



# The embedding of local culture in global communication: independent internet cafés in London

NINA WAKEFORD  
*University of Surrey*

## Abstract

Although public internet access in London is dominated by the large chain easyInternetCafé, outside the central areas many small independent internet cafés are catering to local populations. This article examines the ways in which two of these cafés operate. Participant observation and interviews provide the data for this study of the ways in which both the local and the global are embedded into the internet cultures which are found in such settings. Patterns of migration and local demographics are found to be just as important as the layout of the space or the technological infrastructure. It is suggested that these spaces merit more study and that the standardized easyInternet café should not become the dominant unit of analysis for the study of London internet cafés, despite its significant presence in the city.

## Key words

consumption • internet café • local cultures • London • space

The internet cafés CheapCall and Colours provide commercial online access in one of the least electronically connected areas in London.<sup>1</sup> They are about one mile apart, and well off the beaten track of most tourist sites, being 20 minutes by underground train from central London on the outer edges of Zone 2.<sup>2</sup> Both serve primarily local neighbourhood populations, although both attract a widely divergent clientele. In common with most of the internet cafés in these areas, CheapCall and Colours were set up as independent small businesses, being staffed by the Turkish or Somali immigrant owners with one or two assistants, who tend to be friends or relatives. Even though many have signs outside which advertise the business as an internet café, the products and services on offer vary widely, and do not always include standard café fare apart from canned drinks and pre-packaged snacks. Internet access may be offered alongside a 'business centre' (photocopying, fax, typing, translation services), cheap 'telephone box' services (particularly for premium rate long-distance destinations such as India or Africa), multiplayer online gaming facilities, or a gift shop. In contrast, internet cafés in central London are mostly branches or franchises of larger chains. The largest and most prominent of the chains is easyInternetCafé (opened 1998 as 'easyEverything') which is run by the 'easy Group' and operates more than 2000 computer terminals in seven central locations, with over 500 screens at the café on High Street Kensington.<sup>3,4</sup>

In this article I examine the way in which independent internet cafés such as CheapCall and Colours function as local places which translate experiences of communications technologies. It has been argued that any local culture should be seen in terms of the global cultural flows of which it is a part (Appadurai, 1990; Urry, 1995). Although internet cafés have specific local forms, it is important to look at their role in making visible the interconnections between global and local processes. In this article this will be undertaken via an analysis of internet cafés from the perspective of the sociology of place and space (Urry, 1987). Such a framework highlights the connections between the social, the spatial and the temporal in the constitution of local social relationships. It involves looking at the ways in which the social relationships are spatially and temporally constituted, as well as the different senses of locality that may be constructed through specific sets of local social relations. However, as will be shown, the places of internet cafés are also embedded in repertoires, both imaginary and experienced, of urban and global mobility. Internet cafés could be characterized as being part of the movement of technologies and technological experiences across spatial and temporal boundaries, or what Appadurai calls 'technoscapes' (Appadurai, 1990).

Empirical material is drawn from fieldwork conducted as part of two projects on information and communication technologies (ICTs) in

London.<sup>5</sup> The main fieldwork in cafés was conducted over nine months, beginning with a six-month period of observation and interviews in a wide range of internet access points in London, including large and small commercial internet cafés, stand-alone internet kiosks, and internet terminals attached to phone booths. In the subsequent three months, time was spent as a participant observer at Colours and CheapCall, including informal interviews with owners and customers at a range of times during the day and evening. Visual data consisting of sketches and photos was collected and an analysis of the websites, where they existed, was carried out.<sup>6</sup>

CheapCall and Colours offer a distinct kind of internet experience that cannot be directly mapped onto either the early generation of internet cafés described in earlier studies (Lee, 1999; Stewart, 2000). Neither are they scaled down versions of the recent mass access facilities. However, a crucial element of the localization of CheapCall and Colours is the dominant urban presence of a standardized experience offered at businesses such as easyInternetCafé. Throughout this analysis I will build on the idea that what happens in internet cafés are elaborate and sometimes divergent forms of the 'dynamics of objectification' (Miller and Slater, 2000). The term is used to describe the ways in which people engage with the internet as an instance of material culture through which they are caught up in the processes of identification (Miller and Slater, 2000: 10). In so doing I wish to avoid the assumption that what happens in internet cafés is always about a construction of 'the virtual' or 'virtuality'. Alongside approaches such as that of Miller and Slater I want to resist treating the internet independently of its embeddedness in local social relations, rather to begin with virtuality as a social accomplishment (Miller and Slater, 2000: 6–8). This contrasts with frameworks which posit a necessary opposition between the 'the Net' and 'the Self' (Castells, 1996; Turkle, 1995).

Internet cafés can be described as social and material achievements that may combine several kinds of objects and experiences, only some of which are 'cyber' or 'virtual' in any straightforward way (Wakeford, 1999). A London internet café might combine the following interrelated components available for consumption:

- a machine as an isolated computer;
- a machine as part of a local network within the café;
- a machine as part of a global network;
- systems and technical infrastructure, including the speed of the connection;
- staff and their embodied knowledge;

- café atmosphere/ambience;
- décor;
- street location; and
- food and drink.

In this study we found London internet cafés are ‘places of sociality’, just as they were in Trinidad (Miller and Slater, 2000). All of the independent internet cafés visited for this study were places which explicitly – in terms of signs on the street and inside the space – attempted to present themselves as selling the internet in some fashion, whether in terms of a simple window sticker saying ‘Internet Access £1’ or an elaborate interior design which incorporated computer terminals into the furniture. The technological infrastructure, including the number or speed of machines, was not a reliable guide to the way in which this representation took place. For example, during our observations customers did not ask about the speed of connection, or the specifications of the machines.

Previous research has looked at the operation of an internet café in terms of ‘landscapes of computing’ (Wakeford, 1999). At Netcafé, the London internet café described in terms of overlapping landscapes of computing, the staff and management sought to present the internet through a set of distinct styles and attitudes. These included a concern with preserving a ‘cybervibe’, and making links to youth and clubbing cultures, as well as adopting the colour scheme of *Wired* and other aesthetics linked to early cyberculture. The focus of this study was on the cultures of the staff and customers inside the café, for example, the ways in which staff had developed skilled displays of the internet, involving clothing, attitude and music. The previous study also looked at the space of the café itself as a way in which one version of early internet culture became linked to specific artefacts and experiences at this site.

The independent cafés in the current study do not orientate themselves around a ‘cybervibe’ or this early version of internet culture. Neither do workers associate themselves with the ‘new media tribe’.<sup>7</sup> Although similarly concerned with the socio-spatial dynamics of interactions at internet cafés, this article examines the ways in which such businesses in London reflect and build upon alternative spatial orders, and how they affect the experience of the internet at such public access points. What is crucial at CheapCall and Colours are the ways in which links are made between local neighbourhood populations, use of the space and the role of the internet. A contrasting model offered in this article is the increasingly standardized and impersonal model of easyInternetCafés, and the role that they also play in contemporary urban life.

## PLACE AND THE TECHNOLOGICAL RELOCATION OF LONDON

Spatiality can be considered an integral feature of the processes of capitalist production (Massey, 1984). As such it has long attracted the attention of sociologists. One of the early contributions was Simmel's work on the city, which stressed the ways in which social interactions are localized in space, turning spaces into socially meaningful places (Frisby, 1992). In his work on the metropolis and mental life, Simmel argued that city-dwellers have to develop a particular orientation due to the experience of living in densely populated areas, including a reserved, detached subjectivity (Levine, 1971). Building on Simmel's work, Urry has established a developed programme of rethinking sociology from the point of view of time-space relationships (1995, 2000). Urry has made four claims for his sociology of place: first, places are increasingly centres for consumption, where goods are evaluated, purchased and used; second, places are consumed, particularly visually; third, places can be depleted by use as they are literally consumed; fourth, localities can consume one's identity so that they become all-consuming (Urry, 1995: 1–2).

These are useful proposals with which to frame the study of internet cafés in London. Urry encourages us to look at the ways in which consumption happens within local social and spatial relationships, and to recognize the contemporary importance of visual consumption (see also Lash, 1990). Contemporary experience is fundamentally structured by the aestheticisation of everyday life (Featherstone, 1991). Therefore, any investigation of the social and spatial must take into account the significance of visual consumption as a pervasive tendency, particularly through the construction of images and the increasing importance of design. For this reason in this article I contrast Colours and CheapCall with the producer of the dominant imagery of London internet café culture: easyInternetCafé. The presence of this chain has had a fundamental impact on the visual culture of internet cafés, and on the ways in which central London itself has become a place in which the consumption of access to the internet can take place within such branded environments.

London has long been depicted as a global city, and there are extensive accounts both by visitors and residents of its characteristics and its persona, although there may not be any overall agreement on 'what' or 'who' London really is (Eade, 2001). In relation to new ICTs, several groups in London have attempted to represent the city as a 'new media place' using some of the same mechanisms as New York or San Francisco (New Media Knowledge, 1999; Pratt, 2000a). Just as San Francisco created the South of Market or 'SoMa' area, London's districts of Shoreditch in east London and Soho in central London have emerged as places where social and technical networks are mobilized around new ICT production and consumption (e.g.

Wittel et al., 2002). The key to the successful establishment of a city as new media place is the orientation of several professional networks towards new media, for example, a combination of media and advertising, writing and science fiction, animation, film and television, and music (Pratt, 2000b). In London a recent survey of the sector showed a lively London new media scene which has enrolled, and at the same time revitalized, many of these sectors (New Media Knowledge, 1999).

Specific local history and visions of the future are frequently embedded in discourse about ICT development (Agar et al., 2002; Miller and Slater, 2000). In their study of the UK city of Manchester, Agar et al. have shown that the people who sought to integrate the technologies into local communities and businesses found themselves having to work with the sense of Manchester as a place, including images of its industrial past, and claims to its future as an 'information city'. In a very different context, Millar and Slater found a similar social process at work in Trinidad. Trinidadians were fashioning the internet into a concept which allowed them to actualize aspects of their identity which were already very familiar as local and spatialized 'Trini' characteristics. In both Manchester and Trinidad it appears that locals work with a sense of place as they integrate, adapt, or resist ICTs. ICTs are involved in a process of 'relocation' of technologies into existing places (Agar et al., 2002). In London we might refer to the relocation of the internet in terms of how the city has been used as a way to talk about and mobilize technology. As described above, London has been portrayed as a location for new media industries and the internet's 'cultures of production'.<sup>8</sup> However the relocation of technology has also revealed London as embodying a problem of the 'digital divide'.

The Greater London Authority's report 'The Digital Divide in a World City' (Greater London Authority, 2002) showed that although London has the highest connectivity of any UK region at 45 percent according to the Office of National Statistics (December 2001), it also has extreme variation between boroughs in the levels of household internet access. The least connected boroughs had less than a quarter of households connected, whereas the most connected boroughs had more than twice this level of connectivity, and well above the UK rate as a whole (37%) (Greater London Authority, 2002). Just as in Manchester, a network of London policymakers is trying to forge links between London's future as a digital city and the socio-demographics of the city. Organizations such as the London Development Agency and LondonConnects portray London as a place where the digital divide can be tackled by having a 'comprehensive vision' for ICTs in the city led by one organization, coupled with a strategy which is 'driven by user focus' and which is enabled by a collaboration between statutory organizations, businesses and community and voluntary groups (Greater London Authority, 2002: 58). There has been a tendency to restate

as least some urban ‘problems’ as having solutions which in some way involve online resources. For example, the Social Exclusion Unit’s ‘National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal’ report proposed that ICTs could have a role in reviving communities, providing services and working in partnerships (Social Exclusion Unit, 2000).

There are several other initiatives, official and unofficial, which are important in London’s technological culture, most of which have to do with the linking of technological infrastructure and experiences with specific London locations: first, ‘blogging’ has emerged as a way of narrating the city (Reed, 2002); second, wireless network access has been made visible by ‘warchalking’, or writing chalk marks on the pavement where such infrastructure can be accessed (see <http://www.warchalking.org>); third, the development of kiosk services in prominent and busy locations, alongside the updating of British Telecom telephone boxes as sites of broadband internet access in public spaces.<sup>9</sup> All of these developments are changing the way in which London may be consumed as a digital place. Indeed the contemporary *flâneuse* would find representations of London’s internet capacity not just at internet cafés, but also literally on the street and via location-based services for her on her mobile phone or laptop computer.

## CAFÉ SETTINGS AND LAYOUTS

In both Colours and CheapCall there were complex representations of local and global places, including London, the local neighbourhood and its inhabitants, and the internet itself. Our data collection therefore included observing each café as part of the neighbourhood, as well as looking at what kind of internet (or internets) were being experienced by those who used the online facilities.

It is helpful here to describe in detail the socio-spatial settings of the two cafés and the kinds of interactions which were framed by these settings. From the outside, CheapCall had not made any significant effort to mask the backs of computer benches and wires which could be seen from the street. The emphasis on the signage was large bold letters advertising services, including faxing and pricing. From the outside this was the most striking contrast with the other café, Colours, which had a much more styled, hand-painted shop sign, and had integrated the @ sign and the web address prominently on the front hoarding. The same two bright shades of orange and blue had been chosen for the outside and inside of the café, and it had been carefully designed to look like a desirable upbeat place to ‘hang out’.

In both CheapCall and Colours, the prominence of the service counter encouraged customers to encounter staff on first entering the café. These counters were places where regulars and new visitors were identified and sorted, and computer time and other purchases were made. CheapCall

charges £1 for 90 minutes of internet access, and at Colours the same amount buys 60 minutes. From the moment the door was pushed open, it was evident that the internet was a personally mediated experience in these cafés, rather than a lone encounter with an access code or a solitary confrontation with a recalcitrant kiosk.

Regulars often had machines which they preferred, and known time-slots. This was particularly important during busier evenings at CheapCall where staff had to juggle expectations as well as fitting users into free spaces as they became available. There was considerable pressure on staff during these times, and occasionally one of the two men at the counter would retreat into a small office behind the serving space and appear to busy himself with paperwork or make telephone calls. At Colours there was no such space to retreat without leaving the café floor altogether. The pressure on this smaller venue was much less intense, and the two workers behind the counter tended to find time to arrange the books and gift items while clearing tables and regulating the use of the computers. At CheapCall there was no real 'café service'. Snacks and canned drinks were taken to the computers and cleared up by customers themselves, or at the end of the evening by staff.

In Trinidad Miller and Slater found that at one internet café, gay male users could create a safer space for viewing homoerotic imagery by using a private room (Miller and Slater, 2000: 74). There was no back room at either café where customers could retreat from other users. Colours was too small to offer such a facility and, as was suggested above, the spatial layout offered very little privacy. At CheapCall the second room was partitioned with large windows, so that monitors in the second room were visible, especially by those around the busy counter area. Although it had a door, this room therefore offered less privacy than the screens in the front part of the café, where a customer could construct a fairly private space at a terminal because of the separators which had been installed.<sup>10</sup>

Both cafés offered visitors some insight into the technical infrastructure of internet access by the placing of networking hardware in prominent positions. At CheapCall, the owner would stand on a chair and fiddle with the settings on a black box 'from BT [British Telecom]'. At Colours, the central computer was on the counter, as was the networking box. At both venues there had been no attempt to disguise the rudimentary wiring which linked up the café computer networks. The relative visibility of the network in the café space was in complete contrast to the situation at easyInternetCafé, where almost no wires are visible.

At Colours, tables were set up in the middle of the café for those waiting for computer access, permitting recognizable café rituals to take place, such as scanning for customers about to leave a table (see Laurier et al., 2001). However, being at an internet café also meant dealing with new kinds of challenges, such as being able to see a stranger's computer screen. Because

Colours had such a small floor area it was noticeable that the computer screens were visible to most of the other customers who were not online. However, none of the customers expressed any concerns about privacy or a wish to conceal their screens, even when typing personal emails. In CheapCall, by contrast, thin wood divides had been built between the screens lined up along each side of the computer area, and screen sharing was difficult without pushing a chair out, a move which then resulted in revealing the content of the screens on either side. Although groups of young men seemed to dominate the centre aisle of CheapCall, drawing comments from the young professional users, it was difficult to see how they could have done otherwise and still been able to share one screen.

This description indicates two contrasting settings for the social and material achievement of internet access. In each café there were complex and overlapping sets of spatial orders, which also related to other new technologies which are embedded in contemporary urban life in London. As well as internet access, the role of telephony was central. At both cafés the prevalence of using mobile phones while on the computer was marked, and in some instances customers appeared to be establishing a form of temporary workspace by co-ordinating computer and mobile phone use. For example, a student who lived near to CheapCall came in to the café for the morning to finish writing a project, check email, and at the same time remained in contact via his mobile phone, due to the fact that unlike his college computer lab, there was no expectation in the internet café that a phone should be switched off. The imperative to connect for such users, particularly the younger customers, was far stronger in terms of maintaining mobile phone connectivity than it was via a computer-based online connection. These internet cafés are linked into other interaction possibilities, not only relating to face-to-face conversation, but also the increased use of voice calls and texting on mobile phones.

## THE INTERSECTION OF TECHNOSCAPES AND ETHNOSCAPES

Just as important as spatial layout in understanding the way which these spaces functioned as internet cafés was the way in which each of the spaces drew upon the experience of local context. The character of the neighbourhood, in particular the demographics of inhabitants, was a crucial factor in understanding how these cafés position themselves in terms of the internet. In creating their business, each café has to present their particular version of internet access as something which can be purchased by a variety of local users. Therefore, both cafés made complex connections between the experience of their local area, spatial relations inside the café, and purchasing time online, *without* drawing on the early rhetoric of promised benefits of the internet, or a discourse of access to global networks. CheapCall revolved

around its facilities as a telecommunications hub, in part for a section of the local Somalian community; Colours set out to integrate internet terminals into a café serving fresh juice and sandwiches, a book and gift shop, and on some evenings a venue for poetry and music performance with an emphasis on Turkish culture. Just as the cafés can be seen as being part of contemporary technoscapes, they are also embedded within the dynamics of migration, asylum and transnational movement of cultural and ethnic groups. Appadurai refers to this global cultural flow as an ‘ethnoscape’, also including tourists as playing part of the movement across borders (Appadurai, 1990). CheapCall and Colours represent spaces in which technoscapes and ethnoscapings intersect; the local experiences of global computer networks are cross-cut by practices of living in a multicultural neighbourhood community with many recent migrants.

CheapCall is run by two Somali immigrants, and many of the customers have links to this region. A significant amount of profit comes from selling top-up cards for pay-as-you-go mobile phones, and international calling cards which could be used elsewhere. There were 20 machines organized around the edges of a main room, with the counter to one side, serving as a separator between the internet access and the telephone service. There was also a glass-enclosed smaller room with a further 12 machines, which was largely used for training in the evenings. The owners had set up training courses in Somali which were advertised on laser printed posters round the walls of the main room. The training notices were in Somali; most of the other notices were also translated into English.

The nearby Colours was run by a man and young woman both of Turkish origin, and was much smaller in size than CheapCall. Whereas on entering CheapCall the first sight greeting a customer at the counter was a wall full of adverts for phone cards, and a scheme to unlock blocked mobile phone services, at Colours there was a counter display of cultural events happening around London, many of which were organized by the local Turkish community. The owners wanted Colours to be welcoming and a friendly place to ‘have lunch and use the computers’.

Both CheapCall and Colours are fittingly described as ‘places of sociability’. Often the dominant forms of communication at each café were talking and looking, rather than computer interactions. Customers, staff and the owners of Colours and CheapCall created their own complex mappings of the space in the cafés. From the point of view of its owners, CheapCall functioned primarily as a way in which to maximize use of (and therefore profit from) the computer and telephone infrastructure, and this was reflected in how the owners had set up the space, with telephone services and computers split into different areas. However, this also meant that there was a division of customers, as most of the customers using the telephone service were older women calling countries in Africa or Asia. By contrast

the computer users fell into two groups: younger Somali men and other young immigrants, who were often unemployed and would spend long periods on the machines, and local students and young professionals who tended to purchase shorter times slots to check email before or after work or classes. This led the café to appear visibly segregated by gender, and to a lesser extent by ethnic or cultural identity. Even to a customer who did not notice the back area of the café, the heterogeneity of their fellow users was often evident in the websites in different languages left open on the machines.

### Internet café identities

Miller and Slater have proposed that the dynamic of objectification between identity and the internet in Trinidad could be described in two interrelated ways: *expansive realization*, in which the internet is a way to enact a version of oneself which may be regarded as old but now can be realized through the internet; and *expansive potential*, in which one can imagine a new way of being, which may be projected as a feature of the technology itself (the authors offer 'transcendence of mundane identities' as an example of this point; Miller and Slater, 2000: 10–11). Both ways highlight the way in which versions of self are constructed and reconstructed in relation to internet experiences, and will be examined here in terms of the links between identifications and the kind of interactions evident at each café. At Colours and CheapCall all the following types of interactions were integral to the internet experience (including which online sites were visited, which other activities were undertaken and which were abandoned): interactions with the computer (touching or speaking to the machine); via the computer (email, chat, web browsing); with other customers; with staff at the café; and on a mobile phone.

In Colours and CheapCall, customers often became entangled processes of identification through the viewing of websites and participation in chat spaces. The most likely websites to be left onscreen at CheapCall were those involving news about African countries, including news in French. At Colours, the logout screen to Hotmail, Yahoo or AOL was frequently the first website to greet the next user. Displays of the kinds of information which other people had been accessing, either because they had left webpages on screen, or because they were visible in the 'history' button of the web browser, also allowed customers to track websites used by others and make assumptions about their identities. One morning several machines at CheapCall had been left on the oppositional website <http://www.algerie.com> (title 'pour une autre Algerie'), and <http://www.bbc Somali.com> was another popular site at this café. Therefore, even without talking to any other customers, anyone using the café was frequently faced with identifying the marks of others. Many sites left in this fashion appeared to confirm that

recently departed users had been checking sites about African countries or chatting in Africa-themed chat spaces. For some of the Somali young men who regularly read news about Africa via webpages and participated in email chat with relatives abroad, there was a sense in which they were enabled to realise a global and mobile online version of their identity through participation at the café. The chat spaces which were observed were often organized around ethnic and cultural identities rather than neighbourhood location, and therefore contrast with other mainstream UK location-based discussions.<sup>11</sup>

Yet much of the expansive capacity of the internet had nothing to do with the potential virtuality of participation in the space. Owners and workers in both cafés were well known to regulars, not only in their roles of running the machines and selling other products, but also as conduits of information about the local communities of which they were a part. At Colours this was more explicitly about cultural events, such as leaflets and posters about concerts or readings, than at CheapCall, where informal gossip was particularly prevalent. Regulars would come in at both venues and shake hands or greet whoever was at the counter, before beginning their next activity. In this way each internet café stretched out into its neighbourhood, both by the circulation of local customers and by acting as a place where news and gossip could be exchanged. In one of the other cafés in our study there were large amounts of radical political propaganda in the form of free newspapers, suggesting that internet cafés are serving as information points much as might occur in a community centre or private social club. By their extended presence in the spaces, the café staff was able to accumulate a place in the neighbourhood, which went above and beyond the way in which they regulated access to online activities.

### **Chatters and checkers**

In both cafés, spoken interaction was very important and another way in which identifications were evident. Talk around the computers tended to be in a mixture of English and another language, whereas prolonged conversations around the counters were rarely in English. Regulars who spoke only English tended not to linger or chat as much those involved in these conversations. In terms of internet use, regulars could be segregated into broad categories of 'checkers' and 'chatters'. 'Checkers' were those who came, used the computers quickly en route to another activity. These were largely young professionals or students from the neighbourhood. One example is a secondary school teacher who came into Colours every day to log on to her Hotmail account. Although she could do this at school during a break, she preferred the café because of the relaxed atmosphere as compared with her workplace. It had become part of her routine between work and home, and she used it as part of segregating the two (see

Nippert-Eng, 1995). 'Chatters' were those who interacted extensively with others before, after and often during their time online. This group were the most likely not to be speaking English in the café. An example of this type of user was a small business owner who used Colours as a way in which to catch up on news on the neighbourhood while also checking websites about the Turkish football team. Although much of the information on the website was also available during the conversation, the two activities were intertwined – checking a website became a means through which to extend the interaction in the café.

These categories of user are crude indications of use, and were cross-cut by gender, complicated by the many different cultural assumptions about gendered roles. The different distribution of men and women was particularly noticeable at CheapCall, where very few female 'chatters' came to use the computers. Rather this category of customer had come to use the cheap international telephone services, even though accompanying men might use the computers.

Yet the categories of chatters and checkers brings into view the linkage of the spatial and temporal aspects of these two locations, for these types of use are linked to different kinds of movement through space and time, both within the café and through London. Inside CheapCall the marking of time was most prominent through the software Nettime, which cut off access as soon as the allocated time slot was finished.<sup>12</sup> Even though they were both regulated temporarily by similar technical means, chatters and checkers had different versions of the product of the internet café. Checkers were likely to describe alternative means of getting internet access, sometimes speaking of an interchangeable range of regular public internet access points which they used; they were able to outline how each kind might fit into their regular routines. Chatters rarely used other venues, even when the network was not working. A broken connection was further opportunity to socialize and expand their range of connections, or use their mobile phones and engage in other conversations. When the network broke down, money was refunded, although many customers waited for nearly 30 minutes at their terminals rather than going to another internet café (the nearest is five minutes walk away, although not on the same street) suggesting that the café had a certain holding power. By contrast at Colours, one of the counter staff pointed out that if the computers were not working properly customers could always stay and have a cup of coffee, read the papers (which were delivered daily) and look at the books and music on sale. There was no automatic cut-off from the internet, and customers could overrun by five minutes or so by asking to 'just finish what I'm doing'. Extending the experience of the internet café beyond the time on the computers, in the evenings Colours hosted poetry readings, and posters for past cultural events

plastered the inside of the toilet facilities. At CheapCall there were no public organized activities after closing time.

From this description, we would expect that the imaginings of these two sites reported by customers would be quite different. However, for the *regulars* at both cafés they were remarkably similar, envisaged as places to socialise and meet others as much as to use the internet facilities. Although the lack of spare chairs at CheapCall, and the layout of the space did not encourage customers to linger, many visitors would stand around the counter or the telephone boxes, hanging out and chatting to each other or staff. In fact, particularly in the mornings, a new customer would have to interrupt an extended conversation going on across the counter in order to signal that she or he would like to purchase some time on the computers. Although there were snacks and cold drinks, as well as computer supplies, for purchase most sales were carried out via a sparse side conversation if another interaction was going on. Despite the largely bare walls and unfinished air of the computer benches and counters at CheapCall, which gave it the air of a computer lab rather than a café, many young male users would come to the café in groups and cluster round one machine, or buy time on a single computer, and then draw chairs together in a nearby space and chat. For them, more than any other group, the internet café was a place in which to 'do what I want', which included internet chats, gaming, looking at pornographic images or chatting offline while one of the group wrote email.

### Outside the mainstream directories

Technically many of the internet cafés in London have the opportunity to be included in free advertising for their services, particularly through directories. Internet cafés may achieve visibility through policy-led initiatives related to the digital divide. Currently, internet cafés have two ways of being included in government schemes to promote ICTs.<sup>13</sup> Businesses can apply to become 'UK Online Centres' and/or 'Learndirect Centres'.<sup>14</sup> Currently there are 6000 UK Online Centres, coordinated by the Department for Education and Skills.<sup>15</sup> One of the benefits offered to internet cafés in becoming involved in such a scheme is publicity, including listing in an online database. However, cafés must take on an identity – through signs and leaflets – which indicate that they are linked to the scheme. In the list of criteria for becoming a UK Online Centre, the commitment is much more narrowly defined. The application form states that the mission is to 'support the Government's strategy for "e-government"' and specifically to 'access government and other public services electronically'.<sup>16</sup> Approximately 8 percent (500) of UK Online Centres are also linked to Learndirect, a programme which aims to help the public to update their skills.<sup>17</sup> Learndirect centres enable those without internet access to take a variety of

online courses by providing networked computer facilities.<sup>18</sup> Both UK Online and Learndirect have played an important role in targets for inclusion set by the current Labour government.

CheapCall and Colours had not enrolled in any of these schemes, nor did they refer to them in any way through posters or leaflets. Owners did not see a positive role for the government in the kind of internet access provision that they were trying to offer. Even though Colours and CheapCall did not present themselves as the kind of learning centres which are being promoted by government initiatives, informal kinds of knowledge were created and disseminated, showing how the internet was integrated into everyday activities and interests. The observations in this research support the importance of local social networks to learning, and the presence of learning activities even when no formal teaching was in place (Liff et al., 2002).

Neither had owners (or users) entered their cafés on free and independent online directories, and they seemed surprised that several of these existed. Such guides tend to be set up by internet café enthusiasts, rather than professional or commercial organizations.<sup>19</sup> It has been noted elsewhere that such websites provide one way in which to assess the number of internet cafés (Stewart, 2000), yet in the case of London they seem extremely unreliable. According to Netcafés (<http://www.netcafés.com>), there are 52 internet cafés in London.<sup>20</sup> According to Cybercaptive (<http://www.cybercaptive.com>), 44 are in operation. The UK-based guide Caféindex (<http://www.caféindex.co.uk>) – ‘the most comprehensive listing of all internet cafés in the UK’ – lists 64 cafés. Although all list the easyInternetCafé chains (sometimes under the earlier brand name), many cafés are entered in one directory but not others; neither of the cafés which are described in this article appear in either.

Both cafés are therefore ‘off the map’ in terms of directories and official initiatives, and it is unlikely that we would have found them had we not spotted their street presence during the research. Rather, owners and staff at both cafés talked of the visual impact on the street as the way in which they can attract custom, along with personal recommendation. Most of the smaller cafés have glass windows showing the computers inside, and use the windows as a place to advertise price per hour. There is little uniformity in the style of signs, and cafés may present internet access as a less important part of their enterprise than, for example, cheap international telephone calls, even though they have more computers than telephone facilities.

### **Contrasting easyInternetCafé: access as standardized**

The experiences of those in CheapCall and Colours is not only influenced by factors internal to the localities, but also by the way in which companies such as easyInternetCafé have been able to circulate images of the internet

experience as standardized and transferable. easyInternetCafés are the most visible urban manifestation of the internet, and as such are described here because of their economic and cultural impact on all London public access points. Although the common perception is that easyInternetCafés are populated by tourists, a survey suggested that half of the customers are London residents.<sup>21</sup> easyInternetCafés tend to be a reference point for other shops offering internet access, largely because the chain has such a prominent advertising strategy which highlights how cheap internet access is through their branches.<sup>22</sup>

The image of a ubiquitous yet standardized urban eating experience is being reworked in the suggestion that easyInternetCafés are providing internet access in convenient urban spaces. In late 2001, advertising for the easyInternetcafé chain claimed that it had provided café-based internet access near every important London location. By presenting the internet in this way, customers are asked to believe that location of the cafés is important (convenient, ubiquitous) but simultaneously that internet experience is not local and specific to each café. Experiences of accessing the internet in any one café in the chain is to be understood as interchangeable with any other branch. easyInternetCafés are also represented by the parent company as fitting into a particular kind of mobile urban lifestyle which is dictated by multiple forms of consumption. The company's media pack asserts that

we know many customers will not be out and about purely to go online – they're shopping, meeting friends for a drink, on their way from home or sightseeing . . . they often find that they stay [in the café] for far longer than expected as they get embroiled in a news story, see a great site or end up chatting [online] or planning their next holiday. (easyInternetCafé, 2002)

Many of the users of CheapCall and Colours spoke of easyInternetCafés as symbolizing a particular kind of impersonal atmosphere, although acknowledging access there could be very cheap. One of the customers who was interviewed at the Colours café stated that it was this 'cattle-like' treatment which led to her avoiding the mainstream cafés, even though they were much cheaper than the local options and were convenient, as she regularly travelled into central London. There were references to the easyGroup's brand colour in independent internet cafés, most obviously in the frequent use of bright orange for walls and signs (orange was used to decorate large parts of both cafés described in this article). Sometimes the colour orange was described by workers as giving the café a feeling of being 'modern' or 'up to date, like the internet' rather than as a direct reflection of the décor of an easyInternetCafé. An extensive online webpage presence, in terms of dedicated sets of webpages and links, distinguished easyInternetCafés and the other chains such as Internet Exchange from the

smaller establishments. easyInternetCafés not only advertised their related brands on-screen, but provided the website viewer with detailed information about other locations, extensive media cuttings and press releases, and a 'how it all started' story.<sup>23</sup> The websites for the larger cafés were often slick and sophisticated, and used as the screensaver on the in-store machines. In contrast, many of the independent cafés had websites which offered often only very basic information about the café, and in one case, did not give opening times.

easyInternetCafés play an important role in the social process of location of ICTs in London. They encourage Londoners to prioritize price and central location, but at the same time they avoid any representation of a particular locality as having distinctive characteristics. There is no difference, in their terms, between High Street Kensington, Tottenham Court Road, Oxford Street, Victoria, Trafalgar Square or Kings Road, Chelsea. This is a strategy which borrows heavily from the philosophy of the parent easyGroup and its reputation for 'no frills' cheap air travel and car hire. However, in so doing the easyGroup helps to reinscribe a particular kind of placelessness for the internet experience. This is in stark contrast to the independent internet cafés as described earlier in this article.

### Local and global: the London internet café experience

The relocation of ICTs in London through internet cafés has taken place through both chains such as easyInternetCafé *and* small independent businesses. All these cafés are part of the technoscape of the city. London as a place has managed to sustain multiple versions of the internet café, despite the massive economic and cultural dominance of easyInternetCafé. Whereas easyInternetCafé is making alliances with fast food outlets and their imagery of standardized experiences, the two smaller cafés described in this article operated through two extremely specific fashions of combining local and global experiences. The placelessness implied by easyInternetCafé's model of public access stands out in contrast to the experience of many of the users of Colours and CheapCall, but not all. For checkers, there tended to be far less of an emphasis on particular cultural affordances of the place. Although the secondary school teacher liked the atmosphere in Colours, she would have replaced it with another small independent internet café which offered similar ambience, regardless of the kind of cultural events that it was promoting. This implies a kind of transferability between the same kinds of translations of internet access, and that internet cafés themselves became mobile devices, in that they permitted travel around the city while maintaining the possibility of access.

Regarding virtuality as a social accomplishment in this article has led to an emphasis on uncovering many temporal and spatial arrangements at the two cafés. The findings support the importance of looking at the spatial and

temporal aspects of places as centres of consumption. Both cafés were embedded in places which were centres of local consumption, although the virtual resources might be global or be implicated in the doing of global mobility. For many users, the global implications were not merely the ability to send email around the world, but the complications of being a migrant and using email to contact multiple social networks, including finding resources that enabled the navigation of local space. To use the internet was to engage in the consumption of place, both the café and the neighbourhood. Despite contrasting aesthetics of the café interior, Colours and CheapCall both incorporate multiple elements of local material culture that came to be integrated in the experience of internet access. The cafés were sites of visual consumption, including posters and flyers, which contrast with the lack of local notices at easyInternetCafé. The research points to an increasing diversification of internet cafés in London, and this requires further investigation in relation to assumptions about the role of public internet access in ameliorating the digital divide.

Colours and CheapCall offer access to diverse members of local communities, as well as to online facilities. In this way the social process of location of the internet involved the changing demographic profile of the neighbourhood. The private social clubs or community centres which are common in this borough are aimed at one ethnic or cultural group and may be strongly gendered. In contrast, these internet cafés were rare local venues where prolonged interactions were possible, although not frequent, between different groups. The visibility of the information and communication behaviours of those users who were unlike oneself was a significant way in which local concerns were articulated through the technology, and a therefore a way in which the ICTs were incorporated into daily experiences of space and time. Even though news about world events on <http://www.bbc Somali.com> or the state of Turkish football might seem to prove the importance of global networks, at Colours and CheapCall these were primarily locally meaningful knowledge, with temporal significance.

## Notes

- 1 The café names have been changed. The area is shown in a recent government survey as well below the London average connection rate (Greater London Authority, 2002).
- 2 Fares on public transport are calculated in London on the basis of zone. Travel costs increase the more zones are traversed. Travel zones are used as ways of describing space in the city alongside the names of neighbourhoods, particularly when planning travel. Most of the internet café chains have branches only in Zones 1 or 2. Further details and maps showing how zones correlate with tube and bus fares can be found at <http://www.londontransport.co.uk/>
- 3 easyInternetCafé Media pack at <http://www.easyinternetcafé.com>, 'Advertise with us'.

- 4 The other large London-wide chain is Internet Exchange (opened 1997), with five main locations and 13 smaller facilities which are run in association with public libraries. Smaller chains include Nethouse cafés and concessions within Virgin shops. Further details can be found at <http://www.easyinternetcafé.com>, and <http://www.internet-exchange.co.uk>. Internet Exchange also has an affiliate brand, Internet Lounge, with three branches in London.
- 5 The fieldwork was carried out by Tomoko Kurihara and Nina Wakeford, and was conducted as part of a collaborative project funded by Sapien and Intel. See <http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/incite> for further details.
- 6 A methodological note: at the smaller cafés, websites visited by the machine's previous user were often left visible when the next customer logged on, and these also provided an indication of the kind of information which had been accessed via the web, not only to ourselves, but to any subsequent customer. More personal data about login names and online identities was not collected unless raised in conversation. However in several instances the user did not, or did not know how to, log off their personal settings, leaving the possibility of accessing and changing personal information, or taking on the online identity of the user. For ethical reasons, the researchers logged out of these accounts before using the computer. More surprisingly, there were frequently CVs left on the hard drives of the machines which, unlike at easyInternetCafé, could be used for storage. These could be used for directly inspecting the identity of others, although in fact few users paid attention to saved documents on the screen 'desktop'. We spoke to several users who were constructing their CVs using the café facilities, and found that they were also using jobsearch websites at the café, although no one said that they had secured employment through these means.
- 7 Members of this group 'talked about the salience of their identity as part of "new media" . . . [their community was] linked to a particular elective affinity group associated with lifestyle, music, aesthetics, décor and clothing' (Pratt, 2000b: 432).
- 8 This term is taken from Du Gay et al.'s discussion of the history of the Sony Walkman (Du Gay et al., 1996)
- 9 Kiosks are not discussed in this article, although elsewhere we have suggested that they are difficult to use and at present attract a very limited number of customers. Details of kiosk study are available at <http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/incite>
- 10 In terms of privacy, the role of being a customer was circumscribed at CheapCall by the presence, in the café, of a CCTV camera trained on the computers. This camera was officially for use when the café was shut to deter theft. In fact the CCTV tended to be left on during the café hours, although it was rarely consulted.
- 11 For example <http://www.upmystreet.com>
- 12 Information about this software is available at <http://www.nettimesoftware.com/>
- 13 A House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology in 1996 used 'the spread of cybercafés' as evidence of demand for internet access in the UK (Liff et al., 2002). A couple of years later, a survey of the IT for All initiative showed that a small number of cybercafés were amongst the organizations offering free introductions to the computer and the internet (Liff et al., 2002: 80).
- 14 <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/ukonlinecentres/>
- 15 <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/ukonlinecentres/whatis/default.cfm>
- 16 <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/ukonlinecentres/howdo/default.cfm>
- 17 'Centre Focus' article at <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/ukonlinecentres/>
- 18 <http://www.learndirect.co.uk/personal/centres/>

- 19 There is a professional association for internet café owners, the International Association of Cybercafés (<http://www.theiac.org/>), but during our fieldwork period this page was ‘under reconstruction’.
- 20 <http://www.netcafés.com/city.asp?name = London>, 10 October 2002.
- 21 See the ‘Media Pack’ at <http://www.easyinternetcafé.com>. The data presented here also suggests that the average customer in a easyInternetCafé in the UK is likely to be between 20–29 years-old (54% of users). There are slightly fewer women (46%) than men. Of those non-residents, another 20 percent are staying in London for over three months. Over three-quarters (76%) have access elsewhere.
- 22 Recent reports have suggested that the easyGroup has put \$130 million into developing their chain of cafés worldwide. Nevertheless, the precarious nature of running these facilities has become apparent in an ongoing series of closures and openings of easy branded cafés. Until October 2001, the cafés traded under easyEverything. They were renamed at the same time as the company ‘offloaded a number of European outlets’ (closed branches).
- 23 ‘Autumn 1998, Stelios, inspired by the success of Internet sales for his airline easyJet.com, plans to launch a new company easyEverything – the chain of the world’s largest Internet cafés. The name easyEverything is chosen because just about everything can be found on the Internet’, <http://www.easyeverything.com/mission/history.html>.

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NINA WAKEFORD is a Foundation Fund lecturer in sociology and social methodology at the Department of Sociology, University of Surrey. She has studied women's experiences of virtual communities, funded by an ESRC post-doctoral award. This included fieldwork in and around Silicon Valley while based at the University of California, Berkeley. She is Review Editor for *Sociological Research Online*.

**Address:** Department of Sociology, University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey GU2 7XH, UK.  
 [email: [N.Wakeford@soc.surrey.ac.uk](mailto:N.Wakeford@soc.surrey.ac.uk)]

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