THE CONCEPT OF TRADITION: ITS SURVIVAL, TRANSFORMATION AND VIRTUAL WORLD REFASHIONING

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CLOSE WITHOUT SAVING? HOW LOCAL TRADITIONS MAY WITHSTAND A DIGITAL DEMISE

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The irrepressible expansion of social media continues to inspire fear over the losses of distinctive local culture. The more digitally connected humans become – the well-worn dystopian argument goes – the weaker our ties to our geographic and cultural surroundings; our immediate friends and neighbours; and, by extension, the inclination to preserve traditions. Geography and history are certainly key to conceptualizing culture and tradition, but so, too, are those facets central to understanding the digital. How one engages digitally is largely shaped by offline culture, norms, behaviours, and expectations. Thus, any transformative power of the web is best understood situated within specific socio-cultural contexts of offline life.

This paper will focus on the Catalan social drama known as the Passeig. This urban ritual, emblematic of public sociality throughout Catalonia, is at risk of extinction. At the time of my ethnographic fieldwork (2007-2009), the activity was depicted by locals of all ages as on the wane, with its central stage deemed by youths as the outdated domain of their grandparents. However, a particular type of interaction on social media shares many similarities with the custom of the passeig, despite youth insistence that such a practice is irrelevant to their lives. Is the power of social media to erode traditions the culprit of such a demise, or merely a red herring? A case study of the most popular social media site among young Catalans during this period will reveal that the lifespan of a tradition is surprisingly not platform-dependent.

INTRODUCTION

Despite its many recognized benefits, digital communication is commonly disparaged as a poor facsimile for "real life". The irrepressible expansion of social media in particular inspires fears over the ultimate loss of some ephemeral essence of what it means to be human. It seems almost too obvious that social media will inevitably disrupt, corrupt, or entirely efface traditions that rely on established, long-term connections between people in shared physical locales. When fears over a loss of cultural heritage or character are raised, few question the notion that the global reach of technology is largely to blame for eroding face-to-face interaction. The internet, social media, and mobile phones have created always-on access to global information that is assumed to dilute the distinctiveness of peoples and places around the world.

The power of social media to facilitate widespread change should not be underestimated (Postill 2014; AlSayyad and Guvenc 2015). However, that social media inevitably causes a total systemic break with any local history or cultural identity is a misconception. The rich diversity of ethnographic studies of different media practices, platforms and communities around the world challenges the idea that there is a blanket homogeneity of digital culture. When digital media are situated in cultural contexts found in particular places, the data is far more contradictory (Horst and Miller 2012). In some circumstances, social media can become a powerful tool for reinvention of self (Boellstorff 2008; Wang 2016); in other times and places, it may garner very little interest or even avoidance (Nicolescu 2016). More often, any notable transformations of self and society, or seeming continuities with traditional values, are entangled at various stages throughout the engagement with digital media (Costa 2016; Pype 2016; Miller 2016).

Figure 1: Location of Figueres

Figure 2: La Rambla, Figueres

Figure 3: Steps to the Rambla and Monument to Narcís Monturiol

Figure 4: Traditional "ramblejar", early 1900s

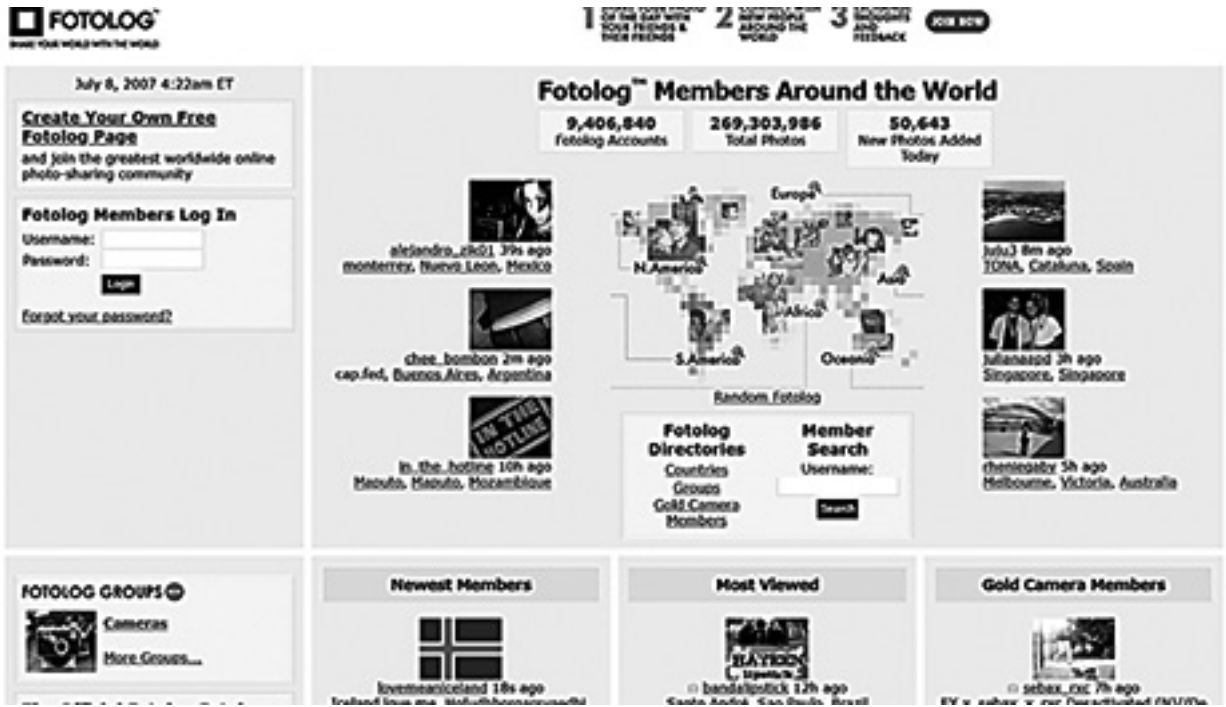

Figure 5: Fotolog homepage, July 2007

Figure 6: Author's Fotolog page

Figure 7: Typical Figuerenc teen's photo page on Fotolog

Figure 8: Typical Fotolog user upload from Figueres

Geography and history are key to conceptualizing both culture and tradition. They are also central to understanding the digital. Interactions on social media are fundamentally shaped by existing, offline cultural traits and norms. These can be much more resistant to digital usurpation than we might expect. In this respect, digital adaptations can express strong continuity with traditions and not simply herald their extinction. Any potential transformative power of the web is best understood with this cultural context in mind. In short, the "placeless" Internet (Crang, et al. 2007: 2406) is not placeless at all.

How are local traditions affected by unfettered access to social media: are they discarded, altered, or might they even be reinvigorated? To determine what competing or contradictory trajectories evolving mediated practices might hold for long-held customs, it would be a mistake to view the digital as an outside force set apart from the towns and cities where individuals live and where traditions are born, nurtured, or otherwise forgotten. Evidence of culture loss or preservation will not be found on the web alone. It requires a closer look at how non-digital lives change in parallel with these technologies.

AN URBAN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DIGITAL MEDIA

The city of Figueres is the capital of the comarca of the Alt Empordà, in the province of Girona (Figure 1 Location of Figueres, see page 65). Nestled in the foothills of the Pyrenees in the most north-eastern corner of Catalonia in Spain, it is only a short distance from the French border. At the heart of the Girona-Costa Brava-Perpignan triangle and doorway to the Pyrenees, Figueres holds a natural status in the region as a cultural crossroads, transit hub, and commercial center. It is also known regionally as one of the strongholds of Catalan culture and tradition. Catalan nationalist sentiment is plentiful in Figueres, along

with strong pride in its local and regional traditions. Catalan residents of the city are active and vocal about the importance of preserving all local Catalan customs as well as support for the Catalan independence movement (e.g. Piulachs 2022).

This article is based on data collected over 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Figueres from 2007 to 2009 that was equal parts urban and digital ethnography (Barone 2010). This period represents a significant snapshot in media temporality, as well as awareness of Catalan tradition, identity, and cultural preservation. At the time, social media was fairly nascent in the city and not widely used across all age groups, although its usage grew over the course of the research alongside significant developments such as the introduction of Facebook and the release of the first iPhone in Spain, both in 2008.

At the center of this analysis will be a plaza at the geographic heart of the city of Figueres known as the Rambla. Throughout my fieldwork, this urban space was the subject of much reflection and cultural introspection, especially – but not exclusively – among older Figuerencs. The once quasi-sacred social domain of the Rambla was continually reported to be in a prolonged decline from its past cultural significance. It was the site most often pointed to as the archetypical traditional space at the greatest risk of being forgotten. The case study presented below will focus on the Catalan social drama known as ramblejar, a performative stroll that takes place on the Rambla. From 2007-2009, this urban ritual, emblematic of public sociality throughout Catalonia, was purported by city residents of all ages to be all but extinct, and its eponymous plaza deemed by youths as the outdated domain of their grandparents.

After exploring this space, I will present an analysis of a popular social networking site among younger Figuerencs called Fotolog. Interactions on this social media platform share many similarities with the declining custom of ramblejar, despite youth insistence that such

a practice is irrelevant to their lives. Important continuities will be traced by exploring in more nuanced detail how people behave when navigating their increasingly saturated media environments. I will draw parallels between the two types of sociality to question whether the loss of one can truly be blamed on the other; and, moreover, if an urban custom long since recognized as on the decline may even have found renewed life online.

THE RAMBLA

Throughout Catalonia, a rambla refers to a large central plaza or boulevard devoted to public promenading. It has pride of place among all other plazas, as is the case of the Rambla in Figueres (Figure 2: La Rambla, see page 66). Encircled by cafes, bars, museums, and boutiques, Figueres' Rambla is located in the heart of the city and is the gateway to the Old Town. As a Figuerenc writer extolled: "If many Catalan cities have their Rambla, few compared with ours represent so much for the city"; and, it is "not only its central position or unquestionable beauty, but the function as market, public square and crossroads which it performs simultaneously" (Freixanet 1966: 148).

Installed from 1828-1935 to cover a river running through the city (Guillamet 1999: 195), it is an open and airy sycamore-lined passage with benches down either side. A perimeter of short green hedges and raised stone walls further marks off the space from the surrounding road. The parallel rows of wooden benches face inwards, reflecting how the "organization of plaza space distributes clusters of men, women, and children so that as they sit or stroll together, they become the audience for other small groups" (Richardson 1982: 430).

Built on a slight hill, at the eastern end, there are steps leading down from the Rambla to a small adjoining plaza. A monument dedicated to famous Figuerenc Narcís Monturiol – inventor of the combustion-powered submarine – was installed there in 1918 (Figure

3: Steps to the Rambla and Monument to Narcís Monturiol, see page 67). Stone railing around the steps complete the iconic plaza's stage-like appearance. An interactive art installation commemorating an even more infamous child of Figueres, surrealist artist Salvador Dalí, can also be found near the eastern steps and is a draw for many tourists as well as a meeting place for young people (Duran 2021).

Traditionally, a rambla is a salon for everyday strolling at midday and in the evenings as well on Sundays and holidays. Historically, it is the place where city dwellers go to visit friends, meet new people, amble back and forth to pubs and cafés and engage in lively conversation (cf. Corbin and Corbin 1987: 48-49). The term ramblejar is used to describe this activity. Residents of Figueres are quick to note that this is a term distinct to the Catalan language and one which describes a very proud and unique social tradition.

The public ritual encapsulated in the term ramblejar acts to solidify social bonds through simple greetings and instances of "phatic communion" (Malinowski 1923). Status and sociality on the Rambla are displayed by means of walking, talking, standing and "holding the body", some of which are pre-conscious while others are deliberate (see Bourgois and Schonberg 2007: 10, Mauss 1936; Bourdieu 1977). Up until the mid-1900s, dressing up in ones best formal attire for a stroll on the rambla was a public affair akin to being on stage (Goffman 1969). It was both the epicentre and backdrop of social life, and still holds that symbolism for many.

Older Figuerencs recall lively evenings of their youth spent on the Rambla, meeting up with friends, meandering to and from the bars, courting, chatting, gossiping, drinking and eating tapas or sitting and playing cards. Today, those with a memory of the rambla as a vibrant social hub are nostalgic for it. They lament that this longstanding cultural practice has all but disappeared among young people. Figuerencs of all ages agree that the significance of the Rambla in

Figueres can be said to be on a decline that started in force in the 1980s.

In 1989, journalist Narcís Pijoan lamented: "We witness, disconsolate, the total and irreparable disappearance of the Rambla as a place to meet friends, pass the time or stroll. In the forties, fifties and part of the sixties, our boulevard was the city's most famous and characteristic place" (quoted in Anglada, et al. 1999: 181). My research participants typically blamed the loss of rambla sociality on the arrival of television, video games and other household diversions in the 1980s and 1990s, and some continue to blame the internet and digital media as additional culprits.

The same wistful sentiment regarding the demise of the Rambla and its special place in Catalan life remains a subject of fascination in Figueres to the present day. A local newspaper report from 2021 places the blame squarely on social media, arguing that "social networks have done a lot of damage to the concept of Ramblejar" (Duran 2021). The article suggests that young people no longer meet in the iconic plaza to share their adventures of the week, their loves, heartbreaks, or so on, with one another because "everything that needs to be explained can be done through WhatsApp" (ibid.).

For their part, young people in Figueres also characterized the traditional Ramblejar to me as old-fashioned and boring (Figure 4: Traditional «ramblejar», early 1900s, see page 68). They prefer to spend time venturing out of the city to more entertaining spots like movie theatres, bowling alleys, nightclubs, or the beaches of the Costa Brava. Teens spotted on the Rambla in Figueres throughout the day may be rollerblading, skateboarding, biking, breakdancing or playing ball games on the plaza, to the chagrin of their grandparents. Alternatively, they congregate on the railings or steps at the periphery of the space to chat, skate, or listen to music aloud in small groups. For traditionalists, these transgressions are a perversion of the Rambla's "rules".

Is the decline of the Rambla as a social hub in Figueres indicative of dying tradition finally rendered extinct for good by social media? Are the generations so divided that the ramblejar ritual has lost its meaning in Catalan culture? On the contrary, I will suggest that the public displays of friendship, community, and self that typically define the Rambla tradition in Catalan cities remain at the forefront of youth interactions in Figueres. This can be read through their digitally mediated interactions on the social web. Furthermore, the archetypal social drama encapsulated in the term ramblejar may yet survive. In a new, hybrid and digitized form, the urban tradition is not lost: it exists even beyond the physical streets of the city.

FOTOLOG: AN ONLINE RAMBLA

Fotolog.com was an international social networking site for photo sharing from 2002 to 2019 (Figures 5, see page 69). Exceedingly popular in Chile, Argentina and Brazil, it had gained 15 million members in Spain as of 2008. At the time I entered the field in late 2007, Fotolog was one of the most popular social websites among young Figuerencs between the ages of 13 and 25, peaking in mid-2008. Throughout Spain, Fotolog far exceeded the popularity of Facebook as a social networking site among people aged 12-18 (Europa Press 2009).

It dates back to a time when the mobile web was only just becoming popular, as smartphones were not yet commonplace in Figueres. There were no Instagram, TikTok or WhatsApp. Unlike with Instagram, there was no use of Fotolog for commercial purposes from brands during the period of my fieldwork, but there were famous "floggers" – as Fotolog users were known – in the world. Most notably, there were a couple of teen celebrities from Argentina who were essentially early social media "influencers" that became famous offline as well as online, drawing crowds of fans at events hosted in person.

The functionality and simplicity of design are quite similar between today's Instagram and the web-based Fotolog of 2007-9. Both of these apps center on user-uploaded images. However, Fotolog limited users to a single photo upload per 24 hours. It also had some basic social features. Visitors to the user's photo page could leave comments for each photo as well as invite the photographer to "friend/follow" them and thereby join in their friend networks or public groups that they may belong to.

On any user's photo page (see Figures 6, see page 70, and 7, see page 71), their image of the day appears in the center. They can add a title and a description to be displayed beneath the photograph. Comments from visitors appear in a time-stamped list beneath that. The photograph is flanked on the left and right by columns of thumbnails. The left-hand column shows a selection of the user's most recent daily images from their timeline, while the right-hand column lists the latest photo uploads of some of the user's Fotolog "friends/favorites" which hyperlink to their profiles.

A majority of the daily photos uploaded by most of my hundreds of local contacts from Figueres were portraits or self-portraits, at a time before the term selfie had even fully entered the popular lexicon. It was also common to see some family photos or groups of friends on the beach, dancing in a club or at a party, with scenes of Figueres and local landmarks around the Costa Brava providing a backdrop (see Figure 7, see page 71). By following networks of friends on Fotolog, one can observe various incarnations of the same shared experiences posted the next day by different members of the group.

For Figuerencs, the Fotolog formula is simple: post a photo with a caption and wait for friends to comment; then comment on their photos in return. As one user explains: "I communicate with my friends. We put some photos up and then later we add some comments". Another teen describes their daily routine on the site: "I update everyday with

a photo and a text, like a personal diary. I share it with the others and I visit their fotologs to catch up with them and to stay in contact".

Image posts are captioned with a personal story like a blog entry that may include a diary, share a pop culture reference, a song, poem or joke. Life milestones are particularly popular times for posting, such as passing exams or celebrating a birthday. Together, they serve to keep visiting friends updated with mundane details of everyday life. The interaction between a flogger and their commenting followers cements a feeling of "staying in contact" and "knowing" one another. The social aspect of the accompanying blog post is also reflected in the common practice of listing the names of friends in the post as a "shout out" to them directly, denoting one's inner circle of important people. In this way, Fotolog is not unlike the traditional Rambla as an arena for flaunting friendships and fashions. It is somewhere to see and be seen.

Commenters show their affection and appreciation for their friends by praising their photo posts in comments, commiserating with them on difficult days, and congratulating them on important milestones. Since most floggers are likely to be online at the same time (after school or at weekends), the posting and commenting can take place synchronously as an ongoing conversation that can be traced in real-time from photo to photo among two or more friends. Timing is also a factor because it is likely that the next day a new photo will appear to take its place and continue the cycle over again. The comments themselves are usually brief, including laughter, "hugs" and smiles. (Figure 8: Typical Fotolog user upload from Figueres, see page 72).

These small communicative gestures or phatic expressions are again reminiscent of those between acquaintances on the Rambla. To extend the analogy, while engaging on Fotolog, teens embark upon a web-based promenade around the site, stopping for short greetings on the pages of their friends, catching up on the latest gossip, commiserating

with each other, admiring their friends' clothing and style, all the while adding new contacts to their social circles by browsing networks and discovering the friends of friends.

The Fotolog ritual therefore shares notable similarities with the once daily Rambla stroll. In the digital culture of young people, the activity itself reinforces the importance of "seeing and being seen" in a public forum as a key element in being social, the same criteria which has long characterized the more authentic and traditional Rambla experience. It is no coincidence that the Catalan expression fer una volta – to go for a walk – was used by participants to describe how they stroll through the Fotolog pages of their friends. Ramblejar would also be an apt descriptor.

This unconscious repurposing of an urban tradition once indelibly tied to physical space into a digitally-mediated format reinforces how existing offline culture is an essential component in making sense of engagements with new media. That is, Figuerenc youths use and adapt Fotolog in a distinctly Figuerenc way in order to reproduce a familiar context. Their transformation of Fotolog into an acceptable Catalan social space points to "a reproduction of a traditional public context that has existed well before the diffusion of social media" (Costa 2018: 3648).

While some international floggers courted global notoriety through their pages, Figuerenc participants were predominantly concerned with increasing their online fame amongst their offline friends. The global reach of the platform was less significant than its ability to facilitate local connections. In fact, they remained quite suspicious of followers that they did not already know "in person" or that they had connected with through an existing trusted contact. Being anonymous or non-local (i.e. a "stranger") within a network on Fotolog would be against the norms of interaction; again, in a similar way that it would be on the Rambla in Figueres. Both are places for local "insiders".

Despite the promises of social media, there was also no attempt to develop wholly "virtual" relationships restricted to Fotolog pages. Quite the contrary. The entire ritual depends on being present in physical spaces of the city and having existing, co-present local friendships to put on display. Fotolog friends are geographic friends, classmates, neighbors, and relatives. Locations in the city and region make the best selfie backdrops to the shared memories and stories that feature as posts. In addition, the Fotolog chain of communication is multimodal (Madianou and Miller 2013). A single exchange may begin with a chance encounter in the town, a planned outing captured in photos, a text message or phone call, and later a post on Fotolog with asynchronous commentary, followed up by more in-person interaction. How much of this interaction should be meaningfully be classified as digital alone?

CONTINUITY, CHANGE, AND PLACEMAKING

The purpose of this ethnographic snapshot has been to reveal parallels between old and new ways of placemaking. There are important similarities, which I have argued reveal that people engage with new technologies in culturally contingent ways. Understanding the role of new media in social change depends on how newly emerging digital contexts fit within the logics of pre-existing changes – and continuities – in the urban landscape. The social "rules" and norms that govern transforming an empty plaza covering a river into a symbol of cultural identity have also applied in turning a social media site into a part of Figueres.

Fotolog may not have brought young Figuerencs back to the nostalgic, choreographed Rambla tradition of the past. Perhaps that type of interaction is indeed extinct, and social media has not helped to keep the plazas full of pedestrians. Yet when presented with a novel

digital platform, Figuerencs have chosen to recreate a style of sociality that is most familiar to them; one that is not a great conceptual leap from the type of interactions that their grandparents enjoyed in the past. In this way, they are still engaging in the practice embodied in the concept of ramblejar, only with the Rambla now existing partly in an online space. Both "platforms" (physical or virtual), it could be argued, are mostly empty stages until the ramblejar is performed upon them.

Figuerencs prefer social media that keeps them connected to place and locality: the people that they already know and spend time with; the city, region, and sites that they visit in person. They do not actively seek to engage in a placeless global network with no anchor to their offline lives. Fotolog was the right "fit" with traditional Figuerenc sociality due to its facility to prioritize highly localized networks along with a focus on visual presentations of self.

It is likely that teens also gravitated towards Fotolog over other social media partly for the reason of avoiding "context collapse"; that is, "precisely to keep different social circles apart" (Costa 2018: 3645). Facebook, for example, while slow to gain popularity in Figueres during my fieldwork, eventually appealed more to older residents, including parents and teachers. Fotolog was more exclusively for teens. From this perspective, context collapse may be the very same reason behind young people vacating the Rambla. That their parents and grandparents are nostalgic for the space and claim its proper use and etiquette leads teens to look elsewhere for a place of their own. Fotolog could be that space.

What, then, of the Rambla? The grandparents of Figuerenc floggers may dispute the tidiness of the analysis that I have presented above. While teens seamlessly move between the physical and the digital by uniquely blending old and new forms of interaction from the street

to the screen and back, the Rambla remains empty save for a few elderly couples chatting quietly on its benches. Browsing Fotolog in 2007 was a sedentary activity done mostly from home. Substituting still photography and text-based chat for real face-to-face interaction, dystopians would argue, results in little more than a sad mimicry of the older tradition that it has subsumed.

From this vantage, the Internet looks convincingly like the cause of the Rambla's decline, not its saviour. Some additional socio-urban context is needed. If not technology alone, then why is no one strolling the Rambla? The following reflections from young people in the city shed some light:

> *I'm young, and in that aspect Figueres is dead. All you have is the cinema [outside the city] or the Plaça del Sol [designated nightlife area with a couple of trendy bars] or some small pub lost in the town center. If you don't do one of these three things, there's nothing left. If you want to go out to dance or to bars or different atmospheres, you can't, you have to go to Girona or Empuriabrava … [Figueres,] it's a pretty city, but pretty much dead at night. What's more, if you want to go for a stroll in the evening, you basically have to go in the center … further away from the rambla, there's virtually nothing (female resident, 19 years old).*
>
> *I don't like that there is so much immigration. People used to be out more and walking around at night. Now after 7:00pm, people just go inside. Well … this is because the [people] are afraid. There are robberies here … yes, all the time. People would rather go home and keep their kids inside. [There are] drugs. It's not safe. They go home and lock the door (Female resident, 30 years old).*

Figuerencs of all ages report vacating the town center for many reasons, but with few allusions to technology. Some common

denominators are disaffection with city spaces in general; impressions of increased crime and lack of safety; and perception of rapid demographic shifts; coupled with nativistic sentiment. Many residents report choosing to spend their free time away from the city center, whether at home, at a rural family residence, or taking trips to a more exciting nearby city or beach. Unlike the chaperoned youths of the 19th century Rambla, young people are free to explore further afield with easy access to transportation. At the same time, Figuerencs in general are spending more time indoors; and, when indoors, they are often using their computers.

Social media is not the sole source of a Rambla exodus that, by all accounts, began as early as the 1980s and 1990s. Rather, it benefits from the spoils of ongoing urban shifts by supplementing unfulfilled needs for the type of daily, banal interactions that once took place there. As a Figuerenc flogger succinctly explains: "Fotolog … I suppose [I use it] because it's something amusing. You notice the support and opinions of people, and this makes you feel good". Far from revolutionary, the type of mundane, quotidian interaction that youths crave online is not greatly removed from the social strolling of their parents and grandparents.

Moreover, technology and the city are not at opposing ends of a street vs. web tug-of-war. Digital and urban spaces alike are equal components in the media-saturated environments in which young Figuerencs live their lives. Despite enjoying apps, games and other web-based diversions, Figuerenc youths, like their parents and grandparents, continue to prioritize street-based activities and relationships. As those relationships increasingly traverse the blurry distinctions of online and offline, we may find that important traditions can be equally rooted – and preserved – in both domains.

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