environmental challenges); and (b) iconographic evidence, regarding daily routines and needs, concerning identifying, analysing and illustrating urban inequalities, highlighting

disparities in accessing space, resources and services, i.e. in fully accessing the right to the city [1].

Digital media arts can stage (2) bottom-up participatory narratives resulting from marginal artistic appropriation, activism, civic participation and political mobilisations based on and supporting local perceptions of minorities in line with Viegas [11]. This digital stage is, therefore, here understood as "other" space for dialogue and critical engagement in the artistic, civic and political fields, giving and/or amplifying visibility and strengthening the voices of particular individuals and communities. In this case, methodological approaches, including the use of self-representative recording media tools, such as the referred photo-voice and participatory video making, can enable the building and sharing of immersive experiences based on those situated perceptions, all the while criticising the system of hegemonic western knowledge, contributing for epistemological decolonisation in line with Mignolo & Walsh [20]. Ultimately, this perspective and approach also seek to explore and legitimise alternative knowledge, meaning-making [26] and methodologies by building the referred kaleidoscope of perceptions that reveal different visions of self, other(s) and the relationships established within their social experiences, also helping to understand cultural patterns and trends [5].

(3) Artivist digital networks can enhance the agency of community members and their ability to express their concerns, aspirations, and visions for change while fostering their digital literacy. As occurs in the iterative process, these artivist networks may have a crucial role to play in deconstructing top-down strategies, policies and practices, and grassroots approaches and visions regarding the lives of the under-represented; and in giving and/or amplifying visibility of bottom-up participatory actions and narratives based on, and defending the importance of everyday-life experiences.

In its turn, in a more globalised world, artivism is, by itself, one of the many invisible threads that sew the web of digital networks in the struggle for social causes today, at the same time supporting and fostering discussion and action (both in/regarding the physical and digital world). In this broad and intertwining context, cataloguing, organising and structuring evidence so as not to get lost in the immensity of digital data amplifies the range and efficacy of these artivist networks while fostering them. As such, preserving and sharing digital repositories broadens the reach and longevity of socio-spatial mobilisations (and other forms of activism), ensuring that their stories continue to echo in the digital sphere.

Digital repositories can function as banks of collective memory, allowing and facilitating discussion, collaboration and collective action, reinforcing the referred community networks and fostering a sense of community-building with shared responsibility. The platform used for archiving and disseminating immaterial and intangible cultural practices, often overlooked in conventional discourses, for storing new artivist content must be responsive, inclusive, collaborative and participatory. It also would benefit from allowing continuous updates and additions, reflecting the dynamic nature of digital narratives and the development of artivist practices themselves. In this way, the amplification of artivist and community voices and the public understanding of this process can catalyse social change.

4 CONCLUDING NOTES

This theoretical-methodological exploratory, collaborative essay explores the disciplinary and thematic convergences of digital media art, urban life and social activism. We also point out paths for co-creating Digital Narratives & Urban Artivist Networks, which challenge dominant systems and their diverse forms of expression. Through an interdisciplinary and intersectional approach, we contribute to the design of critical processes that deconstruct this political, social and physical structure that produces situations of otherness while enabling new approaches and tools oriented towards reflection, action and experimentation of new interventional practices for fairer, more inclusive and equitable societies. This framework supported the construction of a theoretical-methodological section based on collecting, interpreting and processing data, where we (1) pinpoint ourselves as researchers while identifying the guiding ideas that condition our vision and approach, (2) define the associated methodologies and how they relate to the type of data/evidence to be collected, and (3) how iteration leads to process/outcomes with interpretations resulting from PAR.

Accordingly, we emphasise that the outcomes of such production and transfer of original co-constructed knowledge have the capacity to give more visibility to (1) everyday life experiences; (2) bottom-up participatory narratives; (3) artivist digital networks, and how the strengthening of these networks can contribute to the improvement of the aforementioned everyday life experiences.

In turn, digital artivism, as a tool for criticism and social change, allows the expression of emotions that lead to an understanding of different socio-spatial realities. Artistic practices based on activist intentions can therefore trigger widespread awareness and collective deconstruction of tending exclusionary regimes, thus swelling the various types of counter-narratives that challenge the dominant system and its structural paradigms.

In this context, artivism as a tool for critique and action requires a careful approach based on an iterative and incremental development process (according to the needs felt by the various participants throughout the process) so that these interventions are constructive and promote collective reflection aimed at problem-solving.

However, digital works' ephemeral and dispersed nature still poses complex challenges for their collection and archiving. The iterative process with the community is both means and end, where knowledge is simultaneously produced and restituted, becoming dynamic and multidirectional while promoting community-based placemaking actions, both physical and digital.

In this way, the involvement and strengthening of urban artivist networks can contribute to changing perceptions, creating positive social change and building more just and equitable societies in line with the right to the city.

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