Mediapolis: an introduction

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Media/polis

The organisation of this workshop has been prompted by concerns with the way media so often seem to get left out of writing on cities and urban politics (rather than vice-versa). We agree with Iveson's (2007) argument that urban and media studies have much more in the way of shared concerns when it comes to politics than is conventionally thought to be the case. As a result, we are hoping this workshop will create an occasion for urban scholars to meet those studying media, to explore what difference it makes to explicitly consider the place of media practices in making a politics of cities, and conversely, to consider what is left out when such practices are relegated to the background. In certain ways, we are suggesting a contemporary return to something like Robert Park's inclination in relation to cities and media. In his seminal essay on the natural history of the newspaper, for example (Park, 1925), Park exhibits a style which does not generally seem to distinguish between or oppose the urban and the media when studying politics and democracy. This surely has something to do with Park's own intellectual period, and the absence of established disciplines in media or urban studies. Yet this is also precisely the point of the workshop: an opportunity for engagement and discussion through a similar sort of pre-disciplinary spirit.

Why 'mediapolis'? In using this term, our intention was not to propose a groundbreaking new concept. Indeed, the initial rationale was significantly less ambitious. Mediapolis was just a way of provocatively interweaving media, politics and cities, by joining together 'media' with the various urban and political meanings of 'polis' (e.g. city, state, citizens). It pointed out, rather nicely and in a single word, an opening for discussion on the intersections of media with cities and urban spaces as settings for, and objects of, politics.

We soon realized, however, that it would probably not be enough to say simply that the term mediapolis conveniently joined up two or three key concepts. In no small way this was because we became aware of a recent book by Roger Silverstone (Silverstone, 2007) – completed in the last year of his life, during a period of illness – carrying the main title of *Media and Morality* and subtitle of *the rise of the mediapolis*. In this book, Silverstone explicitly proposes 'the mediapolis' as a central concept[1]. He refers in particular to the writings of Hannah Arendt, whereby polis is not a city-state in physical location, but a 'space of appearance' for acting and speaking together, regardless of location. This mediapolis, which Silverstone regards as empirical and normative – 'both a reality and an ambition' (2007: 186) – indicates a unified global public sphere. While it mirrors the classic Greek polis, it points to the constitution of politics or public life, the relations between self and other, taking-place on an increasingly global scale. Silverstone is not saying that media are a single undifferentiated mass, or that they make physical distance meaningless. Rather, he is saying that the many practices, organisations and technologies making up the media produce a single discursive and judgmental space that makes for distinctive kinds of proximity and distance in a moral sense (see Dayan, 2007). In other words, the mediapolis is a unified-yet-centrifugal moral space of communication, made of a multiplicity of others, and different patterns of inclusion and

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[1] We also discovered that 'mediapolis' has been used – if not in a central, conceptual way – in the title of at least two other books broadly on media: Inkinen (1999) and de Jong and Schuilenburg (2006).

exclusion. Through this morally-led argument, one major conclusion Silverstone makes is that the media is far too important to be left to professional journalists alone.

There is, of course, more to *Media and Morality*. The book not only explores media but wider issues in moral philosophy and politics, engaging – along with Arendt – Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Lévinas, Ulrich Beck and Edward Said. It can also be seen as a personal and perhaps even religious utopia of Silverstone's making (Peters, 2007); his hopeful vision concerning the communicative preconditions for future humanity. At the same time, and even if for these philosophical reasons, the book works media and polis together through a distinctive spatial imagination. This is one focused on the relations of the self to the mediated spaces of communicative interaction (the mediapolis), whereby the figure of the mediapolis is not city or city-state but a global space of appearance. And if we hold to this simpler and less morally-focused reading Silverstone's mediapolis for the moment, it makes for an interesting juxtaposition with a different reading of polis, from within a broadly urban studies tradition: Engin Isin's *Being Political* (Isin, 2002).

Isin's book is a major text on the notion of citizenship, which he argues to be a condition always set against various Others, who are encouraged to conduct themselves in the ways that affirm the virtues of those regarded as citizens. He illustrates this claim through exploring a series of 'group configurations' that have historically defined citizenship, beginning with the classic Greek polis and moving on to describe the civitas, the Christianopolis, the eutopolis, the metropolis, and the cosmopolis. In so doing, Isin argues for an understanding of citizenship and polis explicitly hinged on the city. This is because, for Isin, the city is distinctive as a 'difference machine' around which different historical and contemporary forms of Western citizenship have been delineated. At least within geography – if the critiques and queries of a recent special issue of *Political Geography* are any indication – this urban focus is fairly contentious. Isin was there accused of inadequately defining 'the city' (Godlewska, 2005), reducing the polis and the political to cities (Elden, 2005), and spatializing citizenship as urban and thus implicitly excluding distant others (Ó Tuathail, 2005). Isin's (2005) response is interesting, however, because it stresses the city as *not* a place or specific space, but a 'figuration' (375), implying a city without a fixed definition but instead contingently defined through its problematization by various groups (377). So, for Isin, the polis is not reduced to the city but the city is elevated to generalized polis: an 'entity that is simultaneously both the concentration and diffusion of acts that are political' (2005: 377).

Just as Silverstone's *Media and Morality* goes beyond a narrow concern for media *per se*, Isin's *Being Political* goes beyond a narrow concern for the city. It is, after all, a book principally concerned with citizenship, and one engaging a broader range of philosophical thought spanning matters of politics, law and the social. Nevertheless, Isin's polis – despite being a non-territorial reading of the city – places a certain emphasis on groups coming together and differences being worked out through the city that is characteristic of urban studies. If we accept this simplification for the moment, just as we did earlier in the case of Silverstone, we might be in a position to generalize that there are some interesting differences when a broadly media studies reading connecting media and politics is set into contrast with a broadly urban studies reading connecting cities and politics. These apparent differences indicate for us an opening that we would like the dialogues of this workshop to explore. While we do not claim that bringing together these two areas, no more than these two particular writings, will lead to a singular synthesis of the intersections of media, politics and cities, we do hope it will make way for a discussion explicitly oriented to *politics*[2], and specifically to an urban politics. We think

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[2] As contrasted to the comparatively plentiful work on the more general intersections of media and cities. On this, for example, see the online proceedings for 'Cities and media: cultural perspectives on urban identities in a mediatized world' (http://www.ep.liu.se/ecp/020/), a wide-ranging conference held in Vadstena, Sweden in October 2006.

this is an important enterprise, not least in the context of understanding the reconfiguration of politics in a world often proclaimed to be becoming more and more mediated and more and more urban.

Spatial imaginations of media studies and urban theory

One of the most prominent contrasts between Silverstone's polis and Isin's conceptualisation of the polis – and we would suggest by extension media studies and urban studies – is their different spatial imaginations. Paradigmatically, media studies might be seen as deploying space in two ways: first, as mediated spaces of communicative interaction, in which space is understood to be a plastic configuration for variable relations of presence and absence (Barnett, 2004); and secondly, as highly localised sites of, for example, production, rituals, or domesticity. By contrast, urban studies' concern with the city has typically directed its focus to spatial definitions of urbanity in terms of locality, scale, place, density, and heterogeneity – conceptualisations which tend to characterise the urban as a space of co-presence or gathering of various processes, practices, actors, and technologies. These are generalizations, of course: there has been much recent work investigating media for its multiple spatialities (e.g. Couldry, 2000; Couldry and McCarthy, 2004; Falkheimer and Jansson, 2006; McCarthy, 2001; Morley, 2000, 2006); and recent geographical work on cities has been marked by a decided shift towards a non-scalar and relational vocabulary of intensities, distribution, connectivity and mediation (e.g. Amin and Thrift, 2002; Graham and Marvin, 2001; Iveson, 2007; Massey, 2007; Massey *et al.*, 1999; Pile and Thrift, 2002; Sieverts, 2003). We might nevertheless restate this contrast in a slightly different way: for media studies, space is always already mediated, spatially and temporally extended, distanciated and dispersed; urban studies' longstanding concern has been on the various effects and affects brought about by particular types of spatial configurations of co-presence or proximity.

The contrast of these spatial imaginaries indicates that there is a discussion to be had around different understandings from within and between these respective disciplines on their key (spatial) concepts. For one, we might think about the ways in which cities, urban space or 'the urban' get conceptualized in media studies and urban studies respectively. We might likewise think through how these interdisciplinary areas conceptualize the media, media (without the definite article) and communication[3]. More importantly, we might ask whether and how such conceptualizations inform different images of politics. In thinking through these contrasting spatial imaginations, we imagine that a good deal of their differences result from the substantive concerns and disciplinary boundaries being played out within these already interdisciplinary areas. At least anecdotally, the latter was certainly underlined for us in the lead up to this workshop. In developing a list of possible invitees, for example, it was quite difficult to find scholars in media studies that explicitly affirmed an interest in cities, whether in publications or on their personal website. This perhaps reflects the degree to which canonical media studies tends to focus on territorial spaces such as the nation state, the 'global', or more localised scales, such as the home. Moreover, in correspondence some were quite surprised to be invited to an event with this sort of cities-media focus. This latter point was even more the case with invited geographers and urbanists, many of whom responded (some only initially) with responses along the lines of 'I don't do media', 'I am not an expert on media' and 'I'm not sure I can talk about the media'. This perhaps reflects an understanding of 'the media' as a discrete set of practices (the sorts of thing that can have 'effects' or one sort of other), practices which are reserved as objects of analysis for specific disciplinary fields. In order to draw media studies and urban studies together, then, it might be helpful to shift perspective,

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[3] It is arguably here that geographers have most effectively engaged in media studies debates, by drawing attention to the urban and regional geographies of media production and cultural innovation (see Scott, 2000; Pratt, 2002; Coe, 2001; Krätke and Taylor, 2004).

by trying to think of the ways in which what we tend to think of as discrete 'media' are in fact embedded in practices that they in turn help to constitute as such; practices such as 'politics', which we propose to consider here through the lens of urban life.

Media practices

What does it mean, then, to suggest an approach to the urban-media interface around the concept of practice, and how does this in turn help to rethink how politics ordinarily works? While we do not want to provide an ironclad definition of practices, at the same time, we do not simply mean its common-sense usage. Instead, we draw on a broadly Wittgensteinian sense of practices which, following Schatzki (1996), are understood as activities composed of 'doings' (understandings of how to do things) and 'sayings' (or 'rules', meaning explicit statements setting out how to do something or that a state of affairs is the case). Reckwitz (2002: 249) defines practice as "a routinised type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge". The most relevant bit of this definition is the part that *things* play in practices. There is a tendency to think of 'the media' as a range of distinct practices, to do producing and distributing, and watching, listening or reading various media forms – bibles, newspapers, 45s, or soap operas. In this sense, media is easily offset against other dimensions of social life as a discrete set of domains, ones which can have various sorts of effects. It might, however, be more interesting to think of media as not a distinct set of practices, but rather as aspects of every practice. This thought follows from the distinction in recent practice theory between integrative and dispersed practices (Schatzki 2002: 88): *dispersed practices* are the features of many activities, such as describing, rule following, interpreting, explaining and so on; *integrated practices* are bundles of activities that make up particular domains or activities, such as cooking, motoring, being a football fan, and they contain particular combinations of dispersed practices[4]. In these terms, much of what we think of as 'the media' might be rethought as so many dispersed practices that help constitute any number of more integrated practices. The print/literacy/reading assemblage is an obvious example here, but one might also think of 'television' in the same way: not as single practice but as a variable component of any number of practices; practices of informed citizenship, of childcare, of friendship and hospitality, and so on.

This practice-based lens implies an open-ended approach that asks the basic questions: what do people *do* in relation to media; and what do people *say* in relation to media (Couldry, 2004). It also implies resisting the constant temptation to think in terms of the effects that media have on other domains, however sophisticated such understandings might be (Barnett 2008). One benefit of approaching media as practice is that it reframes the political nature of media, by diverting attention away from the widespread tendency to think that media are political primarily because they distribute mediated representations that help to construct subjectivities. In such accounts, all forms of media – be it a novel, a song, a film or a newspaper column – are political, since each can be claimed to affect how subjects perceive or interpret the world, and therefore can form the basis of theories about the formation of longer-term or deeper subjectivities. A focus on the place of media in practices, by contrast, directs attention to *how* media constitute different fields of communicative activity. In terms of the focus here, for example, it directs attention to the place of mediated communicative practices in the variable

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[4] Integrative practices are also distinct from dispersed practices because they rely on a shared sense of certain teleological and affective ends and mobilizations, as well as knowledge about the past and present nature, conduct and common situation of the practice (see Schatzki 1996, 2002).

formation of the field of 'politics'[5]; and it also draws attention to how this relationship might in turn be shaped by the embeddedness of media practices in a variety of integrated practices that help up make urban life – work practices, transportation processes, socio-cultural practices of social reproduction in the home and neighbourhood, and so on. In other words, it is a perspective through which it becomes possible to distinguish how certain media practices might be understood to be more *explicitly* political than others. This is one important reason that we asked participants to consider their work in relation to two more specific areas of media practices, these being broadly journalistic practices (from professional to emerging forms of do-it-yourself journalism) and the ways journalistic media enter into and are used through a diverse range of everyday practices and organised activities. One thing that sets journalistic practices apart is that they rest on some distinctive commitment to factuality, objectivity and truth[6]. While all sorts of media practices might help constitute the world as a field of public concern (Scannell, 1996), journalism practices are distinguishable because they divide up this public world into normatively differentiated fields of, for example, politics, entertainment, sport, defined in no small part by the degree to which they are presented as fields requiring not just public interest but concerted public action.

Conclusion

It must be emphasized here that the aim in convening this workshop is not to create a vision of cities, media and politics as some hermetically sealed intersection. Rather, it provides a set of juxtapositions to ask a series of new questions around the relations of three – admittedly very fuzzy – concepts. Building upon the above-noted points for discussion – on contrasting uses and conceptualizations of core concepts such as space, place, cities, communication, 'the urban' and 'the media' and their political implications – a number of additional (non-exhaustive) questions leading from our focus on practices might be:

- Does thinking in terms of 'practices' (i.e. performed, or pragmatic activities) mark a distinctive approach to exploring the intersections of media, politics and cities?

- How are radical changes in media practices and technologies remaking the social and political life of cities? How are such changes haunted by historically longstanding practices and technologies of media communication and urban life?

- How do media respond to and amplify the political remit of significant events (such as violence, conflict, demonstrations, crises, etc) that become connected in some way to cities?

- How are claims of urban citizenship, belonging, identity and difference made through the practices related to media?

- How does the geographically- and historically-specific manifestation of media practices make for distinctive forms of politics in, and in relation to, cities in different parts of the world?

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[5] We imply politics here in a very ordinary sense (rather than the much more widely-defined 'cultural politics' where politics tends to be identified through scholarly analyses and theorizing), as simply the variously-sited practices of claiming and negotiating who gets what, when, where and why. For some examples of how such an understanding has been variably connected to cities, see: Amin and Thrift (2002); Cochrane (2007); Dikeç (2007); and Judge *et al.* (1995).

[6] Note that this does not necessarily mean that all such practices involve an explicitly deliberative or rational expression, since they could also, for example, be emotive, theatrical, or satirical yet be taken as claiming some truth or state of affairs.

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