

PANEL 2: Method(ologie)s in the study of urban communication

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PANEL ABSTRACT

The panel focuses on how to conceptualise and investigate forms and practices of urban communication in an age of pervasive digital mediation, smart mobiles and networked mobilities. At the same time, we direct attention to the city itself as a spatially multilayered yet palpably material and multisensory environment of communication and (inter)action. Our aim is to illustrate the variety of methods used in this burgeoning field of study and to call for a more systematic discussion concerning related methodologies and their implications.

Based on the dual focus of urban communication activities, on the one hand, and of the city as a material medium, on the other hand, we highlight the epistemological commitments of different methodological takes. Moreover, we illustrate what concrete methods have been and could be used in investigating, for example, spatial urban rhetoric, mediated modes of urban interaction and self-presentation, uses of mobile and ambient media in urban space and people's activities as urban audiences, publics or activists. By way of comparison and joint reflection, we hope to expose major methodological challenges and discuss the fruitfulness of diverse approaches in the study of urban communication in all its contemporary mediated diversity.

With regard to enhancing methodological self-reflection and elaborating sensitive methods for urban communication research, our panel expresses a dialogical orientation towards several other disciplines or disciplinary fields. Among the most pertinent are urban geography, urban sociology, urban anthropology, mobility studies and science and technology studies (STS). While emphasising the necessity and potentials of multi- and interdisciplinarity, we also seek to address the intricacies that crossing disciplinary borders entail.

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ABSTRACTS

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Decentering media studies for the analysis of urban audience activities

Media studies scholars are ever more forcefully invited to address the pervasive digital mediation and its consequences in contemporary cities, together with researchers from human geography, urban studies, science and technology studies, and mobility studies. Current studies of people's uses of media in urban space, in particular, could play a central role in shedding light on the mediatedness of urban daily life.

Drawing on a review of research that focuses on media use within the broader field of "urban media studies," we argue in our presentation that participation of media studies scholars in the interdisciplinary endeavor runs the risk of being hindered by overly media-centric methodological procedures. Their restrictive implications are most problematic in the taken-for-granted employment of "urban audience" and "urban media user" as key concepts in the study of how people relate to the digitalised urban environs and how they use media in urban space.

What we propose instead is to demarcate the research object by proceeding from the primary importance of urban practices. This methodological decentering of media necessitates the "verbing" of the notion of audience, thereby shifting the research focus to the activity of "audiencing" (media-related or not) and its interrelations with other urban activities. Conceiving of 'audience' as one specific mode of urban activity, in turn, affords us to better capture the simultaneous diversity and power-relatedness of public life in contemporary multispatial cities.

Scott Rodgers, *Birkbeck, University of London*

Near and far: Recalibrating ethnographies of urban media

Recent research on media and cities has become firmly anchored on the turn to studying media as situated experience, or practices. Such a shift in focus – where media research moves on from discrete media (i.e. texts, forms, technologies) towards exploring the mediated ensembles of everyday practical situations – has invited renewed and reimagined urban media ethnographies. Studying urban media, it seems, is now almost axiomatically about studying the experience of "technological environments rather than individual artefacts" (Gunkel and Taylor, 2014, p. 2). This paper applauds such a shift. Yet it also sounds a cautionary note regarding its most apparent methodological blind spot: an implicit prioritization of 'ordinary,' 'everyday,' 'routine' media uses. The problem with such a methodological prioritization is that urban spaces are more than complex media environments for daily experience. They are also environments constituted by the layered agencies of organizations, professions, technical systems, codes and infrastructures. A city is not a singular machine, but can be seen as a constantly mutating 'mechanosphere' (Amin and Thrift, 2002: 78) that is both fragmented, distributed and unpredictable as well as organized, ordered and strategic.

This paper argues for a recalibration of ethnographic approaches to urban media and mediation, so as to find

new ways to think about the urban settings of media production in particular. Media production is more than just the origin of media experienced elsewhere. It is a form of media experience in its own right, as generative of the urban 'mechanosphere' as everyday motilities of media-in-use, meriting its own ethnographic attention. But such a recalibration implies more than a demand for added ethnographic attention to urban media production sites. It suggests an expanded and retuned form of ethnography able to not only provide rich accounts of that which is 'near' – the fine grain of situated urban media environments – but also that which is 'far' – the dispersed social and technical spaces brought into play through such practical environments.

Drawing on a recent small-scale study, I provide a modest example of what such a near and far urban media ethnography might involve. In summer 2015, I conducted four walking-whilst-talking interviews with 'hyperlocal' media practitioners, whose experiments with location-based media had been funded within the first round of UK charity Nesta's Destination Local programme. In each case, we conversed during a walk through the local area related to their project, and after a subsequent seated conversation, I retraced the walk alone, taking photos and making reflective notes. Before and after these walking interviews, I undertook extensive desk-based research into a substantial volume of reports, studies, blog commentaries, social media contributions and video related to Destination Local, and conducted in-depth interviews with programme consultants and managers. I will highlight how, in combining intimate with more remote ethnography, I was to provide an account of urban media production as not only consisting in tacitly experienced or explicitly named place, but also a geographically-dispersed and technological-layered UK hyperlocal media space.

Tetyana Lokot, *University of Maryland*

Methodological challenges in the study of augmented urban protest

Bennett and Segerberg (2012) suggest that the use of digital networked media by activists and protesters leads to a shift from collective to connective action, and a new organizational pattern of action networks, where digitally enabled personal connections supplant established political organizations and institutions. This kind of protest communication can connect a wider range of individuals and offer opportunities for more ephemeral, flexible connections and mediated modes of activist engagement. These augmented communication networks often rest on or wrap around existing urban practices, embedding themselves in the city's structures and simultaneously creating new connective tissue between urban hubs of activity, organizations or individuals.

This new communicative reality demands that we combine the study of digitally augmented protest organization, action, and identity construction with the study of the city itself as a spatially multiple yet material environment that also affects urban protest communication and activity. Such a dilemma requires that we cross-pollinate between existing methods of protest studies, approaches to the study of digital media and communication, and urban studies. Moreover, it is in the dialogue of diverse methodological takes that we can find productive methods for the study of the urban mediated protest.

Such an emergent set of methodologies requires that we not only account for the various objects and subjects of our study, but also consider them as a whole instead of separate entities. What we wish to study is how people living increasingly mediated lives in cities get engaged and are able to participate in protest activity, and how that activity both shapes and is shaped by their urban mediated environment. We therefore draw on urban sociology, urban anthropology and urban media studies, as well as fields such as social construction of technology to inform our research methods.

The key methodological challenge we face is that urban activists and protesters today are at once online, offline and moving in the city. In other words, while studying their activities, we need to take into account at the

outset both the urban environment as a digitally mediated spatial context and the platforms and devices that afford protest communication in the contemporary multispatial cities. We must therefore arrive at a set of methods that combine human interaction and conversations with protesters (e.g., interviews or focus groups); collection and analysis of media and digital content generated by and around the protest (content analysis, social network analysis); and gathering evidence of the city's transformation as a site for dissent (observation, recording visual data, location and mobility studies, mapping). These methods can then be triangulated to illuminate the complexities of the augmented urban protest as a comprehensive phenomenon.

References

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Jussi Holopainen, *Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology Europe*

Playful disruptions: research in the urban wild

'Research in the wild' approach (Benford & Giannachi 2011, 8-12) has raised widespread interest in the area of interaction design, due to the ubiquitous role that information technology has gained in our everyday lives. The notion of 'research in the wild' implies that the focus is on the design, staging and study of playful disruptions in urban context. In my presentation, I discuss this interdisciplinary approach by paying attention, among other things, to how theory, practice and field studies iteratively inform each other during a specific project.

To begin with, the design of the disruptions is based on play theory, game design knowledge, game technologies, architecture, urban planning, and social and psychological insights into the use of urban media. More concretely, designing and staging playful disruptions in public urban environments are seen to act as 'Trojan horses'. The Trojan horses have immediate benefit for their audience in the short term but in the longer term they may act as a wedge for engaging with 'dark matter' – the legal, policy, business and other less visible systems which greatly influence people's lives (cf. Hill 2014).

The studies of the playful disruptions contain two complementary evaluative approaches. In the first of them, focus is on understanding the user (or participant) experience of a designed intervention when staged in the wild. These studies are informed by the explicit goals for the particular intervention, and use a range of data collection methods including both qualitative and quantitative measures in order to assess whether an intervention actually addresses the issue that it is geared towards. The studies are carried out 'in the wild', and for prolonged periods of time (length depending on the nature of the intervention). The second type of studies evaluates the disruptions from the perspective of social impact. While social impact is a long-term effect, there are models developed within the tourism sector (Fredline et al. 2003) that can be used to assess the impact of singular events. More comprehensive taxonomies from the social impact assessment field (Vanclay 2002) as well as methods for community based assessment (Becker et al. 2003) are used as well.

My argument in the presentation is that through the iterative cycles of theory, provocative playful disruptions, and their empirical exploration, it is possible not only to make visible how urban disruptions are experienced but also to gain deeper insight into people's routinized relations with everyday urban media.

References

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Blue Skies, Black Squares: STS-informed methods in the study of urban environmental risk communication in Beijing

Information about mundane urban environmental risk notably air pollution, informs socio-spatial practices ranging from mobility choices, to policy-making, to house prices and so on. This paper examines how Air Quality Information is communicated in Beijing, consistently ranked as one of the most polluted cities in the world, and how these information flows are designed to intertwine with everyday practices.

In Beijing, multiple air quality indexes from multiple sources (including the official Beijing Environmental Protection Bureau, the US Embassy, and others), calculated through different methods, are communicated to the public via a plethora of websites and mobile applications. The public is, to a large extent, left to pick and choose which numbers to trust to inform its own practices – a somewhat significant departure from China’s image as an authoritarian state with strict control over information.

As a case study, we unpack the sociotechnical choices shaping the three releases of the “Blue Sky” (*Weilan Ditu*) mobile app, produced by one of China’s main environmental NGOs. We examine in particular how the application transforms AQI numbers into “recommendations” for daily practices (going out, wearing masks, washing cars etc.). Through STS-informed methods (ethnography and code studies), we reconstruct the urban audience inscribed into the software, and examine how it fits within the fragmented situation described above.