

The Mediated City Between Research Fields: An Invitation to Urban Media Studies

Introduction

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This Special Section argues for a wider recognition of urban media studies—an emerging and vibrant scholarly space for research that permeates the borders of both media/communication studies and urban studies. Our main motivation and aim is to shed light on the mutually constitutive entanglement of media, in all their multiplicity, and urban phenomena. Before introducing the articles gathered for this Special Section to exemplify this intersectional approach, this introductory article first lays out some of the key elements that help define, though do not exhaust, the field of urban media studies. Moreover, we identify some important developments in both media studies and urban studies that have paved the way to the endeavor, such as non-media-centric approaches to media and relational/processual takes on urban space. We bring together some familiar and emerging models in the formation of urban media studies, even if we envisage this emerging scholarly space as open to further refinements, additions, and modulations, as necessitated by individual research interests and contexts.

Keywords: media and communication studies, urban studies, non-media-centric media studies, relational space, urban remediation

In present times, media—as technologies and representations—have come to pervade and inform nearly all aspects of urban living. They are relevant urban infrastructures, and play a key role in sustaining urban functions. Furthermore, they inform urban routines and practices, and mediate public appearance. In

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this sense, no urban process can be fruitfully understood without taking into account these constitutive forms of mediation.

At the same time,,it is not possible to adequately address our relationships with media in contemporary cities without considering the urban character of media-related practices. The *urban* points to living in a densely populated and highly infrastructured space (Wirth, 1938) and to people sharing it either through corporeal or technologically mediated co-presence (e.g., via screens) in the frame of public appearance (Arendt, 1958). It is in this space that specific forms of mediated communication take shape and become normalized or silenced. Thus, none of the established perspectives in media studies—whether that of democracy and participation, production and technology, representation and use, or belonging and identity—can claim to have an exhaustive understanding of their problematics without appreciating the urban dimension.

Hence, as argued elsewhere, “the two domains, cities and media/communications, become more accessible for analysis when observed alongside, against, and in terms of, each other” (Krajina & Stevenson, 2020). Authors in the fields of both media studies and urban studies are increasingly interested in the relationships between media (as technologies, material artifacts, practices, institutions, and representations) and cities (as sociotechnical, cultural, political, and economic assemblages and as spatial contexts of social practices) with an eye on their reciprocities. Among media studies scholars, Scott McQuire (2008, 2016), for example, has endeavored to clarify how media, as technologies and regimes of visibility, have historically played a doubly pivotal role in shaping the experience of the urban and in making sense of—and thus contributing to—urban transformations. Other authors have focused on mobile and personal media as interfaces to urban space (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012), shedding light on the ways in which the uses of these devices support place-making and contribute to the generation of “hybrid spaces” that are at the same time material and virtual (Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011). In a different line of research, some media scholars—like Friedrich Kittler (Kittler, 1996) —have recognized homologies between media as information processing infrastructures and loci of spatial and functional organization of the city, proposing to address the city as a medium. Concomitantly, urban scholars, most prominently urban geographers, have addressed the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the morphological organization of the city and its daily functioning. Authors such as Nigel Thrift and Shaun French (2002) and Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge (2011), for example, have investigated how ICTs and software shape and govern the spaces in which urban daily life unfolds. In a complementary way, Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin (1996, 2001) have explored the importance of telecommunication infrastructures for the (uneven) development and transformation of the city.

The co-constitutive relationship between media and the city has been recognized by these researchers and, increasingly, by other individual researchers and groups (such as the Institute of Geomedia at the University of Karlstad, Sweden, or the European Communication Research and Education Association working group on Media & the City, with which the editors of this Special Section collaborate). However, a sustained dialogue between media studies and urban studies continues to be, at best, uncommon. We suggest here that both fields would benefit immensely from such a dialogue and from engaging seriously with the canon of the other field. Adopting such a bifocal outlook is, in fact, essential, given the multifaceted nature and overall complexity of the contemporary urban/media nexus. In this sense, any research field

alone is not (and never can be) theoretically and methodologically equipped to fully grasp this nexus. Our aim, then, is to encourage both sides of the spectrum to engage in interdisciplinary dialogue to produce useful redefinitions.

Challenging Canons, Speaking From Their Margins

The obstacles to a sustained dialogue across the borders of media studies and urban studies trace back to the nature of disciplinary canons and to guarding their boundaries rather than suggesting unsolvable epistemological incompatibilities.

For any research field, a historical canon of authors, texts, and empirical works represents a precious repertoire of intellectual resources, valuing certain theoretical approaches, methodological options, methods, and even research questions over others. Yet at the same time, in defining the limits of what is intellectually pertinent within its purview, a canon inevitably generates blind spots. This is especially so when a canon becomes ossified in terms of institutional recognition, must-learn curricula, research posts, and funding.

We contend that the co-constitutive character of the media/urban nexus falls into such a blind spot, eluding the foci of both urban studies and media studies. The institutionalization of canons in the two fields of research,¹ both interdisciplinary by nature at the outset, makes it in fact difficult to find common ground for scholarly debates across disciplinary boundaries. This difficulty extends even to the spotting of shared interests, not to mention a joint elaboration of conceptual and methodological frameworks. In a sense, then, addressing media and the city in the same framework means engaging with both research fields from a position of marginality. For canonical perspectives, a shared framework such as the one we are proposing may appear as a call to focus simultaneously on the figure and its background, while a sane perception would seek to distinguish one from the other and focus on one at a time. Our contention, however, is that such a double focus, in affording critical distance from the canons, enables the identification of a new center—one that does not form a new static (two-headed) canon but that keeps on moving across the complex and multifaceted theoretical terrains of media and urban entanglements. We are suggesting a dynamic and generative matrix of “not-only” or “more-than” canonical research questions and methodological frameworks.

With bell hooks (1989), we see marginality of this sort as “the site of radical openness and possibility” (p. 23). Proceeding from this notion, we propose urban media studies as a space for examining media and communication, and urban processes together, taking as a starting point their co-constitutive entanglements in terms of historical developments, theoretical definitions, and ongoing structural transformations.

Some unpacking of key elements identified in the above definition might help clarify our attempt. First, adding the prefix *urban* to media studies addresses primarily media scholars, but it also intends to encourage truly interdisciplinary theorization and joint hands-on empirical work from both fields. Actually, it should be acknowledged that the invitation to cross the borders of the two research fields initially came

¹ For an attempt to define the canon in media studies, see Katz, Durham Peters, Liebes, and Orloff (2003).

from urban studies (Tosoni, 2015), when critical geographer Stephen Graham (2004) proposed in a research manifesto a joint exploration of the “remediation of urban daily life.”

Second, we see urban media studies as standing side by side, and on many occasions overlapping, with earlier initiatives such as the long-standing tradition of urban communication studies and the more recently launched urban cultural studies endeavor (Fraser, 2014a, 2014b). On the one hand, “urban communication scholarship is concerned with 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” (Aiello & Tosoni, 2016, p. 1254). On the other hand, urban cultural studies identify “art and culture . . . as one point of entry unto the totality of urban society” (Fraser, 2014a, p. 13), exploring what the role of “both artistic production in general and the artistic product specifically . . . has been . . . and . . . may be” (p. 13). Both of these approaches commit to the bifocal study of urban media and communication, even though they place their respective research emphases differently. Urban media studies, for their part, have resonances with the improvisatory, intellectually promiscuous, and antidisiplinary take on media dared by early cultural studies (see Hall, Hobson, Lowe, & Willis, 1980) in the attempt to expand the purview of media studies from media content and representation to include media as institutions, embodied practices of usage and production (for examples, see Krajina, 2014; Rodgers, Barnett, & Cochrane, 2014; Tosoni & Ridell, 2016) as well as technologies, infrastructures, and material artifacts (Ridell, forthcoming). Only through such a multiple focus does it become possible to gain a nuanced understanding of the co-constitution of urban and media phenomena in their power-related complexity (Ridell, 2014; Ridell & Zeller, 2013).

Some important developments in the fields of both media studies and urban studies have paved the way for the sort of urban media studies we wish to encourage. In media studies, at least three relevant recent threads of research can be identified. The first thread is the ethnographic exploration of media engagement beyond the private space of the household, to which researchers’ focus had been restricted until the early 2000s (see Ridell, 2014; Tosoni, 2015); this shift was triggered by the widespread diffusion of portable and ambient electronic media (see, e.g., Bakardjieva, 2006; Humphreys & Liao, 2013; Krajina, 2014; Moores, 2012). It is the new contexts of media engagement that have alerted media scholars to acknowledge the particularly urban nature of these spaces and to attempt to understand and conceptualize it. The second thread consists of the attempts to decenter media studies (Krajina, Moores, & Morley, 2014; Morley, 2009) by moving the main analytical focus from the user–medium relationship to the broader processes and phenomena in which media participate. This effort has led researchers to deal with phenomena that have been unconventional in the media and communication studies canon (such as street names, public statues, and monuments in Vretenar & Krajina, 2017). Scholars have also started to focus on dimensions of social life that are constitutive of the urban, such as walking, encountering, and talking—hence observing their development with media use through practice-centered approaches (Rodgers et al., 2014; Tosoni & Ridell, 2016). Finally, the emerging interest in materiality and multisensoriality in media anthropology (Pink, 2011, 2015) has brought to the fore issues that concern body, embodiment, and affectivity that the media studies canon has neglected. The latter development has encouraged scholars to develop methodological conceptualizations of user engagement that are more sensitive to the complex constitution of the mediated city (Mattern, 2008; Pink, 2007).

While rarely deployed in an integrated way, these approaches resonate with those approaches in urban studies that stress the processual nature of urbanity. These are typically approaches that draw on relational conceptualizations of space (Massey, 2005; Murdoch, 2006) and conceive the production of urban space (Lefebvre, 1991) as multilayered and open-ended. Urban studies have usefully moved from more static or localized visions of the city as a self-sufficient, permanently stabilized unit (agglomeration) to understanding urban space and urbanity as processes of multiple actors and generative relationships (Amin & Thrift, 2002, 2016) and dynamic assemblages (Fariás & Bender, 2012). Several studies increasingly emphasize emergent, improvisational, and, above all, context-specific urbanism (Jones, 2009; Mameli, Polleter, Rosengren, & Sarkez-Knudsen, 2018).

For example, Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift (2002) have shown how sophisticated systems of coordination and delivery among suppliers and supermarkets in Western European cities like London collapse the inflexible, hierarchical view of city spaces—as serving either global command centers or local supplying peripheries—into a more complicated picture of local “sites.” These function as highly interdependent links operating within wider, ICT-enabled, and responsive networks. AbdouMaliq Simone, in turn, has addressed forms of urban “piracy” and the “multiplexity of social organization” across postcolonial, globalized African cities such as Johannesburg and Douala. The author describes how these cities substitute for the lack of sustained systemic governance with circumstantial forms of grouping and resignifying practices involving informal exchange of things—including technologies—or temporary repurposing of spaces (for example, turning parking lots into churches or swimming pools into butcheries). For the author, these are examples of “politics not aimed at seizing power” and of “attempt[s] to keep things open” (Simone, 2006, pp. 358–360). Elisabeth J. Sedano (2016), as a last example, has demonstrated the existence in American cities like Los Angeles of sanctioned illegality of sections of outdoor advertising, whereby silent tolerance by the local authorities results from actual uncontrollability and leads to “informal” urbanism. Such studies can be read as examples of non-media-centric considerations of mediated communication, given their observation of communication technologies as in the midst of (rather than set apart from) material constraints and opportunities as well as local and global pressures and actions. These and many other such studies are also attentive to issues of social production of space (Lefebvre, 1991), to the problematization of private and public realms of action, and to the materiality of interaction. Because multiplicity and potentiality are emphasized in these studies, matters of power, hierarchy, and space are not discarded but are redefined as anchor points, directional forces, or mediators within complex globalized flows, networks, and circuits.

In light of these examples, urban media studies can also be viewed as a variant of urban studies. It is not only that *urban* is made a prefix to *media studies* (as suggested above), but also that *media* has been inserted into *urban studies*. Having indicated some of the comparable and complementary shifts in emphasis in urban studies from our specific, media studies background, we recognize both possibilities: where neither urban nor the media is at the margin or in the center alone but where together they constitute the interspace of research on a central form of human organization in the 21st-century world: mediated urbanism.

The Contents of the Special Section

This Special Section provides readers with some examples of possible trajectories for circumventing traditional divisions established by canons to gesture toward an interdisciplinary perspective on phenomena

that pertain to both urban studies and media studies as research fields. This was, in fact, the main objective of the occasion from which the Special Section stems: the 2015 conference held at the University of Zagreb titled "Urban Media Studies. Concerns, Intersections and Challenges" that the three editors organized, acting at the time as the managing team of the European Communication Research and Education Association temporary working group on Media & The City.

The authors we invited to contribute to this Special Section deploy different, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, strategies. The first three articles provide a historical perspective for interrogating the mutually constitutive nature of the media and urban issues, while the other two observe the interlocking of microlevel analysis of protest and daily street encounters with macrosocietal issues involving citizenship and cultural difference.

Cesare Silla, in his article titled "The (Theatrical) Mediation of Urban Daily Life and the Genealogy of the Media City: Show Windows as Urban Screens at the Rise of Consumer Capitalism in America (1880–1930)," adopts a genealogical perspective on the contemporary city as a media-architecture complex to account for media saturation of the urban environment. Silla traces this process to the dawn of consumer capitalism, focusing on the transition in American cities from the unproductive urban spectator (*flâneur*) to the consumer, a figure observant of and partaking the new spirit of capitalism. The author highlights the key role played in this transition by show windows as early forms of urban screens. Representing goods in idealized scenes of urban daily life, these urban media contributed to the creation of a wider new social imaginary, into which subsequent generations of citizens were brought, formalizing a new form of desire to be expressed through goods consumption. To tackle the mutually constitutive relationship between show windows as media and urban daily life in the early decades of consumer capitalism, Silla deploys the concepts of liminality (the suspension in times of social change of established patterns of behavior), imitation (as an orienting principle that can help social actors overcome uncertainty), and theatricalization of urban life (a logic of performativity informing the design of show windows but also street conduct among passersby). With this conceptual triplet, Silla demonstrates how specific forms of urban mediation are "at the foundation of the modern consumer city and its forms of social life" and that therefore any analysis of urban change should keep in view "the involvement of media."

As something of a companion to Silla's article, "Photographic *Flâneur*, Street Photography, and Imagi(ni)ng the City" by **Ilija Tomanić-Trivundža** revisits the well-known figure of the *flâneur*, alerting us to its still unexhausted potential in making sense of the transformations of our media-saturated urban environments. If, in fact, the *flâneur* is a bygone social type of 19th-century Paris, *flânerie* as a social practice still persists. For the author, this practice is characterized by three core features: the perambulating observation, the critical knowledge production, and the related production of cultural artifacts. From this point of view, street photography is a form of *flânerie*, and its transformations can account for issues related to the visual foundation of urban dwelling, to the ways in which public and private domains get implicated in one another, and to the commodification of urban space. For the author, the tradition of street photography is today challenged from below by the unceasing generation of vernacular images of everyday life on social media and from above by the deployment of an automated and uninterrupted surveillance gaze. *Virtual* and *UrbEx flânerie* represent adaptive transformations of the practice. The author relates the new forms of a media-related practice to long-term urban processes. At the same time, he underlines how

a media-related practice such as photographic *flânerie* can be used as methodological probe to account for these same urban processes.

The third article, "Uncanny Resemblances? Captive Audience Positions and Media-Conscious Performances in Berlin During the 1936 Summer Olympics and the 2006 FIFA World Cup," by **Sami Kolamo** and **Jani Vuolteenaho**, adopts yet another approach to gain a historical perspective on the media city. The authors engage in direct comparison of similar urban megaevents, both held in Berlin: the 1936 Summer Olympics staged under the Nazi regime and the 2006 FIFA World Cup. Without doubt, these megaevents radically differ in terms of aims, with nationalist ends in the former giving way to commercial ones in the latter. And yet, focusing on the issue of captive audience positions (Tosoni, 2015) and media-conscious performances of spectators, the authors highlight significant similarities in the strategies deployed by the producers of these two events to relay wider ideological meanings (first the strong German nation, then powerful global brands), regardless of the radical transformations of communication technologies that occurred during the intermediate period of 70 years. While the authors do not deny the relevance of media technologies, they underline how similarities between the two events are evident when the transformations of the mediascape, and the transformations of the cityscape, are interrogated jointly.

Kolamo and Vuolteenaho's invitation to decenter media studies (Krajina et al., 2014) is taken up by **Tetyana Lokot** in her article on urban protests in the mediated city. In "The Augmented City in Protest: The Urban Media Studies Perspective," Lokot adopts a practice-centered approach as a leverage to go beyond the "one-media bias" typical of protest research, and to overcome its general media-centeredness, to account for "how protest movements develop, how they frame their agendas, and how the protest is lived and practiced as part of the urban life, disruptive though it may be" (Mattoni, & Treré, 2014, p. 254). For this purpose, the author places her main focus on the interplay of media practices, citizens' agency, and urban daily life, deploying a methodological approach based on an innovative cross-pollination of research methods typical of protest studies, digital media and communication studies, and urban studies. The author applies her multifocal perspective to the case study of Galas ("noise" in Ukrainian), a crowdsourcing protest community and platform that emerged in December 2013 as part of the Euromaidan protest in Kiev. Lokot shows how physical and digital dimensions are transcended by a sort of "connective tissue" between individuals and organizations that entangles urban locations, spatial routines, digital platforms, and the actors enacting the urban protest.

In the article "Understanding Encounters for Urban Media Studies: Civic Intercourse, Screen Technologies, and Cultural Difference," **Zlatan Krajina** reflects on a normalized on-the-move media phenomenon—posts people produce on social media following a significant social event—as an occasion to elaborate on urban media as aspects of contemporary forms of sociality. The author focuses on posts produced in response to xenoracist assaults in UK cities following the 2016 Brexit referendum: quick postings on portable devices occasioned by "the transience of street encounters" of their authors that normally remain unreported. Integrating the analysis of these posts with ethnographic observations and interviews in the places they refer to, Krajina underlines how social media discloses a layer of violence that existed in the flow of pedestrian traffic and that was exacerbated by the ongoing social crisis. While this phenomenon contributed to public awareness of the issue, it also generally staged the figure of the disengaged witness, deprived of any responsibility to intervene and rarely engaged in critical reflection. As the author concludes,

"The posts thus simultaneously raised and withdrew from debate the issues of imputed scapegoat identity of migratory strangers and their disputed presence in cities of networked visibility, social inequalities, and selective acceptance."

The Special Section closes with an academic interview by **Simone Tosoni** and **Seija Ridell** with Professor Will Straw titled "Practicing Urban Media Studies: An Interview With Will Straw." Professor Straw teaches a course on urban media studies at McGill University in Canada, representing one of the few explicit attempts to unite in a pedagogical context the canons of media studies and urban studies. In the interview, Straw explains how the course came about and was institutionalized at his university; how he practices urban media studies in his own teaching; and how he sees the future of this "interdiscipline." The second part of the interview addresses two of Straw's main research topics and their relation to urban media studies: his studies on scenes (Straw, 1991, 1996, 2014a) and the night (Straw, 2014b, 2016).

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