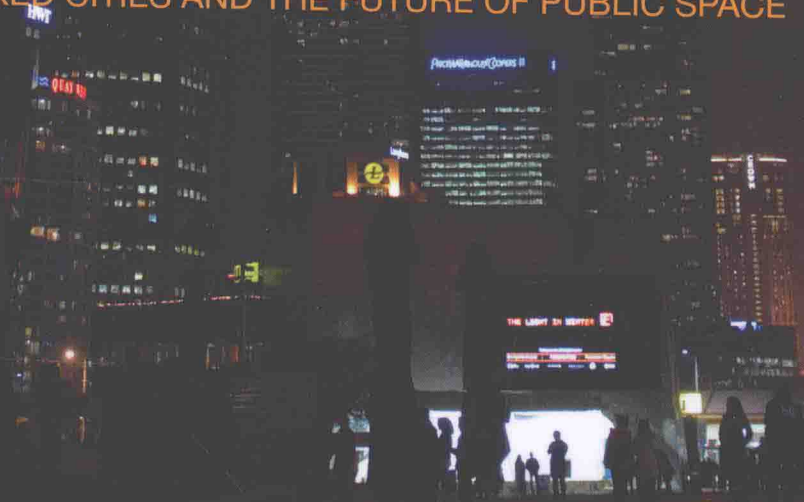


GEOMEDIA

NETWORKED CITIES AND THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC SPACE



Scott McQuire

Geomedia

Networked Cities and the Future of Public Space

SCOTT McQUIRE

polity

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Introduction

From media to geomedias

In less than two centuries cities have shifted from being exceptional locales to become the globally dominant setting for social life. As late as 1900, Great Britain was the only nation with a predominantly urban population. By 2007, the majority of the world's population could be defined as city dwellers, with the number forecast to continue to rise rapidly (United Nations 2014: 7). The apparent continuity of this threshold masks numerous transformations. Not only is there a vastly expanded scale of urbanism, but city life has become subject to new dynamics, including far greater cultural diversity, new patterns of regional and transnational mobility, and growing pressure to develop more sustainable modes of urban living. If the contemporary city is a social experiment whose ends remain uncertain, it is one being lived without a safety net.

This book focuses on what I will argue is one of the key features distinguishing twenty-first-century urban experience from earlier modes of urban inhabitation, namely the extension of networked digital media throughout urban space. New media technologies

from smart phones utilizing place-sensitive data to LED screens embedded in central city locations contribute to a new spatialization of media as an integral part of the contemporary city. This is what I seek to grasp in terms of the transformation of media into geomedia. Through this lens I want to explore the future of urban public space.

Geomedia is a concept that crystallizes at the intersection of four related trajectories: convergence, ubiquity, location-awareness and real-time feedback. Let me unfold each briefly, beginning with ubiquity. Throughout most of the twentieth century, access to media was conditioned by a paradigm which can, at least in retrospect, be described in terms of scarcity and fixity. In other words, people had to travel to particular sites in order to watch, listen or be connected. Telephone calls linked handsets hardwired into particular places. To see a film, you travelled to a specialized viewing chamber – the cinema. Television was primarily viewed in the living room of the family home. When personal computers began to spread from the early 1980s, they followed a similar pattern, and were situated on desktops in home and office. While these different media platforms were deeply implicated in the profound transformations in spatio-temporal experience that defines modernity (McQuire 1998), up to the 1990s ‘media’ nevertheless remained confined to a relatively restricted set of sites within the city. Despite a few exceptions (such as newspapers, billboards and transistor radios), we could say that media were part of public culture, but generally not situated *in* public space.

This has changed decisively in the present. Mobile and embedded media devices, coupled to extended digital networks, recreate the city as a media space in which content and connection are seemingly available ‘anywhere, anytime’.¹ If this condition has been long-desired, and remains to some extent a dream (there are still numerous black spots and blank spaces in which networks function poorly or not at all), ubiquity has made media an increasingly important part of urban routines. While fixed media platforms certainly haven’t disappeared in the present, they now function as nodes situated in relation to more extensive media flows. ‘Watching television’ can still refer to the sort of famil-

ial, living-room experience inherited from the dreamtime of the 1950s, but can equally refer to viewing content streamed to a mobile phone on a bus or to a Wi-Fi-connected laptop in a park, or watched on a large video screen permanently located in a central city public space.

The key point I want to draw out in this context is that ubiquity is not just about the capacity to do the same thing – such as watch television – in a new place, but involves a profound transformation of social practice. A common response to the perceived incursions of television on social and cultural life in the 1950s was ‘don’t watch it’. But abstinence was always a flawed strategy in so far as it failed to recognize that ‘television’ was implicated in the recalibration of larger sociopolitical logics, ranging from the public sphere and political life to the hyper-coordination of industrial production in accord with mass marketing beamed direct into consumers’ homes. Such deep and wide-ranging impacts are difficult to simply *switch off*.

In similar vein, the ubiquity of digital media is currently transforming the social space of the city in complex ways that extend well beyond the choices available to individual users. If communication has always been situational, and new media technologies generally provide the means for altering the spatio-temporal parameters of ‘situation’, the ubiquity of digital media now extends this transformative capacity across broad swathes of social life. As a result, contemporary processes of social interaction are being shaped less decisively by traditional modes of urban boundary formation, such as the hard infrastructure of the built environment. Instead, the process of social encounter has become more susceptible to new patterns of relational exchange characterized by distributed, iterative communication practices that often enjoy global extension.

The second broad trajectory driving the transition to geomedia is the enhanced role of location in framing both the functionality of media devices and the ‘content’ they access and generate. Like ubiquity, this is a relatively recent development. While Geographic Information Systems (GIS) date from the late 1960s, it wasn’t until the Clinton directive authorizing wider availability of GPS data for civilian use in May 2000 that a wave of experimentation with

new devices, services, applications and practices was triggered.² Artist-led experiments with 'locative media' were soon overtaken by an explosion of commercial services following the release of the iPhone in 2007.

Contemporary location-aware devices such as smart phones and tablets combine a number of different systems, including geocoded data, GIS software and GPS tracking capabilities. This assemblage enables devices to pose position-sensitive queries to relational databases, which then relay the information considered most relevant to the position described. 'Placing' information in this way has generated a wide range of new social practices and commercial logics that are now routinely enacted in urban space. When the everyday movements of millions of individuals through the city can leave discernible digital traces, location-awareness assumes a new prominence in urban experience. As McCullough notes: 'With the spread of positioning systems, which in effect make anyone who carries such a system into a live cursor, the city plan itself becomes a living surface' (2004: 88). When Google first integrated location into web search in 2010, location-aware services had not only become the most dynamic and rapidly growing sector of digital media, but were recognized as a key to wider business strategies.³ In conjunction with ubiquity, location-aware media supports the extension of an urban logic in which the freewheeling mobility of individual users and the calculative analytics of mass tracking have become closely related trajectories.

The third key trajectory underpinning the emergence of geomedia is the 'real-time' orientation of contemporary digital networks. It is important to distinguish this from the older capacity for electronic media to relay simultaneous events to a dispersed audience: this has existed for a century with broadcasting, and was elevated into a specific social form through the 'media event' (Dayan and Katz 1992) carried by live television. What is different in the present is the way the distributed architecture of digital networks opens the potential for 'real-time' feedback from many-to-many, supporting novel experiences of social simultaneity. As I will describe in chapter 1, geomedia alters the valence of the broadcast media event by creating the potential for new forms of

recursive communication and coordination between diverse actors even as events unfold.

As Virilio (1997) has argued, the threshold of ‘real-time’ media is not merely a technical event, but is implicated in a profound reconfiguration of the social relations of time and space.⁴ A key strand in my thinking of geomedia is the way that contemporary developments are contributing to the progressive undermining of the primacy of the representational paradigm that has historically underpinned media studies as a discipline. According to this paradigm, which can be traced to Platonic roots, the event always comes first and mediation necessarily involves *re*-presentation through some form of symbolization or signification.⁵ In this Platonic logic or *rhythm*, the event is always primary and mediation is inevitably secondary and belated. The explanatory power of this model has arguably been waning ever since live broadcasting via radio and later television became powerful forms of orchestrating synchronous social experiences on a national scale. However, the uncertain relations between live media and event have assumed a new potency in the present, as ‘real-time’ feedback multiplies and spreads into the interstices of everyday life.

The fourth strand underpinning the condition of geomedia is convergence. Convergence is often defined according to a narrow technical logic, describing the merging of previously separate systems of broadcasting, computation and telecommunications in the context of digital technology. However, the logic of convergence also extends to a broader process of remaking, impacting on business, institutional and regulatory settings as much as social, political and cultural practices. In so far as convergence names this complex process of transforming ‘old’ media while also elaborating the emergent ‘new’, it informs my choice of ‘geomedia’ to name the heterogeneous family of technologies – devices, platforms, screens, operating systems, programs and networks – that constitute the contemporary mediascape. If convergence breaks down the differences separating older mediums such as photography or broadcast television from the computing and telecommunications sectors, this is not just because the older media have become increasingly computational and networked, but because the so-called ICTs

have become increasingly mediatized. In this context, many of the historic differences embedded in terms such as 'camera', 'phone', 'computer' or 'television' no longer operate. Using 'geomedia' to name this condition is a strategic choice, in so far as it helps to foreground the increasingly complex relations of 'media' to 'immediacy' in contemporary practices of social encounter.

In summary, geomedia should not be understood as simply referring to the emergence of specific types of new device (as is the case with many studies of 'mobile media') or in relation to the effect of single functions (for instance, the focus on geolocation in studies of 'locative media'). Rather, my aim is to conceptualize the different *condition* that media enters in the twenty-first century. This condition, situated at the confluence of the trajectories I have described in terms of ubiquity, positionality, real-time and convergence, is characterized by a profound contradiction.

On the one hand, media now span the globe with greater facility, spread and speed than ever before. Everyday interactions often enjoy global reach at little cost and effort. Along this axis, digital media are extremely powerful *space-time machines*, enabling the extensions of human perception, social organization and cultural protocols that were first analysed by those such as Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan in the 1950s and 1960s. This capacity to span distance and contract time has often fed fantasies of overthrowing matter, such as those associated with cyberspace in the 1990s (see for instance Dyson et al. 1994). But this was always a one-sided analysis, and its bias has become more obvious in the present. Digital media have become increasingly personalized and embedded, and are widely used to activate local situations and connect to particular places. In other words, as much as digital media enable *emancipation* from place, they have also become a key modality of contemporary *placemaking*. It is this paradoxical conjunction of connection and disconnection – of emplacement and displacement, of the articulation or *jointing* of the local and the global, of media and immediacy – that I am wanting to grasp with the concept of geomedia. Geomedia constitutes a new context for the *production* of public space, impacting on how we conceive and exercise our incipient 'right to the city', how we negotiate social

encounters, and how we experience relations of proximity and distance, presence and absence.

The ambivalence of the digital

The transformation of media into geomedias cuts across a variety of debates concerning media, cities and social life. Alteration of the 'place' that media technologies occupy in the city means that experience of both media and urban space becomes subject to new dynamics. Diverse and often contradictory tendencies are being played out simultaneously, underlining the fact that current transformations are both profound and uncertain in their ends.

In fact, what is most striking about the present is the volatility and polarization that characterizes analysis of the digital future. On the one hand, the sorts of decentralized communication platforms and practices of peer-based exchange and networked collaboration that have developed around the Internet have found diverse manifestations in the contemporary city. The distributed capacity of digital networks means that multiple inputs can be more easily solicited and incorporated, giving practical import to the ideal of a 'participatory public space' in which urban ambience might be defined and redefined by a city's inhabitants. But accompanying this *generativity* of new peer-based practices are vastly expanded capacities to collect, archive, aggregate and analyse a new range of data. Location-filtered Internet searches and geo-tagged social media posts, mobile phone signals, sensor networks and smart cards for urban transit systems now complement older staples such as CCTV and credit cards in producing an urban communication infrastructure capable of constructing increasingly rapid and precise feedback loops between mobile subjects and their particular urban routines. In a context in which so many actions leave a digital trace, and transaction costs have fallen to historic lows, the sort of anonymity that helped to foster the dynamic public culture of the modern city is at risk of disappearing. As the capacity to store, process and retrieve previously inconceivable volumes of

data becomes increasingly cheap and rapid, the entire logic of data use in urban governance is changing. Policies based on retrospection are switching towards prediction.

Urban space suffused with data is the precondition for what Saskia Sassen (2011a, 2011b) has evoked as the potential for an 'open source urbanism' – an urbanism defined by more horizontal, multiple and responsive feedback loops between inhabitants and 'the city'. However, Sassen (2011a) warns that the 'smart-city' agenda is shadowed by the ever-present danger that it may tip over into the technocratic fantasy of totally managed space. Here the genuine innovation of open source urbanism is usurped by what Gilles Deleuze (1992) famously termed 'control society', in which the older spatial strategies of segregation and physical containment that underpinned Foucault's disciplinary regimes are displaced by ubiquitous processes of digital modulation. The demand to negotiate the tension between the potential for new modes of citizen involvement and self-organization and the tendency for such projects to be marginalized by, or to themselves produce, new forms of technocratic control, situates the marked ambivalence of the digital present. I would hasten to add that this is not something that can be resolved by an act of will, as if we could simply 'choose' a single desired pathway over all others. The ambivalence of the digital is not simply the fact that a rhetoric of freedom often masks a new logic of control (Chun 2006), but stems more from the extent to which what Stephen Graham aptly calls 'countergeographies' often depend on the very same digital tools as do contemporary strategies of control:

The new public domains through which countergeographies can be sustained must forge collaborations and connections across distance and difference. They must materialize new publics, and create new countergeographic spaces, using the very same control technologies that militaries and security states are using to forge ubiquitous borders. (2010: 350)

This ambivalence situates the complexity of the challenge regarding what sort of city – media city, smart city, sentient city – we

want to inhabit in the future. How can we invent new protocols, practices and platforms that embrace the benefits of data-based infrastructure operation, while also leaving room to develop the distributed communicative capacity that might facilitate a new era of urban democratization? If answering such a question is today centred around debates over the role of large-scale media platforms and ‘smart-city’ solutions, it is also tied to our capacity to collectively imagine and enact new articulations between media and public space.

Public space and the ‘common’

In the early stages of writing this book during 2011, public spaces across the world, from Tahrir Square in Cairo to Tompkins Square in New York, were being occupied by diverse groups of citizens. These events, often grouped under headings such as ‘Arab Spring’ and ‘Occupy Wall Street’, should not be hastily united into a single front, ignoring their vastly different stakes and varied political conjunctures. But they do signal two things central to my inquiry. First, that the appropriation of public space remains a vital mode of political action in the present. Second, that contemporary forms of ‘occupation’ differ significantly from earlier modalities of taking over the city. How should we understand this new condition?

As Bernard Stiegler notes, the *koine* or common is ‘the condition of all public space’ (2011: 151). But such commonality has never been a simple relation. David Harvey argues that public space cannot be equated with a ‘commons’ in any unproblematic way, but has always been a highly contested zone (2012: 72–3). Public space is dependent on state power, and is implicated in the uneven process of capitalist urbanization, but also emerges from class-based practices of inhabitation. Harvey adds:

To the degree that cities have sites of vigorous class conflicts and struggles, so urban administrations have often been forced to supply public goods (such as affordable public housing, health care, education, paved

streets, sanitation, and water) to an urbanized working class. While these public spaces and public goods contribute mightily to the qualities of the commons, it takes political action on the part of citizens and the people to appropriate them or to make them so. (2012: 72–3)

Harvey underlines the extent to which many of the qualities we associate with public space are not handed down from on high, nor achieved once and for all, but are subject to ongoing struggle. Reversing the order of Stiegler's proposition, we might argue that the fate of public space is today a fundamental index of how we treat the common. In fact, Lefebvre made a somewhat similar observation nearly half a century ago: 'Let us be contented with the notion that the *democratic* character of a regime is identifiable by its attitude towards the city, urban "liberties" and urban reality, and therefore towards *segregation*' (1996: 141).

Struggles around urban space and urban 'liberties' have gained markedly greater prominence over the last two decades. As Pask notes:

key word searches of 'public space' in newspaper archives show an exponential leap in the number of articles since the mid-1990s. The specifics are often different, but the themes remarkably similar: citizens' groups, grassroots collectives, sometimes even local governments themselves, leading a charge to create public space where it does not yet exist, to reclaim it from where it was lost, and to rejuvenate it from states undesirable or incomplete. (In Hou 2010: 227)

This new prominence undoubtedly reflects the profound challenges to public space that emerged under conditions of neo-liberal urban development, as previous forms of 'the common' have become subject to market disciplines and privatization. Pask adds: "public space" has now become a driver of social movements and activism in its own right – and a particularly strategic one at that' (in Hou 2010: 231). This perspective is shared by a number of the most thoughtful analysts of the present, including Zygmunt Bauman who argued that 'public places are the very spots where the future of urban life [...] is being at this moment decided'

(2005: 77) and Saskia Sassen who contends 'that the question of public space is central to giving the powerless rhetorical and operational openings' (2011c: 579).

But the strategic importance of public space in contemporary questions of power and urban life is not simply the recapitulation of an older problematic of public space. Rather, this renewed emphasis on public space is also the result of historical changes in what constitutes the 'common'. In *Commonwealth* (2009), Hardt and Negri argued that production is no longer rooted in the old common of 'nature' (natural common) but increasingly depends on the 'artificial common' of languages, images, knowledges, affects, habits, codes and practices. As a result, it is not 'nature', but the city that now grounds what they call biopolitical productive activity:

With the passage to the hegemony of biopolitical production, the space of economic production and the space of the city tend to overlap. There is no longer a factory wall that divides the one from the other, and 'externalities' are no longer external to the site of production that valorizes them. Workers produce throughout the metropolis, in its every crack and crevice. In fact, production of the common is becoming nothing but the life of the city itself. (Hardt and Negri 2009: 251)

This does not mean that the old 'nature' ceases to exist or is somehow rendered unimportant. Rather, what Hardt and Negri call the biopolitical threshold points to historic shifts in the relation between knowledge and economy that have been variously grasped under descriptors such as postindustrial society, information society, knowledge society, informational capitalism and communicative capitalism. As informational goods assume precedence over other forms of production, control over media platforms, network protocols and intellectual property (copyright, trademarks and licensing) becomes fundamental to economic operations. At the same time, and as part of the same process, the 'artificial common' of languages, images, affects, habits and communication practices becomes subject to new forms of intensive cultivation and harvesting. As I will argue below (chapter 2), the routine activities of social life that support the 'artificial common' are