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Community through multiple connectivities: Mapping communication assets in multicultural London

Wallis Motta and Myria Georgiou

Introduction

London is a *super-diverse* (Vertovec, 2006, 2010) city of intense juxtapositions of difference, constantly presenting urban dwellers with the challenges of cultural diversity: communication, cohabitation, and community building. This chapter focuses precisely on these issues and urban dwellers' efforts to build communities with, next, and against others in a super-diverse London neighbourhood. We adopt an urban communication perspective (Aiello & Tosoni, 2016; Georgiou, 2013), focusing on the socio-cultural processes of information exchange and community building occurring at the intersection of (and supported by) various communication assets. We argue for the need to understand the role of communication in advancing neighbourhood participation, place-making, and thus a sense of belonging in multicultural urban locales. In particular we examine the significance of *communication assets*: resources summoned, mobilised, and appropriated by locals in developing networks of communication, information and exchange; in both mediated and non-mediated urban settings. Communication assets have attracted little attention in literature on urban communities and place-making (see for example discussions in Amin, 2008; Appadurai, 1996; Massey, 1994, 2005). However, we argue, they constitute core resources for enhancing participation and belonging. Thus, we need conceptual, methodological, and analytical tools to make sense of their role and significance in the city.

The chapter has a twofold aim. First, developing a methodological interrogation for the study of urban communication, especially through recording and analysing communication assets. Our proposed multi-method framework develops in dialogue with three existing approaches to urban neighbourhood assets (Alexiou, et al., 2014; Ball-Rokeach & Kim, 2006; Chen, et al., 2013; Greene, 2013; Kretzmann & Mcknight, 1993, 1996). We critically engage with these approaches and propose a framework that focuses on communication - both mediated and face-to-face - and which allows us to understand converging and diverging forms of communication, in their particular significance for neighbourhoods. Secondly, we apply this framework and demonstrate the various ways in which community building takes place through communication assets in a super-diverse urban neighbourhood. These include sustained and ephemeral community structures that overlap and converge and which contribute in differential ways to a neighbourhood's life and its dwellers' sense of belonging. The discussion draws from a year-long empirical study, which involved participant observation, a small-scale survey with 138 respondents, five focus groups with 26 participants, and 11 asset-mapping exercises with 70 participants, all residents of the neighbourhood Harringay in North London.

Community Asset-mapping and Communication

In order to investigate the systems of community building in multicultural super-diverse neighbourhoods, both Vertovec (2006) and Amin have called for qualitative studies of the "local micropolitics of everyday interaction" (2002: 960). Following this call there have been a number of studies exploring how people from diverse backgrounds in multicultural neighbourhoods form relationships (Hall, 2012, 2013; Hickman, et al., 2008; Hudson, et al., 2007; Jackson & Butler, 2014; Wessendorf, 2013; Wise, 2005). In these studies, communication assets have been almost fully ignored, only with few influential exceptions (see Ball-Rokeach and Kim 2006; Chen et al. 2013).

Communication assets are discursive practices, public spaces, technologies (media), local institutions and community organisations. These represent resources that locals mobilise to achieve immediate goals, sustain longer-term projects (Chen, et al., 2012) and build a collective sense of belonging or place (Motta, et al., 2013). Communication assets are identifiable means supporting residents in *making a place their own*. In their community-making role, these assets are crucial because they support face-to-face communication, and neighbourhood groups in making claims and collective representations in their locale (Amit & Rapport, 2002, p. 18). In order to understand the ways in which communication assets are mobilised, and with what consequences, community asset-mapping methods become necessary. These aim to record material, social and/or symbolic communication resources mobilised by groups and individuals in enhancing urban neighbourhood communities and local life. Three of these approaches in particular are important to our own understanding of communication asset-mapping: *Asset-Based Community Development* (ABCD) (Kretzmann & Mcknight, 1993, 1996; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003, 2005; Vosoughi & Monroe-Ossi, 2011), the *Civic Creativity Model* (CCM) (Alevizou, 2014; Alexiou, et al., 2014; Greene, 2013; The Open University, 2013) and most importantly *Communication Infrastructure Theory* (CIT) (Ball-Rokeach & Kim, 2006; Ball-Rokeach, et al., 2001; Chen, et al., 2012; Chen, et al., 2013; MetaConnects.org, 2013; Ognyanova, et al., 2013)[1]. Table 1 outlines the key elements of each of the three approaches, with the last column outlining our approach.

	ABCD	**CIT**	**CCM**	**Multiple Connectivities**
Asset Typologies	Typology of social assets as individual residents, community organisations, and local institutions (public/private).	Typology of spatial communication assets as comfort zones and hotspots. Considers ABCD typology and ads geo-media[2].	Typology stressing local organisations and digital media assets (e.g. social media, press, newsletters, noticeboards).	Typology of media and physical spaces, identifying comfort zones, hotspots and no-go areas with GIS[3]. CIT as primary CCM as secondary and ABCD as background reference.
Aimed contribution	Emphasis on social assets as neighbourhood community building blocks.	Emphasis on communication – geo-ethnic media and public spaces as assets to build communities.	Emphasis on new and hyperlocal media as assets to build neighbourhood communities.	Recognition of a matrix of local, national and transnational mediated and physical communication resources.
Theoretical Stance	Rational choice, Social capital, Action research.	Rational choice, Social capital, Ethnic Studies, Political theory, Urban comm.	Rational choice, Social capital, Participatory design.	Rational/Irrational choice, Social Capital, Ethnic Studies, Urban comm., Conviviality, Place-making.
Methods	Solely Qualitative.	Predominantly Quantitative.	Solely Qualitative.	Mixed method.
Mapping approach	Predominantly listing social assets.	Mapping physical assets.	Mapping physical & mediated assets	Mapping physical & mediated assets
Research participants	Community organisers	Residents and community	Community organisers	Residents and community

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[1] (Alevizou, et al., 2014) provide a descriptive overview of different asset-mapping methods at: http//comparativeassetmaping.org

[2] Geo-ethnic media is defined as “media outlets that produce content covering a geographic area, potentially focusing on issues relevant to residents of a particular ethnicity” (Ognyanova in Chen, et al., 2013).

[3] Geographical Information Systems.

		organisers		organisers
Limitations	-No theory development[4]. - Does not consider media. - No consideration of power structures[5]. - Exclusively self-reporting.	-Little attention to national/transnational media[6]. -Exclusively relying in self-reporting. - Expensive, since it is a representative neighbourhood survey.	-Limited theory development. -Exclusively relying in self-reporting. -Does not consider ethnic diversity. -Small-scale.	- Ambitious mixed methods model - Primarily methodological engagement with assets. - Small-scale.

Table 1 – Asset-mapping comparative overview

By synthesising previous typologies with geographical information mapping, and by incorporating residents in addition to community organisers, the approach discussed in this chapter enabled us to understand the ways in which people in Harringay connect, disconnect and enhance their participation and collective belonging. Our take on asset-mapping discussed below was designed to provide a more balanced, integrated, nuanced and holistic view of social relations, physical spaces, geo-ethnic and new media.

Researching the field

The neighbourhood of Harringay has been a destination for various waves of migrants throughout the 20th century. It is organised as a grid of domestic streets that expand on the two sides of a long and vibrant high street – Green Lanes. Harringay is in the heart of the London Borough of Haringey, one of the most diverse areas of the UK, where 65.3% of residents do not self-identify as White British[7]. Amongst the most prominent ethnic groups are the Turkish, who in some statistics are masked with other Europeans under the category White Other (36.5%), White British (23%) and the Black Caribbean (7.1%)[8]. Harringay is famous for its Turkish restaurants, which dominate the high street, being often referred to as "Little Turkey". We targeted residents who identified with these three major ethnic groups for our study, in particular adults aged between 25 and 50.

We chose Harringay as place of study for two reasons. Firstly, residents are very proud of their neighbourhood, promoting it in local and national media with phrases like "there is no better place to live than Harringay, a model of cross-cultural tolerance and integration" (Shoard, 2015). The 2009/10 Haringey Council residents' survey stated that 80% of residents reported to get along well with others from different backgrounds[9]. Secondly, residents are very active in community organisations and have access to a great diversity of local communication assets. There is an extremely successful hyperlocal online social network with 9,000 subscribers (Harringay Online); two local newspapers; more than half a dozen ethnic newspapers; at least four local ethnic radio stations; multiple neighbourhood and residents' associations; five active ethnic community organisations; a church, a mosque, five parks, two shopping malls and a popular high street.

In our attempt to record and analyse communication assets in Harringay, we experimented with two kinds of asset-mapping methods, which enabled us to record the range of resources that locals recognise and mobilise when developing networks of conviviality, communication and action. The strength of asset-mapping methods stems from their greater ability to adapt to different circumstances, and to enable an active lead from research participants. Asset-mapping provides opportunities for participants to express themselves more truthfully about political, cultural and social issues. This is because exercises usually turn into quasi-fictional scenarios which resemble reality, but which are different enough to diffuse tensions and create a relaxed social space. Finally, asset-mapping produces qualitative synoptic visual representations of communication asset usage from different ethnic groups. These maps in turn can be used to question residents' perceptions of others in the locale, as well as their own socio-spatial imaginaries and practices.

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[4] (Rapp, et al., 2005).

[5] (Ennis & West, 2010; Healy, 2005).

[6] (Grimm, 2015).

[7] (Haringey Council, 2011).

[8] (ONS, 2011).

[9] (Haringey Council, 2009/10).

The first asset-mapping exercise we conducted had a geographical focus. We used and adapted the CIT typology for public spaces. Participants in this exercise were invited to identify hotspots (places they use to find information), comfort zones (places they use to socialise and are comfortable in), as well as no-go areas (places to avoid or problematic) in their neighbourhood. Residents used colour-coded sticky notes to classify local public spaces on a visual map according to the previous typology. Next to this map was a set of pictures representing local media, from Harringay online to ethnic printed newspapers. Participants were asked to classify media in the same way as geographical spaces. Residents also included communication assets not appearing in our suggested categories or representations, to correct and complement those presented. The main strengths of this exercise were twofold. First, we observed how the 'sticky-note-footprint' revealed patterns in local asset recognition and use. This happened interactively, as participants discussed their classifications. Second, by comparing and contrasting assets we observed tensions associated with local life, allowing participants to both recognise what areas they see as assets, and which ones they see as irrelevant or undesired.

The second asset-mapping exercise was inspired by the *CCM* approach (Alevizou, 2014; Alexiou, et al., 2014). Participants were asked to work towards a commonly recognised local project that emerged as important during the focus group conversations – e.g. organising a food festival or a homework club. Participants were asked to imagine themselves as part of the organising committee developing this project, and were offered sticky notes and other props representing communication assets, using the same typology CCM employs. Then, they were asked to place these elements within a set of concentric circles resembling a target, in such a way that the closer these assets were placed to the centre, the more important these were perceived to be in achieving their civic local project. This exercise and its associated discussions revealed not only a number of different communication assets, but also their different relevance for different groups. For example, the White British groups saw hyperlocal media as key tools for mobilisation and action, while for the Turkish groups transnational media had more relevance.

The discursive practices of residents with neighbours and various other community groups were discussed during exercises. The discussion that took place during asset-mapping was fully transcribed and coded by topic. The sticky notes that participants placed on their maps (representing communication assets) were counted and classified according to their type, then loaded into a small database recording which individuals posted which hotspots, comfort zones, no-go areas, media, community associations, key people, and physical infrastructure. This data was also analysed quantitatively, since we chose to combine qualitative and quantitative techniques to make sense of the data. Finally, we used the geo-tagged the information to generate communication asset maps.

Multiple connectivities of belonging

Social scientists are still looking for methodologies and expressions "to capture the phenomena emerging from diversification", and to "[look] for better ways to understand new negotiations of difference in everyday practices in such contexts" (Wessendorf, 2014, p. 19). In this section we present the results of addressing this very issue in the milieu of Harringay; we uncovered ethnically-relevant differences and similarities between the value to community building and belonging that various communication assets provide. We focus on three core asset categories: community institutions, online social networks and face-to-face interaction.

i. *Mobilising community institutions as communication assets*

Harringay is a hub of social organisations that cater to different ethnicities and cultures, with numerous community centres, churches and a mosque. Overall, we found that these organisations are vital to many of the ethnic minorities living in the neighbourhood, but in particular to ageing populations and disadvantaged migrants with limited English language proficiency. For these individuals, community organisations take the role of translators – not only of language, but also to mediate access to critical information associated with services. As two first-generation migrants participating in an asset-mapping exercise said:

> The Turkish community centre is very important… it meets all our needs, they help us loads. If we don't know, we just come and ask questions… Because they speak the same language as us, it is easy for us to understand what we need (Turkish female, unemployed).
>
> The chairman of the Turkish community centre is more important to us than the MP [Member of Parliament]. The MP is very hard to see … But we know the chairman of our community centre, we can come here and tell him our problems… We are sure he will contact the council, maybe ten times… At the community centre, we can come any time we want, and we can talk to our chairman. We've got his mobile number (Turkish male, cab driver).

What is revealed here is of twofold significance. Community centres and individual key figures within them mediate communication between their users – especially those feeling disempowered – and institutions that control resources. At the same time, they are core nodes in networks of trust, to which locals regularly turn to both to address immediate needs and to shape collective identities. It is not uncommon for users of these organisations to meet within them to reflect collectively on their struggles, and to strategise on how to gain more visibility or resources to advance projects. Community organisations yielded the highest number of sticky notes for first-generation Turkish migrants in the two asset-mapping exercises. Turkish participants repeatedly noted that the emotional, social, intellectual, and informational needs these community organisations fulfil made them immensely relevant to them.

For Black Caribbean participants, community centres are also important. However, these participants are less dependent on these organisations, and therefore they scored lower during asset-mapping exercises. This is a likely result of established long Black Caribbean settlement in the country and the locale, as well as their widespread fluency in English.

Black Caribbean participants talked much more (and with greater enthusiasm) about other ethnic minority centres than their own.

> When the mosque… had an open day… I thought it was brilliant... the place was packed solid and they were welcoming, and that was actually the first time I had been in that mosque. It was so... wow! And I said to one of the guys there, 'are you going to run more of these events? Because look how many people you've got here! You are part of a community' (Black Caribbean Male, lawyer).
>
> I've been to other churches. I've been to the Irish Centre. I've been invited to other ethnic groups' events at their community centres (Black Caribbean Female, receptionist).

Both minority groups – Black Caribbean and Turkish – catalogued community centres and churches as both comfort zones and hotspots, demonstrating the enormous value they see in these physical and symbolic spaces to circulate information and provide core organisational nodes in their networks.

We refer the reader to Figure **2**, which shows the number of sticky notes that Turkish, Black Caribbean and White British participants placed during the first asset-mapping exercise. Figure 2 represents the parks and community spaces both as either hot spots or comfort zones. In this map - as in Figure **1** - the size of the symbols is proportional to the number of sticky notes participants placed in these physical spaces. It is clear that the Turkish emphasised community centres as communication assets much more than the other groups, revealing the significance of strong communication assets in sustaining a sense of ethnic ties and local belonging.

The previous discussion briefly demonstrates the multiple roles of community institutions of different sorts as assets, building community within the neighbourhood. While most significantly such organisations enhance particular attachments and reinforce existing communities, they also can serve as bridging mechanisms within a culturally diverse locale. The translation role of minority institutions corresponds to what Hall (2008) refers as the inevitable need for migrants to develop translating skills in negotiating their position among others, whom they share locality and resources with. Community organisations like those described here are important gatekeepers of information, provide access to material and symbolic resources, and act as critical nodes in networks of support.

ii. Online social networking as place-making, ethnic media and local press

Harringay Online[10] (HoL) is a hyper-local social network in the neighbourhood. It is a grassroots discussion forum that local residents built using the Ning[11] platform. In this forum members post discussions for neighbours to comment on. A photo gallery, a mailing list, an email service and a twitter account complement the discussion board. HoL has taken a community role by mobilising digital tools to connect locals. For example, it has generated a Google map of all available free-WiFi networks in the neighbourhood. In 2008 HoL received a high-profile national prize for empowering residents to shape their neighbourhood and engaging them in local politics.

Given the success of HoL we investigated its role as communication asset for different urban dwellers. Through a survey of 138 respondents, we researched awareness and use of the platform. Our survey was not designed to gather representative statistics for the entirety of Harringay; these are already available (e.g. the 2011 census). Instead, we focused explicitly on community building behaviours around Green Lanes influenced by spatial and cultural intersections. Hence, we targeted people on the streets and communal areas of the neighbourhood, leading to a self-selected sample of residents concerned with community building in public spaces. Within this sample, we studied the observed differences and similarities between people who self-identified with the largest three ethnicities in the neighbourhood. The attendees to our asset-mapping workshops, focus groups and those responding the survey were similarly sampled; therefore, we are confident to triangulate and complement the information we derived from all these research methods.

None of the Turkish participants in our asset-mapping exercises were aware of HoL. This is consistent with our neighbourhood survey, where most Turkish residents (77.4%) were not aware of HoL. This shows HoL as a communication asset might be valuable for certain individuals and groups but not others.

In contrast to the Turkish, the majority of White British (72%) and half of the Black Caribbean participants were aware of HoL and often mobilised it as a communication asset, especially in becoming more informed, aware, but also selective in their participation in the locale.

> I try not to read too much into them [HoL posts] 'cause a lot… is opinion and conjecture. But if it is actual things that are relevant to report, like news, I think I would look for those. But a lot of it is just gossip and tittle-tattle, and you can choose how much you are going to get wrapped up in that to be honest (White British, Male, marketing).

> Harringay Online… does have a lot of local information. So it's quite interesting… The only thing I dislike about it is that you get too many opinionated people on there, thinking that they know best… [But about events]

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[10] (Harringay Online, 2016).

[11] (Ning, 2015).

> normally you get an advanced warning from there for it, which is good (Black-Caribbean, Male, salesman).

Despite some controversial exchanges online, HoL represents a powerful case of hyperlocal media supporting strong collective identities, public participation and affective association with the locale. Particularly for White British participants, HoL is a powerful resource for place-making:

> I am a lot more aware of the political issues as result of Harringay Online…With the betting shops…there has been a big Harringay Online campaign [to control betting shops] (White British, Female, school administrator).
>
> I probably dip into it fairly regularly... every couple of days, just to search for information... Mainly, I think for me it is useful 'cause you see various conversations. There are all sorts of things that I might have been thinking about anyway, like conversations about what schools are doing locally (White British, Male, marketing professional).

As our survey shows, White British show significant HoL usage with 54% of them consulting it regularly. In the opposite end of the spectrum, only 5.7% of Turkish participants use HoL as their main neighbourhood news source. 45.3% of Black Caribbean report using various online local newspapers as their main media source for learning about their neighbourhood. Interestingly, whereas communication assets take the form of local/hyperlocal media for the White British, for Turkish participants it is their neighbours who represent the main communication asset to advance projects and get information. This is particularly relevant when researching the formation of communication infrastructures, as communication infrastructures will depend on the contextual and conditional relevance of different media as local assets. The choice between old and new media and between mediated and non-mediated social networks has a strong ethnic component. Communication is not an even terrain, where assets play a similar role across time, culture and space. The different affordances of communication assets need attention, and so does the contextual meaning of different media. The hyperlocal HoL represents a fascinating case of a communication asset – supporting a strong local identity, public engagement, collective efficacy and action of heterogeneous publics. Yet, like most communication assets, it takes its meanings from the urban socio-spatial context. While invaluable for some, it provides no public engagement value for others. Diverging assets – e.g. local press, ethnic media, HoL – both reflect and enhance diverging publics. In their complementary but also contradictory functions, they become critical in managing social ties in the locality and beyond. At the same time, this diversification can arguably also generate benefits through the dynamic appropriation of different assets by multiple local groups that need them. As urban publics do not necessarily share interests or common histories, and do not occupy equal socio-economic positions, it is worth considering how to achieve co-existence with occasional collaboration (Amin, 2008). Being kept informed and connected in a range of networks might indeed be a viable way to support community projects, which can be potentially divisive, but which can also support mutuality and conviviality, precisely because such assets have the affordances to correspond to diverging needs. Recognising this diversity in communication assets is crucial in recording and understanding different local groups' needs and desires, especially those less visible and less often heard in mainstream local and national media. At the same time, and as will be shown in the next section, diverting communication assets best contribute to public engagement and collective belonging when they are complemented by assets that enable convergence across difference. These are mostly the physical locations of congregation, communication and exchange.

(iii) Face-to-Face communication: Engagement across difference

Despite its distinct significance for urban societies, face-to-face communication has remained comparatively unexplored as a resource for urban engagement. Dependent both on close physical proximity and on shared concerns about local issues, face-to-face communication does more than just reproduce familiarity, existing networks and community connections. Unlike many media, which tend to focus on particular audiences due to their linguistic characteristics, face-to-face communication in the city is hybrid – reproducing familiarity and sometimes creating new familiarities across the unknown (Georgiou 2006). The everyday encounters on the high street and at the school gates can become effective opportunities to recognise urban multiplicity through the very shared geography and shared experience of the locale (Amin, 2012).

Possibilities for conviviality and a locally shared sense of belonging were revealed in the ways in which participants engaged with their physical encounters in the neighbourhood. Figure **1** shows the value of the high street as a collection of *comfort zones*; a vibrant communication space important for all participants. For the Turkish, comfort zones usually coincide with parks and community centres. For the Black Caribbean these coincide with parks, barbershops and grocery stores. Finally, for the White British comfort zones coincide with parks, restaurants and pubs. The high street is a space where intercultural exchange happens (this was confirmed ethnographically during fieldwork).

Often, barbershop owners or employees catering to a male clientele offered free ‘Turkish tea’ or ‘Caribbean punch’ in their businesses, not only for clients, but also for visitors and friends. Even the researchers, females who are certainly not their usual patrons, were welcomed to have a drink there. Sometimes you would see White British men who came to the barbershops for a haircut, ending their visit with casual but meaningful socialisation with Turkish or Caribbean clients. This hospitality was also present in other forms at other sorts of public spaces along the high street, which helps generate a greater sense of belonging. Overall, there was a consistently higher number of sticky notes registered in the high street in for all groups (an obvious cross-cultural overlap) - see Figure **1**. In comparison, the two local shopping Malls received very few sticky notes as comfort zones or hot spots, and were not present in participant verbalizations either as prominent community resources.

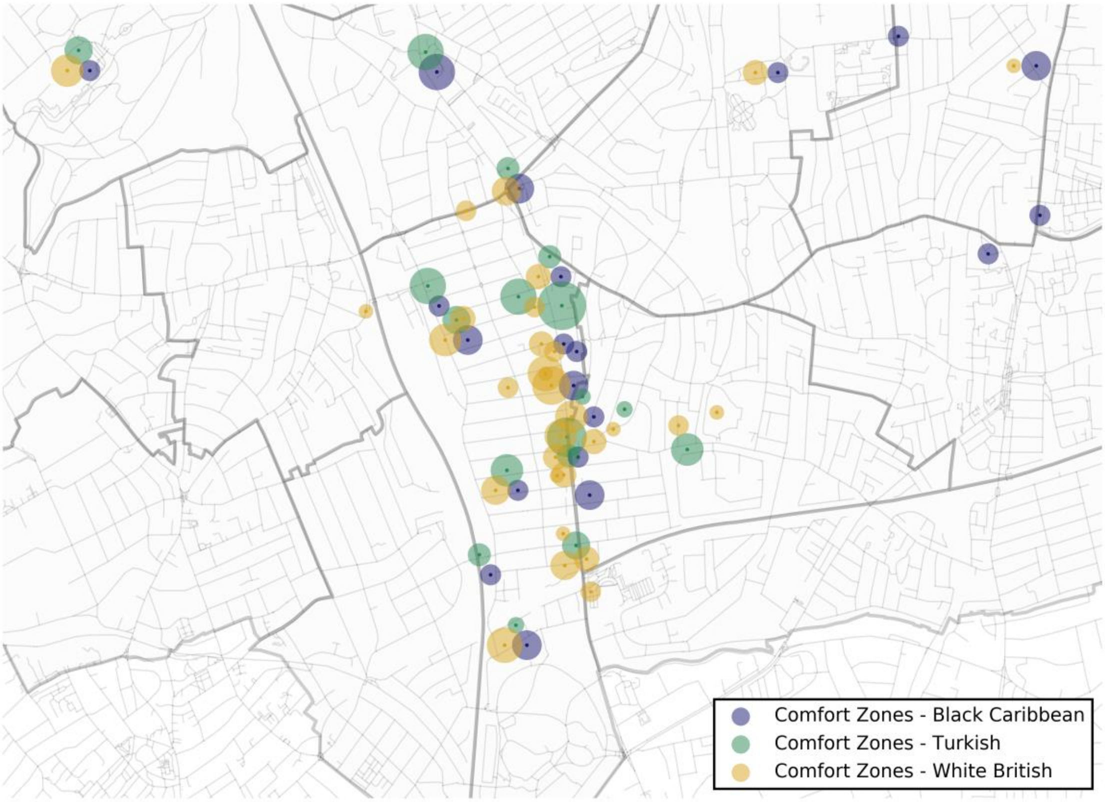
Comfort Zones - Black Caribbean
Comfort Zones - Turkish
Comfort Zones - White British

Figure 1: High Street as comfort zone

Neighbourhood parks came across as both *hotspots* and *comfort zones* for all groups with people from various socio-economic levels, playing a vital role in the lives of people within the neighbourhood and their engagement with their neighbourhood (see Figure **2**). This is a second example that attests to the importance of face-to-face mundane interaction with others in forming bonds of cross-cultural cooperation and belonging.

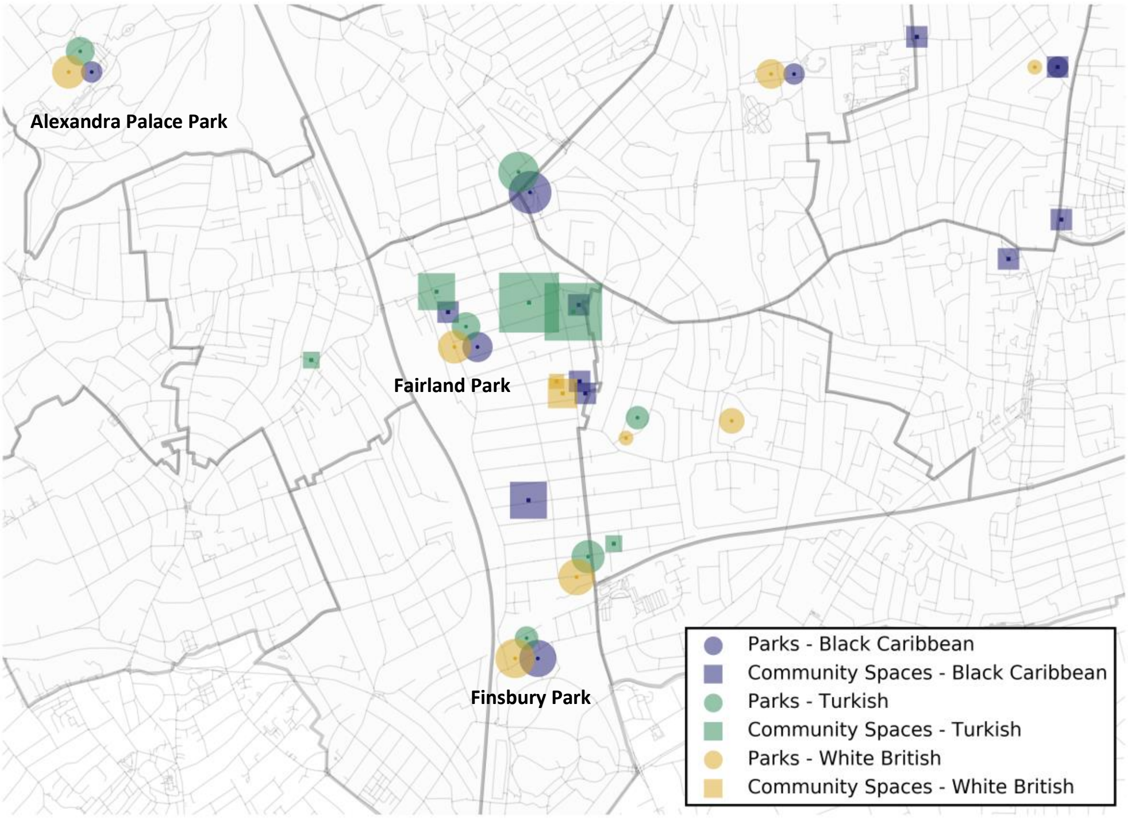
Alexandra Palace Park
Fairland Park
Finsbury Park
● Parks - Black Caribbean
■ Community Spaces - Black Caribbean
● Parks - Turkish
■ Community Spaces - Turkish
● Parks - White British
■ Community Spaces - White British

Figure 2: Parks and Community Spaces as both hot spots and comfort zones

In ethnographic and focus group findings, Finsbury Park in particular emerged as an important asset. Social and family gatherings were regularly observed there during our study. The unique property of Finsbury Park is that it enables a place for sustained cross-cultural sociality around meals, since all ethnic groups organise barbecues and picnics there. This ascertains the park's role as a communication asset that enables people to have more meaningful exchanges within existing but also ephemeral networks. A participant explained:

> Finsbury Park is the only park within the area I know that you can actually engage with other people, because there's actually a Black Jamaican, he does this on a Friday on a summer (sic)…He brings a sound system, and his little barbecue kit and seriously, he would play music and it was mixed. Turks, Polish, the Black, they've all come to listen to his music and he would also bring chicken, which you wouldn't pay for, so he would barbecue chicken and hand it out. Every Friday, people would come with their cans of beer, seat back and listen to this beautiful music, and the barbecue was going. And even the sheriffs of the park, [who said] you are not supposed to have this barbecue [allowed it]…because there was never any disturbances or problems (Black Caribbean, salesman).

The description above is powerful in revealing moments of physical congregation that allow heterogeneous publics to mix and to enhance experiences of conviviality. During our fieldwork in Finsbury Park we frequently observed Turkish, Black Caribbean and White British families cooking barbecues initially without significant interaction, only to be brought together by their children playing together. The interactions of children playing in parks often led parents to interact with one another in meaningful ways, revealing the role of this public space as a communication asset. For instance, discussing how to deal with educational issues of their children was one avenue for collective reflection and mobilisation around neighbourhood challenges. Another common activity observed at parks involved friendly football matches, where both parents and children participated, advancing conviviality and collective engagement. In fact, some residents imagine Harringay as a harmonious place to live because its many parks make it ‘geographically special’:

> I do think that there is something about this area… that there’s a geographical thing… the structure, and the parks, you know… there’s something about this area, which gives it a glue…I think is quite unique…There’s a lot of people caring about them [the parks] and spend a lot of time in there. You’ve got strong friends groups in there. I think Haringey is one of the Greenest Boroughs in London (White British, sports coach).

Opportunities for congregation support intergenerational skills to live and engage with a multicultural locale. For example, parents mentioned proudly that their children are culturally sensitive. As one mother put it:

> My daughter anyways gets quite confident about race and things like that [cultural difference], in ways that being brought up I was not…There was nobody of colour in my school until I got to 16, and you know, it was just a white neighbourhood… Well she doesn’t really kind of see it [racial difference]…and there’s no kind of like [problem]…You know, there is just no doubt in her. It’s just second nature, I mean. Is just the way, people she’s mixed with (White British, housewife).

The unintentional and ordinary exposure to difference in public spaces is critical in understanding how the (relative) local harmony is achieved. Community is primarily built along ethnic lines through community centres and media, partly enhancing separation. But our analysis of assets also shows, that ordinary interactions of face-to-face communication, alongside the occasional mediated interactions across difference, feed into collective sense of belonging to the neighbourhood. This was overwhelmingly demonstrated in the focus groups, where, beyond social and cultural difference, most participants emphasised their emotional attachment, affection and pride for their locale.

Conclusions

This chapter explores how urban dwellers regularly mobilise communication assets in a multicultural London neighbourhood to manage urban life and its challenges. Asset-mapping provided us with invaluable tools to record the role of communication assets in enhancing participation and collective belonging in three ways. First, asset-mapping allowed us to become aware of different ways in which sharing of information, knowledge and sociality is organised in urban locales, through systems of physical and mediated congregation. Secondly, it allowed us to understand the potential of communication infrastructures to turn into assets that enhance civic engagement and urban publics, even if they are always subject to exclusions or inequalities. Diverse systems of urban communication might challenge certain forms of exclusion – through translation, mobilisation, and voice – but they can also reproduce inequalities, in terms of who speaks and on behalf of whom. Thirdly, the rich map of communication assets this study produced was critical in conceptualising urban communication at the meeting of face-to-face and mediated exchanges, especially in recognising the significance of physical congregation when urban mediated communication becomes increasingly fragmented. We recognise that the value of a multi-method approach that utilises GIS, qualitative and quantitative components goes beyond merely providing triangulation and nice illustrations. Rather, it offers a multidisciplinary platform that enables researchers to better account for the complexity of socio-cultural communicative exchanges that unfold in a locale. We respond to the call that “a clearer understanding of how individuals attach meaning and create a sense of belonging to different types of place-based communities” is needed (Matsaganis, 2016, pp. 1345-1346). Through considering how people feel about and use various communication assets, including physical spaces, this goal can be achieved.

Furthermore, mapping and engaging in understanding communication assets can also motivate a dialogue on ways of conserving and improving existing local resources, addressing the opportunities and challenges of inclusive urban publics. The second variant of asset-mapping invites us to think about the differentiated and strategic use of assets in the service of explicit collective projects to achieve visibility, well-being and prosperity. In contrast, the first variant of asset-mapping reveals mundane practices of asset use that lack instrumentality, but have a great value in shaping meaningful connections and collective action. In conjunction, these two sources, together with other methods, can provide a very nuanced picture of a locale and better represent what goes on. Only using a single kind of asset-mapping exercise method focusing primarily on social connections, detailed spatial practices or media usage might lead to a partial view of the locale. If we had used only a single asset-mapping method, we might have reached the conclusion that people in Harringay live completely separate lives or are collectively well integrated, whilst the reality proved to be far more nuanced.

Our research also revealed that, although people from very different socio-cultural backgrounds are thrown together and co-exist in physical spaces within urban multicultural neighbourhoods, they relate differently to the communication assets available to them. In many cases they use these assets to construct a shared ethnic identity, which leads to a corresponding assertion of ethnic difference and a certain level of communicative segregation. Nevertheless, people still pursue diversity and mixing with others – particularly within specific geographical demarcations, such as parks or the high street. This highlights face-to-face encounters as a crucial mechanism to achieve cross-cultural engagement. Our research showed that it is possible to sustain a balance between separation and togetherness – a complex, even if sometimes contradictory mechanism for engagement with communities that are spatially grounded and also culturally defined. Further researching and reflecting on how different locales achieve or fail to achieve this balance is highly relevant, since it could lead us to understand how to contribute to a diverse, inclusive, constructive and supportive environment for urban civic engagement.

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