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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Forum: (De)centring Europe in urban communication research

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ABSTRACT

This special forum includes six contributions by scholars affiliated with the European Communication Research and Education (ECREA) "Media, Cities and Space" Section. It focuses on "European" urban communication research as a way to explore what matters, both critically and theoretically, in media and communication studies of the urban. As a whole, the special forum aims to "decentre" existing assumptions regarding the urban locales, critical questions, and conceptual outlooks covered in each contribution-both from pre-constituted notions of "Europeanness" and from dominant approaches to the relationship between communication, media, and the urban.

This special forum includes work by a group of core members and leaders of the European Communication Research and Education (ECREA) "Media, Cities and Space" Section, initially established exactly ten years ago as the "Media & The City" Temporary Working Group. While the forum is by no means an official or comprehensive overview of the work done through our ECREA section, I feel privileged and honoured to be able to add this forum to the already substantial record of published edited collections created and curated by scholars affiliated with this group.[1]

In the same spirit, this special forum's theme was developed collaboratively by all contributors, through a process of open peer review, and a day-long workshop that took place online in the spring of 2021. The original and basic aim of the forum was to share "European" urban communication research with the readership of a prominent U.S.-based journal like *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, which regularly features in-depth analyses of spatial politics in mainly North American urban, suburban, and rural settings. In particular, we hoped that the forum's focus on European urban communication research would serve as a lens through which we could begin to outline what matters, both critically and theoretically, in media and communication studies of the urban.

And yet, from the very beginning it was clear to us that constructs such as "Europe" and "Europeanness" could not be left unproblematized. As scholars, we understand the

imagined yet deeply material nature of these constructs, particularly with regards to what and who is made to belong in or otherwise feel alienated from the identities and communities that contribute to defining Europe as an institutional structure and everyday space.[2] For this reason, we advocate a critical perspective on European urbanism that is rooted in the lived realities of city dwellers—be it citizens, migrants, sojourners, or activists. As individuals hailing from and/or living in Croatia, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom, we also witness and often experience both the porousness and hardness of European borders. In the wake of Covid-19, some of the power dynamics at the heart of border definition and enforcement have become more visible, and cities are major stages where this could and can be observed. While the forum does not directly address the impact of the pandemic on European urban politics and everyday lives, it offers instruments to better understand the role of media and communication in exacerbating or otherwise destabilizing such power-laden spatial relations.

What became perhaps more obvious through our communal exchanges and individual writing processes was that our developing essays were not only centred in what could arguably be defined as "European" urban locales, critical questions, and conceptual outlooks. They were also doing the work of *decentring* existing analyses and assumptions regarding such locales, questions, and concepts—both from pre-constituted notions of "Europeanness" and from dominant approaches to the relationship between communication, media, and the urban. We set out to critically examine increasingly taken-for-granted models of urbanism that rely heavily on mediation and communication like, for example, the "smart city," the "creative city," or the "capital of culture." In doing so, however, we also aim to problematize the often universalizing theories that generate these models, which are in fact rooted in very specific cities and continents. Ultimately, it is only by looking into the multiple spatialities of urban communication both as a research object and as a critical outlook that we can begin to challenge both established and burgeoning assumptions about what makes a city "work."

The forum, then, is an attempt to present a range of contributions that "(de)centre" European geographies and perspectives in urban communication research. It is not this forum's ambition to address the relationship between Europe, cities, and communication exhaustively. Rather, we hope to provide several entry points into this nexus for those who may have a novel or renewed interest in urban communication research. It is also for this reason that forum contributions were written with a broader academic audience in mind, thus steering away from needless jargon while also focusing on explaining, defining, and problematizing a number of key concepts and frameworks. Therefore, contributions range from discussions of theoretical "keywords" such as "infrastructure," "aesthetics," "materiality," and "identity" to field research on issues of belonging, resistance, connectivity, and image across "European" cities like Athens, Berlin, Kyiv, London, and Zagreb.

A few years ago, Simone Tosoni and I defined urban communication as "the ways in which people in cities connect (or do not connect) with others and with their urban environment via symbolic, technological, and/or material means."[3] The forum is grounded in this purposefully inclusive definition of urban communication, which, however, also foregrounds the central role of human practices and processes in the production and reproduction of the urban.

The opening essay by Myria Georgiou goes right to the heart of humans' key role in urban communication. Georgiou offers a novel theoretical outlook on the relationship

between power and mediation in urban politics. She observes that some of the ways in which cities are increasingly shaped by powerful public and corporate actors rely on media narratives and policies that foreground the human as central to the relationship between the city and technology. However, these human-centric conceptions of urban technology are in fact governed by a digital order, which disguises exclusion and control behind promises of universal connectivity and urban openness. Through her research on the urban digital discourses and practices of cities like London, Athens, and Berlin, Georgiou argues that—perhaps rather counterintuitively—the existence of an emergent digital order calls for a critical humanist perspective aiming to unravel if not disrupt technologized rhetorics of infrastructural change as catering to urban humans' diversity and freedom.

In his essay, Scott Rodgers engages with some of the key politics of the digital order described by Georgiou through a phenomenological perspective. He foregrounds the experiential qualities of what some see as a rising "platform urbanism." While this notion has been well researched via political economy perspectives, Rodgers argues that scholars have paid comparatively less attention to the experiential duality of platforms as objects of, and backdrops for, everyday forms of political expression and engagement with urban environments. His contribution problematizes a priori definitions of terms such as "platforms" and "infrastructure," while elaborating through his fieldwork in different areas of London how platform infrastructures (from Uber and London Datastore to Facebook and Twitter) appear both as political concerns and as mediums for articulating the political meanings of urban spaces.

Turning to a theoretical perspective on some of the questions raised in Georgiou and Rodgers' essays with regards to the power of digital technologies and infrastructures in contemporary urbanism, Seija Ridell's essay centres the work of Stuart Hall in order to "rematerialize" his now canonical encoding/decoding model. She does so by displacing the model's well-known emphasis on symbolic meanings in favour of a reading that foregrounds the importance of technical infrastructure in the model's account of how power works through mediation. This is an approach that focuses on the materiality of mediating technologies and our embodied relationships with them, and for this reason it is also an important instrument for understanding power relations in computationally mediated urban environments. In the wake of pervasive computing, Ridell argues, the contemporary city is also a key site of investigation for a sustained discussion of Hall's model, in relation to the ongoing theoretical shift towards materiality in media studies as a whole.

My essay marks a shift of focus in the forum from structural and infrastructural considerations to the role of symbolic practices in shaping urban materialities. The essay mobilizes the notion of the "visible city" to examine some of the ways in which the urban built environment is used to gain distinction, or symbolic capital, in contemporary urban reputational arenas like, for example, planning and tourism. Through fieldwork conducted in several "second-tier" European cities, I observe that cities visually communicate distinction by balancing difference and sameness, often in ways that cater to overlapping local, regional, and/or global identity claims. I then argue that aesthetics is central to such pursuits of visibility as it is used both as a communicative resource and as a meta-discursive framework in processes of urban transformation, often in ways that reveal a tension between vernacular and globalist aspects of urban communication.

Turning to an in-depth account of the physical, historical, and political characteristics of Croatia's capital, Zagreb, Zlatan Krajina takes this line of inquiry further to argue that we ought to engage seriously with the urban form of cities at the periphery of Europe, which is often made of seemingly chaotic layers of façades, displays, and semi-formal urban signage. In doing so, Krajina argues, we may also be able to dewesternize urban media and communication research, which has typically focused on the ordered, formal, and profitable "landscapes of capital" of post-industrial Western European cities, thus missing out on the opportunity to account for the role of political transition and both national and transnational identities in urban communication. Here, therefore, Krajina deploys his detailed analysis of Zagreb's appearance as a heuristic for the study of urban communication as place-specific and, specifically, as not always being tied to the ambitions of globalist competition.

The special forum's closing essay is a writerly piece by Tetyana Lokot which, not unlike Krajina's contribution, highlights the importance of researching urban communication processes that sit at the "margins" of a geographical, imagined, and institutional Europe. The essay examines the events and symbolism of Ukraine's 2013–2014 Euromaidan protest in Kyiv, highlighting the role of local identities and the urban built environment in establishing a place for the city and the country as a whole in broader negotiations regarding their "Europeanness." In tracing the symbolic, communicative practices of protesters, here Lokot also draws attention to the necessity of engaging with critical voices that are typically ignored in "global" English-language scholarship but whose ability to capture specific cultural and political nuances becomes crucial to in-depth, ethnographic approaches to researching urban communication.

Overall, the individual contributions included in the forum are not so much about showcasing "new" empirical research (although this does happen across the essays), but rather advancing critique and theory based on the body of research developed by each author over time. As a whole, the special forum engages with major critical questions and theoretical agendas related to the digital, material, and symbolic differences and inequalities that set apart contemporary urban contexts, within but also beyond so-called "Europe." My hope is that the special forum will ultimately contribute not only to centring "the urban" as a key dimension of communication and critical cultural studies, but also to making media and communication scholarship into a more prominent field for the study of the city.

To conclude, I wish to thank both the special forum contributors and the group of scholars who generously offered their time and feedback to my colleagues and me as we developed our ideas and writing. My thanks go to Burcu Baykurt, Greg Dickinson, Silva Kalčić, Scott McQuire, Will Payne, Gillian Rose, and Matteo Tarantino for their intellectual input and support with regards to different aspects of this special forum. As an editor, I have benefitted greatly from working with such a brilliant group of scholars and colleagues, and this is something that was crucial to the successful development of this special forum idea through my maternity leave and a global pandemic. For this, I am very grateful. I now look forward to witnessing the further development and uptake of this special forum's contributions to research on the relationship between cities and communication.

Notes

1. Giorgia Aiello, Matteo Tarantino and Kate Oakley, eds. *Communicating the City: Meanings, Practices, Interactions* (New York: Peter Lang, 2017); Giorgia Aiello and Simone Tosoni, eds. "Going About the City: Methods and Methodologies for Urban Communication Research," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016); Zlatan Krajina and Deborah Stevenson, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Urban Media and Communication* (London: Routledge, 2019); Seija Ridell and Frauke Zeller, eds. "Mediated Urbanism," *International Communication Gazette 75*, no. 5–6 (2013): 437–451; Scott Rodgers, ed., "The Urban as Emergent Key Concept for Media Theory," *Mediapolis: A Journal of Cities and Culture* 1, no. 5 (2016); Simone Tosoni, Zlatan Krajina and Seija Ridell, eds., "The Mediated City Between Research Fields: An Invitation to Urban Media Studies," *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 5257–5267.
2. Stuart Hall, "'In but not of Europe': Europe and its myths," in *Figures d'Europe: Images and Myths of Europe,* ed. Luisa Passerini (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2003), 35–46; Zlatan Krajina and Nebojša Blanuša, eds., *EU, Europe, Unfinished: Mediating Europe and the Balkans in a Time of Crisis* (London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); Sandra Ponzanesi and Gianmaria Colpani, eds., *Postcolonial Transitions in Europe: Contexts, Practices and Politics* (London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016); Bo Stråth, "Introduction. Europe as a Discourse," in *Europe and the Other and Europe as the Other,* ed. Bo Stråth (Brussels: PIE-Peter Lang, 2000), 13–44.
3. Aiello and Tosoni, "Going About the City," 1254.

Disclosure statement