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***Search and the City: A Comparative Analysis of WiFi Hotspots
in New York and Budapest***

This paper will present the results of a six-month survey and interviews with the users of WiFi hotspots in cafes, parks and other public spaces in New York. The survey was conducted between October 2006 and April 2007 in partnership with NYCwireless, a community wireless group in New York, and with support from Microsoft Research. Over 550 responses to the survey have been collected to date. The survey is also being conducted in Montreal, Berlin and Budapest. The in-depth interviews focus on three research sites: Bryant Park, Starbucks and the JetBlue Airline Terminal at JFK. To date, nearly 40 interviews have been conducted with community wireless leaders (many of which are both the users and producers of their WiFi networks) and regular users of WiFi hotspots. My interviews have uncovered ways in which frequent users of specific, and deliberately chosen WiFi hotspots, have developed work relationships that provide social support and new venues for collaboration as well as providing constant sources of inspiration and stimulation by a diverse group of “co-workers”. In addition, over 500 photos have been taken to document the practices surrounding WiFi hotspots. The purpose of the survey and interviews is to better understand the cultures and communication ecologies of WiFi hotspots as well as to gather descriptive statistics and demographic data about WiFi users. In contrast to the current debates about municipal wireless networks in the United States, which continue to advocate for “anytime, anywhere” coverage, I argue that WiFi hotspots represent an important form of network culture in a relatively small, bounded community and that this distinction should fostered an preserved through content, applications and policies that support these new work practices.

Laura FORLANO is a Ph.D. Candidate in Communications at Columbia University researching the socio-economic implications of the use of mobile and wireless technology. She is also board member and special interest group leader for NYCwireless (<http://www.nycwireless.net>), a non-profit organization that promotes the deployment of free public WiFi networks. Forlano received her B.A. in Asian Studies from Skidmore College and spent her junior year at Sophia University in Tokyo, Japan. She received a Diploma in International Relations from The Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies in Bologna, Italy, and her Master's in Science and Technology Policy from the Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs. E-mail: lef45@columbia.edu.

