LSE Research Online

THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

Wallis Motta

Book review: geomedia: networked cities and the future of public space

Article (Accepted version) (Refereed)

Original citation:
Motta, Wallis *Book review: geomedia: networked cities and the future of public space.* European Journal of Communication. ISSN 0267-3231

© 2017 The Author

This version available at: http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/76403/

Available in LSE Research Online: May 2017

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (http://eprints.lse.ac.uk) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final accepted version of the journal article. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

http://eprints.lse.ac.uk

Book review: McQuire, S. 2016. *Geomedia: Networked Cities and the Future of Public Space*. Cambridge: Polity.

By Wallis Motta

Geomedia is not a reductionist concept referring to specific media, type of device, mobile app or particular geo-location function of digital technologies. On the contrary, it is more broadly defined as "the extension of networked digital media throughout the urban space" (p. 1). In this sense geomedia is conceptualised as both a new media environment and as a condition of living in the city, where "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" (p. 3). Geomedia enables us to think of an urban, digitally mediated milieu that develops at the intersection of four key digital media processes: location-awareness, real-time feedback, ubiquity and convergence. The aim of the book is to explore these processes, reflecting upon two key paradoxes: first, that "as much as digital media enable emancipation from place, they have also become key modality of contemporary placemaking" (p. 6); and second, that geomedia is a site for "the orchestration of new forms of domination, as it is for the invention of new practices of commonality" (p. 162). The broad argument of the book is that "in the twenty-first century, how we imagine and implement the digitization of the city and the networking of public space will prove pivotal to what kind of future city we inhabit… how we deal with this threshold will offer a template of what kind of people we will become" (p. 19).

In the first chapter, which is by far the most theoretical one, McQuire revisits the work of key 21st century philosophers, sociologists, urban thinkers and media scholars. He posits that urban public spaces are now potentially becoming critical laboratories for the reinvention of a new social and economic capitalist order. Whilst in the 80s a domestication of technology had preoccupied media scholars, today we are witnessing the opposite process, an urbanization of technology. Rather than considering how media broadcasts came to colonise the home and discipline populations to become citizen consumers, the focus has shifted to the colonisation

of the lifeworld in public space through digital media systems. This colonisation is justified under the confluence of three rhetorical discourses: the smart city, the creative class and innovation. All of these have emphasised efficiency, transparency, productivity and a techno-idealism that promises better urban living. Nevertheless, the question remains of whether society will agree to the complete colonisation of the lifeworld. In particular, this chapter takes issue with public space and the implications of this move to change our understanding of what constitutes publicness as social relations in public places, reviewing and re-thinking relevant work (Butler, 2011; Dayan & Katz, 1992; Greenfield, 2013; Habermas, 1989; Harvey, 2008; Lefebvre, 1996; Park, 1967; Sassen, 2011; Stiegler, 2011; Virilio, 1994).

The second chapter grounds these theoretical debates in a practical example discussing how Google Maps and Street View turn our cities into a closed, for-profit and proprietary database right before our eyes. Google renders spatial photographs into data, orders them in a montage according to maps and creates a new representation of urban totality. Power and control no longer derive from aerial views or satellite photography, as in the past, but now incorporate the street level. There is a mash up of sources of information and multiple data streams coming together, in which “the end goal is a real-time vision of the city in motion” (p. 85). This changes the logic of urban representation and entails a transformation of social space. The key danger exposed in this chapter is that “many people tend not to think of Google Street View or Google Maps as private platforms [enabling fine-grained control], but accept their regular framing as a type of public service” (p. 84).

McQuire’s view on these technologies is evocative of the 1930s Mass Observation Project, where participants volunteered diaries containing seemingly banal information about their lifeworld to enable scientists to better understand modern societies and culture. Today Google itself is becoming a Mass Observation Project of sorts, but one that increasingly focuses on public spaces as sites of data gathering for commercial interest. The data generated by our lives in public is being recorded, aggregated and repurposed in unprecedented ways, often unknown to us. Our thoughtful reflection and informed consent is no longer sought after, nor open scientific knowledge the final goal. The author seeks to extend this discussion beyond privacy concerns, considering if turning the city into a database may entail “outsourcing the management of our social encounters to software” (p. 89) in

problematic ways. McQuire asks us to explicitly consider the effect of corporate algorithmic placemaking on our social life. Geographic social contact is not a government-driven, architectural problem anymore; rather, it has become the domain of geomedia as controlled by search engines and social networks.

The third chapter discusses the work of artists seeking to create new practices of commonality and participation using geomedia. The author argues that digital street art "has become a key zone for incubating new types of urban encounter" (p. 95). McQuire discusses extensively the work of Lozano-Hemmer. This artist uses software and light to create public installations where participants exert control over urban lighting with their heartbeats or mobile phones. Lozano-Hammer's work creates awareness that freedom and control in their totality do not exist, but become regulated by entangled relations of humans and non-human forces in a Latourian sense.

An additional example is Christian Nold's Biomapping project, where the emotional arousal of participants is measured with wearable devices as they wonder through public space. The artist uses the data to create a communal emotion map. Nold cites the Mass Observation Project as an inspiration, which is pertinent because he also seems to be testing the limits to what can be recorded and publicly shared. Is documenting physiological arousal and sharing it excessive?

Another art project, Billibellary's Walk, is interesting from an anthropological perspective. It consists of an app that overlays the point of view of the Wurundjeri people to the current landmarks of the University of Melbourne. Historically, the Wurundjeri were displaced and the University built in their home; the app provides an immersive juxtaposition between the spatially-grounded values of the original inhabitants of the area and those of the University. For instance, when describing a building dedicated to Sir Walter Baldwin, an anthropologist specialising on Aboriginal communities, the app states that "the Aboriginal community regards Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer's work as a misappropriation of Aboriginal culture and knowledge. Today, Aboriginal communities demand control of and participation in research related to their communities and ownership of their knowledge" (p. 115).

All the digital street art discussed in this chapter features the creation of a novel information layer that overlays public space, and is analysed in relation to Eco's

notion of open work. McQuire concludes, agreeing with Eco, that “art should be regarded as a ‘higher’ form of communication precisely because of its capacity to engage with different, often incommensurable values, scales and systems… [and] digital art supports negotiative modes of public encounter” (p. 122).

Chapter four focuses on Urban Screens and Media Events, questioning the default assumption that urban screens are nothing more than vehicles for commercialization and advertising. McQuire shows that there is a second-generation of urban screens, concerned with diversifying content and exploring different modes of engagement in public space. McQuire discusses three models that have emerged in recent years to support alternatives to commercial urban screens: public broadcasting model, the civic partnership model and the art model.

McQuire proposes that, since urban screens conjoin the logic of public assembly with that of media events, Dayan and Katz work on media events can be updated by creating a novel category that he calls the *public media event*. In the original Dayan and Katz view, media events were deeply embedded in household life. McQuire suggests that now media events have fully moved to public space. Due to this dislocation, there is a change in how liveness is perceived, discussed and understood. Before the availability of public screens, we thought of watching an event in the living room screen as a secondary experience. However, with large-scale public screens the experience becomes less of a substitute for the event and more of another unique means to enact an authentic collective experience. In a sense, screens in public media events become part of the event itself, providing a potentially less mediated experience. This happens also with smaller screens, where viewers assimilate them as part of their non-mediated placemaking strategies (Motta & Fatah gen. Schieck, 2015; Motta et al., 2013). Hence, public media events are part of a wider process of technological assimilation in which screens become anchored in our experiences of the world around us.

Urban screens offer distinctive opportunities for rituals of play, protest, commemoration and mourning; some of these are explored in the book (Fatah gen. Schieck, Al-Sayed, Kostopoulou, Behrens, & Motta, 2013; Memarovic et al., 2012; Schuijren, 2008). The author describes various projects where urban screens have been used to connect different cities and interact with audiences through mobile phones, reflecting also on his personal experiences running this type of projects

(McQuire & Radywyl, 2010). There is a glimpse in this chapter towards the way urban screens could contribute to a new type of public sphere and cosmopolitan experiences, which will emerge from public experimentation.

For the conclusion, McQuire brings us back to the idea that capitalism is always coupled with technology, working in tandem to extend the logic of commodification. Today those with digital technological power seek to model our civilization, and are succeeding with considerable effect. This is evident from the market to the media and from policy to democracy. The “increasingly crucial question is precisely that of the relation of the technical system to other systems” (Stigler in McQuire, p. 160). Perhaps nowadays the arena of power is technology and software development, not just politics or traditional media as it used to be.

Power today works differently, as software logic is generally hidden – not only behind a veil of intellectual property, but also behind the inscrutability of artificial intelligence. Technology is hence experienced only implicitly, and we are encouraged to live in the realm of the technological unconscious. This is a move that the author sees as post-hegemonic, since we seldom have to be persuaded to accept end user agreements to software. Rather than behind traditional political campaigns, political power can now lie behind the specification of APIs to which, in many cases, we can’t even fully consent to.

This book is full of interesting ideas and conceptual provocations for empirical researchers to explore further and contribute to an imagination of a better media environment.

Bibliography

Butler, J. (2011). Bodies in alliance and the politics of the street. Retrieved from http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en

Dayan, D., & Katz, E. (1992). Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Fatah gen. Schieck, A., Al-Sayed, K., Kostopoulou, E., Behrens, M., & Motta, W. (2013). Networked architectural interfaces: Exploring the effect of configuration on

urban screen placement. Paper presented at the Proceedings of the 9th International Space Syntax Symposium, Seoul.

Greenfield, A. (2013). Against the Smart City. New York: Do projects.

Habermas, J. (1989). The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An inquiry into acategory of Bourgeois Society (T. Burger & F. Lawrence, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Harvey, D. (2008). The Right to the City. New Left Review, 53, 23-40.

Lefebvre, H. (1996). The right to the city. In E. Koffman & E. Lebas (Eds.), Writings on Cities. Oxford: Blackwell.

McQuire, S., & Radywyl, N. (2010). From object to platform: digital technology and temproarlity. Time and Society, 19(1), 1-23.

Memarovic, N., Langheinrich, M., Alt, F., I., E., Hosio, S., & Rubegni, E. (2012). Using public displays to stimulate passive engagement, active engagement and discovery in public spaces. Paper presented at the MAB'12 Proceedings of the 4th Media Architecture Biennale Conference: Participation, Aarhus, Denmark.

Motta, W., & Fatah gen. Schieck, A. (2015). Mediated Spatial Cultures: Place-making in London neighbourhoods with the aid of Public Interactive Screens. In S. Griffiths & A. von Lünen (Eds.), Spatial Cultures. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate.

Motta, W., Fatah gen. Schieck, A., Schnädelbach, H., Kostopoulou, E., Behrens, M., North, S., & Ye, L. (2013). Considering Communities, Diversity and the Production of Locality in the Design of Networked Urban Screens. In P. Kotzé, G. Marsden, G. Lindgaard, J. Wesson, & M. Winckler (Eds.), Human-Computer Interaction – INTERACT 2013 (Vol. 8117, pp. 315-322): Springer Berlin Heidelberg.

Park, R. (1967). The city as a social laboratory. In R. Turner (Ed.), On Social Control and Collective Behaviour. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Sassen, S. (2011). Talking back to your intellingent city. Retrieved from http://voices.mckinseyonsociety.com/talking-back-to-your-intelligent-city/

Schuijren, J. (2008). Putting Art into urban space an interview with Jan Schuijren. In S. McQuire, M. Martin, & S. Niederer (Eds.), Urban Screens Reader. Amsterdam: Institute of Networked Cultures.

Stiegler, B. (2011). The Decadence of Industrial Democracies. Volume 1: Disbelief and Discredit (D. Ross & S. Arnold, Trans.). Cambridge: Polity.

Virilio, P. (1994). The Vision Machine (J. Rose, Trans.). Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press.