MEDIAPOLIS

BY GIORGIA AIELLO (HTTPS://WWW.MEDIAPOLISJOURNAL.COM/AUTHOR/GAIELLO/) /
DECEMBER 5, 2016

RESEARCHING THE URBAN AS A HUMAN ENDEAVOUR

[*Ed. note: this post is part of a roundtable discussion on "The Urban as Emergent Key Concept for Media Theory." For more background on the*

discussion and to view other posts in the series, see here(http://www.mediapolisjournal.com/roundtables/urban-emergent-key-concept-media-theory/).]

T he contributions included in this roundtable have fruitfully tackled the fundamental theoretical question that was initially posed by Scott Rodgers(http://www.mediapolisjournal.com/2016/11/urban-emergent-key-concept-media-theory/): does the urban offer a genuinely new way of thinking about the mediated worlds we inhabit?

Here I would like to turn this question on its head and ask instead what media theory and, more broadly, media and communication studies have to offer in thinking about the urban. Why do we even bother to intervene in debates about the urban when, one could argue, this ought to be the exclusive domain of other disciplines that may be better equipped for this task?

My colleagues Myria Georgiou(http://www.mediapolisjournal.com/2016/11/right-city-compulsion-connect/), André Jansson(http://www.mediapolisjournal.com/2016/11/mediatization-urban-struggle/), and Zlatan Krajina(http://www.mediapolisjournal.com/2016/11/back-to-the-city/) have discussed the right of people to connect or disconnect through digital communication, urban groups' active engagement in the production of the city through expressive and political practices, the right of the urban 'other' to own the city, and the importance of place-making among the inhabitants of urban centres and urban peripheries alike. Personally, I have focused(http://www.mediapolisjournal.com/2016/11/visual-material-approach-city/) on how our cityscapes are planned and fashioned in ways that constrain and exclude given urban subjectivities, while also being circulated across borders via flows of images promoting 'world-class' urban aesthetics. Finally, Scott Rodgers(http://www.mediapolisjournal.com/2016/11/theorizing-media-urban-revolution/) has emphasized the importance of accounting for the layered agencies of the multiple actors – from ordinary city dwellers to media organizations, professions and systems – that quite literally 'make' mediated urbanization.

Having been able to reflect on all of these contributions, it is clear to me that, to quote Doreen Massey, we all see urban space as "the product of power-filled social relations"[1] (#footnote_plugin_reference_2304_1) and that, to us, these power relations shape and are shaped by meanings, practices and interactions that are rooted in communication – whether mediated or face-to-face – rather than technology or information alone. This is an important distinction to make because, in recent

> **To us, urban power relations shape and are shaped by meanings, practices and interactions rooted in communication**

years, digital geographers and STS scholars have convincingly demonstrated the significance of theoretical and empirical approaches that foreground the agency of

rather than technology or information alone

both code and software in shaping the social and physical layers cities[2] (#footnote_plugin_reference_2304_2) [3](#footnote_plugin_reference_2304_3) . Perspectives that privilege an understanding of the 'automatic' production of space[4] (#footnote_plugin_reference_2304_4) through pervasive computing have become central to urban media studies as well. This is because digital platforms and technological infrastructures are absolutely essential to contemporary processes of mediation. They are also often worryingly opaque, making it all the more significant for us to engage with perspectives and methodologies that shed light on these spatial black boxes.

This said, perhaps even more central to an understanding of the urban from a media and communication studies perspective is what Simone Tosoni and I have elsewhere defined as a keen interest, among scholars in our discipline, in how *people* in urban settings connect, or do not connect, with others and with their environment "via symbolic, technological, and/or material means."[5] (#footnote_plugin_reference_2304_5) And, after all, in our field the debate on the urban has been historically influenced by the Chicago School's ecological perspective on the role of media and communication in how different urban communities may or may not engage with each other.[6] (#footnote_plugin_reference_2304_6)

These questions matter because they address people's lives in cities, rather than cities per se

It is mainly questions about identity, voice, creativity, and inequality that animate our work. These questions matter precisely because they address issues pertaining to people's lives in cities, rather than cities per se. In other words, across the roundtable's contributions there is an evident emphasis on the importance of human agency and human outcomes in mediated processes of spatial production. Ultimately, what media theory can offer is a distinctive understanding of the nature and potential of the urban as a human endeavour.

Notes

1. (#footnote_plugin_too Doreen Massey, "Imagining Globalisation: Power-geometries of Time-space", In *Power-geometries and the Politics of Space-time: Hettner-Lectures 1998 with Doreen Massey* (Vol. 2, pp. 9–23), edited by Michael Hoyler. Heidelberg, Germany: Department of Geography, University of Heidelberg, 1999, 21.

2. (#footnote_plugin_too Martin Dodge, Rob Kitchin and Matthew Zook, "How Does Software Make Space? Exploring some Geographical Dimensions of Pervasive Computing and Software Studies." *Environment and Planning A*, 41:6 (2009), 1283–1293.

3. (#footnote_plugin_too Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge, *Code/Space: Software and Everyday Life*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011.

4. (#footnote_plugin_too Nigel Thrift and Shaun French, "The Automatic Production of Space." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 27:3 (2002), 309–335.

5. (#footnote_plugin_too Giorgia Aiello and Simone Tosoni, "Going About the City: Methods and Methodologies for Urban Communication Research–Introduction." *International Journal of Communication*, 10(2016), 1252-1262.

6. (#footnote_plugin_too Robert E. Park, "The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the City Environment." *American Journal of Sociology*, 20:5 (1915), 577–612.