

REVIEWS

BOOK

**Inhabiting cyberspace and emerging cyberplaces:  
The case of Siena, Italy**

By Tobias Boos

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Tobias Boos draws attention to new media and the intersection between the real and the virtual as exemplified in the phenomenon of “cyberspace” in the case of Siena (Boos 2017, v), Italy and its neighborhoods (*contrade*) in his book, entitled *Inhabiting Cyberspace and Emerging Cyberplaces: The Case of Siena, Italy*. Studying Siena’s *contrade* not only reveals the interface between offline and online worlds but also demonstrates how these ancient communities have transcended the virtual via their “sizeable websites” (5). This book is first of the Geography of Media series that hopes to highlight emerging trends in the study of “place-based phenomena” (v).

Boos discusses succinctly the debates in the literature regarding the “duality” or “hybridity” of the “real and the virtual” worlds and of the “immaterial” or “material worlds” and proposes middle way phenomenological theoretical and methodological approaches that underpin the analysis of his study (21). He aims to reduce the gap between “critical-theoretical geographers and applied geographers” by arguing that a “phenomenological theoretical framework grounds theory in empirical work” (5).

The author begins by clarifying concepts of community (“a socio-cultural order in which members are bound together by a feeling of mutual belonging”) (4), cyberspace (“an aggregation of a large number of places”) (3), and cyberplaces (“composites made up of online and offline places”) (3). The first chapter also provides an apt description of the organization of the book.

Chapter 2 presents the literature on cyberplaces vis-à-vis terms, such as “place”, “space” and “community” (13). The assemblage of ideas attributed to cyberplace presents the complexity of this phenomenon pertaining to “online and offline communities” (25). Boos highlights in this chapter that past studies show that

there is no “clear” distinction between the online and offline worlds. The use of new media creates the impression that cyberspace allows discussions ranging from the fluidity to the hybridity and to the transformative experiences of “social and cultural practices and orders of daily life” (25). While Boos intended this work for media geographers, political scientists may also find this chapter useful because it presents consequences of cyberspace on the political, from social constructivist and political economic approaches. For instance, studying cyberspace can equalize access where people, ideally, can “freely meet” and can share their ideas but, at the same time could “transfer inequalities” from the offline to the online world because of the “unbalanced character of power relations” (15–9). Indeed, this phenomenon may have positive or negative implications on democracy and on political participation in terms of broadening the space for discourse. This chapter also highlights how the *Gemeinschaft* or “the feeling of belonging found among its members” of community is strengthened in the virtual world through the “localization of cyberspace” (19–26). The author cited the use of local language and elements such as local markets, festivals, and even local jobs for members, as examples.

In Chapter 3, Boos explains why the complex web of cyberplaces and cyberspaces can be analyzed better through the existential phenomenological approach. He justifies this by saying that the contested identity that results in the local and global contexts of online communities necessitates the employment of this perspective. In this chapter, the author attempts to engage readers by explaining Heidegger’s existential phenomenology and how recent scholarship (e.g., Miller 2016, Moores 2012) provides a unique perspective in examining “a blending of humans and modern technology” (Boos 2017, 39). For example, Boos cited Miller who suggested that the contemporary self includes the “virtual presences of profiles, avatars, databases” (Miller 2016; Boos 2017, 48). From this chapter, technology is seen as “a mode of ‘unconcealment’” or a means by which human actions and interactions and “power relations” can be revealed (Boos 2017, 46–53). This chapter, likewise presents the perspective that webpages reflect proportionate degrees of “publicities and intimacies” (53), “identities” (51), and “self-representations” that can be known through the “visual and linguistic style” of their website designs (53). This enable web pages producers to have control over the “personal/collective identity” that “creates intimacy” which in turn creates “audience loyalty” among the targeted members of these websites (52–3). The author, at this point, implies the dilemmas inherent in cyberplaces like the *contrade* that are exposed to a “global public” and the various communities and identities that they themselves create and attract (53).

Chapter 4 presents the methodology and methods used by the author. Boos discusses how he used web content analysis in analyzing media content by using “virtualethnography” and “netnography” (Hine 2000; Kozinets 2015; Boos 2017, 60).

Media content analysis requires an in-depth examination and interpretation of a website and its web of connections which in this case refers to the “web sphere” of the *contrade* and its “sociocultural-technological-material context” (Boos 2017, 59–61). Boos analyzed both the online and offline web of connections of the *contrade* through the employment of a wide variety of data gathering research methods that include online and virtual fieldwork, observations, interviews, content analysis of local papers, text analysis of content and audio-visual analysis of images, videos and sounds in the website. Boos explains that he was guided by the “circularity” of theory and data and the application of both the deductive and inductive approaches in his research (68).

Chapter 5 provides a breather because it provides the background information on contemporary Siena and its *contrade*. It is the shortest chapter in the book but it is crucial in understanding the selection of the case. It highlights the characteristic features of the central city of Siena and its 17 neighborhoods. In this chapter, Boos justifies that Siena’s *contrade* are more than “territorial districts” worthy of closer inspection because they represent “socio-cultural orders” with their own “institutional structures” and most importantly, because they consist of active and regular members (“*contradaioli*”) regardless of their nationality (74).

In Chapter 6, the author discusses the historical and mythical origins of Siena. Likewise, Boos explains the meanings behind important symbols (i.e., the she-wolf, the Virgin Mary) in Siena thereby, demystifying its context in the process. The author traces the origin of the *palio*, a colorful horse race festival where riders carry a colorful flag that represents their city, to the growth of the community in Siena’s *contrade* that spanned centuries dating back from their ancient history. Boos highlights that the *palio* festival had been institutionalized by interested communities and was devoid of political or religious colors as reflected in the symbols that the *contrade* use in their websites.

Chapter 7 describes and analyzes in greater detail, the websites of Siena’s *contrade*. Boos examines first the language, the outgoing and incoming links of the *contrade*, before discussing the websites’ “styles of representation” (91). The websites represent the interface between the offline and virtual realities of individuals who inhabit the contemporary cyberspaces. All the evidences provided in this chapter suggest that the *contrade* “inhabit intimate cyberplaces” because of the “relatively high density of outgoing links” to websites of organizations related to the *contrade* system and because majority of the information in these websites are in Italian (94).

In Chapter 8, Boos presents an interpretative analysis of the contents of the websites of the *contrade*. These websites reveal the *contrade*’s history, significant places, maps, events and pictures while explaining their symbolism and together, these pieces of information depict a “complex temporal collage” (107). The author highlights the exclusivity of these websites by targeting members of the community

as evidenced in the use of the Italian language in essential contents of the *contrade*. This chapter emphasizes, as well, that the *contrade* are intimate places because the contents of the websites reflect and represent the concerns and interests (e.g., news, photographs, flats for rents, job market) of the *contradaioli* (or members) only.

Boos highlights in Chapter 9 that on the outside, the *contrade* projects itself as the “*contrade* complex” (112), that provides a glimpse of the “idealized neighborhoods” and idealized identities” to an “undifferentiated audience” (116–18). At the same time, the author adds that there are clear and visible identifiable markers that give away their “collective identity” as distinct global online (and offline) communities because of their unique “educational style of the text” and their “colorful visual style” that are able to maintain and retain their “intimate cyberplaces”(117–18).

Finally, Chapter 10 concludes the study of Siena’s *contrade*. In this chapter Boos reiterates important findings pertaining to the case of Sienna’s *contrade*. For instance, the author emphasizes that “cyberplaces” are not commodified objects of the globalized environment but “new temporal and spatial horizons” where communities can forge their “collective identities” (123). And that online communities and places inform and “co-evolve” with, but never mirror, their physical counterparts because there is no “unidirectional causality between online and offline representations” (124).

What does it take to make relevant and timely the *contrade* of Siena in Italy, even to non-Italian scholars? The answer seems simple at first, but probing into the phenomenon of creating cyberplaces and cyberspaces is a daunting task that requires understanding communities and their collective identities, examining web hyperlinks, and analyzing their co-constitutive online and offline presence, contexts and symbols (e.g., as represented in the colors and representative animals of the *contrade*, and; a photo gallery showing pictures of its museum and festivals). Boos has accomplished a lot. Admittedly, the author gave uneven attention in the discussions of the literature review (Chapter 2) and the methodology (Chapter 4). While Chapter 2 satiates, Chapter 4 leaves readers asking for more discussion on “virtual ethnography” and “netnography” (66). In terms of organization, it is odd though acceptable to find the discussion of the historical framework of the *contrade* after the chapter on contemporary *contrade* of Sienna. Perhaps, Chapters 5 and 6 could have been merged and expanded for the benefit of non-Italian readers. Nevertheless, this book is definitely a positive contribution to the literature that examines the phenomenon of the World Wide Web and how it enables real communities to project identities and intimacies through their cyberplaces.

## References

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