The politics and praxis of media-city research:
A duo interview with Myria Georgiou and Scott McQuire

Koen Leurs*, Myria Georgiou**, Scott McQuire***, Jani Vuolteenaho****, Johanna Sumiala*****

*Assistant professor, Department of Media and Culture Studies, Utrecht University, The Netherlands (K.H.A.Leurs@uu.nl)
**Associate professor and Deputy Head, Department of Media and Communication, London School of Economics and Political Science, United Kingdom (m.a.georgiou@lse.ac.uk)
***Associate professor School of Culture and Communication, the University of Melbourne, Australia (mcquire@unimelb.edu.au)
****Adjunct professor, Department of Geography and Geology, University of Turku, Finland (jani.vuolteenaho@utu.fi)
*****Senior Research Fellow at University of Tampere / Adjunct Professor at University of Helsinki (johanna.sumiala@helsinki.fi)

Introduction

This epilogue draws various themes, issues and questions addressed in this OBS* special issue together. For this purpose, a duo-interview was conducted with Myria Georgiou and Scott McQuire. Georgiou and McQuire are unquestionable pioneers in the terrain of media city research. McQuire's *The media city. Media, architecture and urban space* (Sage, 2008) and Georgiou's *Media and the city. Cosmopolitanism and difference* (Polity, 2013) are essential textbooks that have achieved a wide readership across various fields including media and communication studies, architecture, cultural geography, sociology, design and urban studies. McQuire approaches contemporary digital media cities from a historically contextualizing angle, while Georgiou considers the contradictory and mediated challenges of living with cultural difference in the city. They are both working on timely and topical book-projects: McQuire's next book is titled *Geomedia: Networked cities and the future of public space* (Polity, 2016), while Georgiou's next monograph is titled *Urban popular cultures* (Polity, 2017).

The way in which the exchange took place between the end of October and early November 2015 is illustrative for the politics and praxis of media-city research: at the time both scholars were battling jet-lags, travelling and working in a continent away from their home institutions. Myria Georgiou was immersed in fieldwork on communicative infrastructures in a local Los Angeles community. She sent her responses from "a hotel with annoyingly unreliable internet connection which constantly gets cut off". Scott gathered his thoughts during his flight from Melbourne to Belgium. He sent his responses while adjusting to a different time-zone in "gloomy" Antwerp that contrasted heavily with summery Melbourne. He was there to give a lecture on *Digital media cities and the future of public space* at the University of Antwerp.

To set the stage for this reflective dialogue, can you situate yourself in the historical and contemporary debates on the media city?

Scott McQuire:

I think this is a particularly challenging question. First, the debates are remarkably broad and cross-disciplinary, and have a long history across a variety of fields including media and communications, cultural and film studies, architecture and urban planning, parts of sociology and geography, contemporary art, as well, as newer fields such as interaction design, network theory and software studies among others.

This diversity means that different dimensions of the media and the city problematic come into focus in different disciplinary contexts (urban informatics, ubiquitous computing, smart cities, media facades etc.), and are often in play simultaneously. This situation is further accentuated by the rapid evolution of technologies and social practices, leading to rapid prototyping of new articulations. So what I'm particularly interested in is how we can establish more robust processes of feedback and cross-disciplinary translation, realizing more productive links between empirical research, research methodologies, theoretical and conceptual frameworks and issues of design and implementation in particular policy settings.

As a scholar, I've always been attracted by what David Morley once called the non-media centric study of the media (2009). At bottom, this is about finding better ways of understanding technological change, in terms of its historical, social and political embeddedness while also respecting the ways in which new technologies are implicated in opening up new horizons of imagination and action. The media and city problematic foregrounds this need to think about the relation between social and the technological in more complex terms in relation to urban inhabitation. I've found the work of Saskia Sassen (especially in *Territory, authority, rights*, 2006) helpful in terms of elaborating a framework for thinking the articulation of the digital and the non-digital as a dynamic process, in which certain relations (scales, institutional formations, social actors) might be weakened or become destabilized, while other previously informal or emergent relations become relatively more formalized and institutionalized.

If media have become a critical element in establishing contemporary relations to territory, to the city and to others, this does not mean it is the main driving force or in control. Media are subject to uneven processes of adaption and adoption, to forms of appropriation that are shaped by distinct cultures of use, as well as the materiality of specific cities, the legacy of legal and regulatory settings, institutional histories, economic processes, and so on.

In *The Media City* one of my concerns was to map the multiple trajectories that different media platforms facilitate or are integrated with. In that book I was particularly inspired by the work of Walter Benjamin, who recognized the industrial city as a new kind of lived environment (1997 [1925]), but also treated media (most notably film) as an historical mechanism for developing a new political relation to the urban environment. But I also argued that the threshold of the media city belonged to the digital milieu in a particular way: as the moment when certain incipient or minor trajectories achieved a level of dominance, so that the social

experience of urban space becomes subject to new logics and is increasingly experienced as a 'media-architecture complex' forged at the nexus of media, architecture and social practices.

In my more recent work on media and public space I have focused on the new conditions of digital media, defined by ubiquity, location-awareness and potential for distributed real-time communication. Adapting Lefebvre's right to the city problematic (1996 [1968]) to the context of the networked city, I argue this emergent condition is changing fundamental processes of urban inhabitation and social encounter. What I call "geomedia" is a paradoxical condition in which the kind of extension of communication scale (analysed by those pioneers such as Innis (1951) and McLuhan (1964) is increasingly coupled to media as a form of place-making and inhabitation – manifest in personalized media devices and software, growing reliance on media platforms for negotiating everyday activities and sustaining relations to others both near and distant. This paradoxical conjunction of connection and disconnection, of emplacement and displacement, of location and dislocation – of the articulation or *jointing* of the local and the global to form 'open' localities, and loosely bounded, interruptible situations – defines our new, intensely ambiguous sense of urban space. This is what most interests me about the media and the city as a research problematic.

Myria Georgiou:

Indeed a challenging question, not least because this strand of research cannot but be understood as an open terrain with multiple, often parallel histories and trajectories. This is both the beauty and the challenge of research on media city: it frees us from media-centrism, as Scott already noted, and it also invites us to think of the contribution of media theory beyond our disciplinary boundaries. My interest in the city is sociologically-driven but it is grounded in media and communications. I am interested in the city as a social and cultural space, where growing numbers of different people congregate, where we can observe some of the most intense inequalities of our times, but also glimpse of politics of freedom and solidarity. Many of the current social, cultural and political struggles for access to the city's symbolic and material resources take place in the media and are expressed in the unequal distribution of urban communication infrastructures. Who is visible in the city's physical and digital street, who speaks, to whom, and with what consequences are critical questions for understanding who the city belongs to. Zukin's work (1995; 2010) is important here, not least in offering a street-level analysis of these struggles. It is this street-level analysis of the life, politics and cultures of the city, which goes back to Benjamin (1997) and Levebvre (1996 [1968]), which I find most inspiring. Following this tradition, I want to understand how different modes of communication become resources for identity, community and citizenship, or for inequality and the securitisation of urban life.

In my book *Media and the city* (2013) I aimed for a street-level analysis of the synergetic relationship between media and the city, especially as this is expressed in the mutual constitution of their symbolic power in the case of the global city (Sassen, 2001). The global city is the city of concentrated economic power but also the city which has – and needs – concentrated representational and symbolic power for sustaining its position in global hierarchies. While research on cultural industries (Pratt, 2008) and media capitals (Curtin, 2003) has been fundamental in understanding the synergies of power between media and the city, it is the city's people

and their communication practices that remain invisible in these analyses. Similarly, research on digital infrastructures of the city has often positioned people at the receiving end of an analytical order where media and technological change drive power and action. Yet, claims and struggles for the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1996 [1968]) take place in the digital and physical street and in the ways digital and urban infrastructures regulate access to work, play, and knowledge in the city. This book worked as a springboard for my recent research, where I delve into ethnographic and comparative research on the life of the city's communication infrastructures, inspired by urban geography especially and the work of Ash Amin (2012). I think that a non-technologically deterministic approach to communication infrastructures is critical in understanding the right to the city, not least as this relates to the human meanings of what these infrastructures are for and how they enable, distribute and regulate the right to speech, participation, and representation.

You each provide a distinct perspective on the media city. However, by connecting urbanity and mediation you are both bridging disciplines and connecting phenomena that are commonly considered in isolation from one another. Rather than acknowledging the independence and interrelationships between the city and media, how come media and communication studies scholars have largely been reluctant to engage with urbanity, and urban studies researchers have been reluctant to consider (digital) mediation? What is your way out of this conundrum? Can media city scholarship bridge these gaps and function as a meeting place of diverse theoretical paradigms and research traditions?

Scott McQuire:

I think you identify a crucial point that has implications for all forms of interdisciplinary study. While many universities have now adopted a rhetoric of interdisciplinarity, the demands of academic specialization still weigh heavily in terms of career advancement, particularly for younger researchers. Interdisciplinary research, even when it is team-based, takes time. For instance, in researching *The Media City*, I spent a long time engaging with architectural theory (from Futurism and Corbusier to Constant, Yona Friedman and Archigram to more contemporary architects such as Bernard Tschumi and Lars Spuybroek). Some of this appears in the book, but a lot doesn't. This kind of endeavor would be hard to sustain as a young scholar being expected to complete a PhD as rapidly as possible or seeking to establish a track record as an early career researcher. So I don't think the difficulties you mention are just about a lack of initiative or interest on the part of scholars, but are the legacy of institutional and funding settings.

Of course, this will vary in particular contexts. But when I first began exploring this problematic in the early 2000s, I found the discipline of architecture far more welcoming than media studies: I certainly received more invitations to speak to architects and urbanists in those early years. But I think this has changed significantly in recent years. There's not only a lot more articles and books, but conferences and journals dedicated to the

media-city intersection. So I'm more hopeful that this kind of question can make a difference to interdisciplinary dialogues.

I think the challenge now is to resist the all too familiar process of fragmentation. What was so interesting about the first Urban Screens conference held in Amsterdam in 2005 was that no one really knew what the object or field was. But lots of people from different backgrounds – artists, activists, media professionals (the BBC sent their whole public broadcasting team), architects, film-makers, social and media theorists, people from advertising and signage industries, local government representatives – all came into the same space and talked together. Now the architects have their own conference, as do the interaction designers, the signage experts, and so on, so the conversations have become more specialized, less messy, but also, in some ways, less interesting.

Sustaining interdisciplinarity is always a challenge, and this is intensified by the fact of researching emergent phenomena. In 2009, some colleagues and I established a long-term project researching large screens, and we adopted action research methods that involved initiating the production of specific interactive content to link screens in different cities. We had to do this because we were interested to see what could happen, and didn't want to wait around until someone else eventually did it so that we could study it. This meant working closely with artists, curators, arts funding bodies, art galleries, technicians, organizations in charge of public spaces and others, in order to realize these projects. This was very demanding but enormously enriching. Working in this way forces you to become more adept at translating your research concerns into new contexts – and also learning to better listen to the concerns of others.

Myria Georgiou:

I won't delve further into the structural constraints which are still dominant in academic institutions and cultures, even in those that celebrate interdisciplinarity. Scott has already identified those very poignantly. I will try instead to respond to the question you raise in relation to media city becoming a meeting place of diverse paradigms and traditions. I think the research agenda on media city is not less or more interdisciplinary than many other strands of research in social sciences; it is just a relatively young area of study. For me, research on media city will gain momentum and wider academic attention if it continues to ask important questions that help us understand a globally connected, urbanised, unequal world. This is to me the major attraction of this area of study. With growing urbanisation and mediation of everyday life, the merging of the two conditions – urbanisation and mediation – does not only present an intellectual challenge. It also raises important questions: for example, about making claims, communicating, seeing and hearing each other, but also about blocking each other out, and about being subject to the growing systems of control, especially in digitalised cities. If our work on media city does – and I think it can – help us understand some of these challenges, then it will become a meeting point for interesting, interdisciplinary encounters.

Roger Silverstone famously stated: "that it is because the media are central to our everyday lives that we must study them" (1999, p. 2). Media, he argued, are part of the general texture of taken-for-granted everyday experience. In our introductory review essay we argue the media city is important to be considered as a domain of mundane dwelling, but also to remain attentive to excessive spectacle as well as the city as a space of contestation, protest and uprising. I would like to ask you: why study the media city? What is the continuing urgency of this kind of work?

Myria Georgiou:

In answering this question, I would build on my response to the previous question and I would go back to Silverstone, as you do. Silverstone argued that we study the media because they are deeply engrained in different systems of power – it is all about power, in the end (1999). My answer to why study the media city would be along the same lines. The 21st century city is lived and imagined through different modes of communication – from the interpersonal encounters in the street, to the digital encounters on social media, and to the powerful cinematic representations of the city that feed into global and local urban imaginaries. Thus, the city does not exist outside systems of representation – from the ways in which it is named to the ways in which it is communicated and imagined. This is not only the case for the consumers of the city on screens – the cinema goers and the prospective visitors – but also for urban dwellers. More and more, information about the city, its geography and resources are digitised and organised in mediated formats. We learn about no-go areas and about culinary hubs from mainstream and social media; we learn about cities of refuge and about protest through digital networks, and we are being surveilled by corporations and the state through digital networks and cameras on street corners. This is the case in cities more than anywhere else, precisely because of the urban overconcentration of communication infrastructures. Thus, the media and the city merge in a synergetic relation, where many of the systems of knowledge and power are organised, with consequences for those living in the city but also for many living far beyond.

Scott McQuire:

When Roger Silverstone first made his comment – and I would link it to earlier assertions by very different thinkers such as McLuhan, who famously postulated that media constitute a new environment for social interaction – the centrality of media to everyday life seemed far more disputable and contentious. After all, while electronic media might have become influential in public life through the 20th century, to the point that Habermas declared television to be the preeminent institution of the public sphere, media wasn't so much part of public space. The whole domestication paradigm that Silverstone did much to develop initially turned on the fact that media consumption was taking place primarily in the notionally private space of the home, creating a paradoxical contact zone between public and private. In other words, while media was often 'about' the city, it wasn't so present *in* the city.

However, such an assertion about the centrality of media has taken on a new urgency and facticity in the present, as different media devices and platforms are integrated into more and more areas of social activity, including the communication practices of intimate life. So this is part of the urgency for me: understanding the historical threshold we are experiencing in which a whole range of social practices, from how we find a place to how we negotiate friendship or intimacy, are being integrated with different media platforms: databases such as *Google Maps*, applications such as text messages and *Snapchat*, near zero-cost video conferencing, large-scale digital image archives, and so on. This condition is already deeply influencing processes of urban encounter, in ways we are only beginning to discern. The other side of this new condition – and here I agree entirely with Myria's observation that this is fundamentally about the contemporary operation of power – is that, in their current settings, so many of these transactions are engineered to leave recordable digital traces. The ongoing challenge in studying the conjunction of media and urban life is to recognize the historical novelty of the extension of media to more and more sites and areas of social practice, while simultaneously refusing to grant media the status of privileged cause, or to reduce this nexus to some kind of deterministic condition. In this respect, we might say that, while the everyday is certainly being reconfigured by the new conditions of digital networks, in many instances it also functions as a creative limit on the technological and corporate logics that seek to direct the digital future. Recent interventions in public space that blend forms of political activism with media art and utilization of distributed social media networks are indicative of attempts to imagine and enact new practices of inhabitation in globally networked cities.

You both acknowledge the imaginative quality of various media forms and representations. In your view, which contemporarily emerging art and popular genres (in cinema, literature, theatre, digital games etc.) are capable of freshly articulating and/or intervening into the media city?

Scott McQuire:

I think the list is immense if not endless, but the areas in which I've been particularly interested are public artworks using digital media as platforms for public participation. For this reason, I've been deeply interested in the work of artists such as Rafael Lozano-Hemmer for some time, where media, robotic and surveillance technologies are repurposed to construct specific urban ambiances that invite experimental modes of influenced by public participation. I'm also deeply interested in the growing importance of light art, both in terms of large-scale festivals but also in terms of bottom-up interventions, such as the 'We are all boat people' slogan projected by activists onto the Sydney Opera House to protest the hardline attitude of the Australian government towards asylum seekers. This new capacity for urban inscription, which has also been evident in the Occupy Wall Street protests, and the protests in Cairo seeking the resignation of President Morsi, form the underside of the formalization of the digital media city as integrated spectacle.
And, of course, urban inscription extends to the capacity to tag urban sites with positional or locational information. These affordances share the tensions that are manifest in the deployment of communication

infrastructure such as urban screens: to what extent will the media city remain dominated by advertising and practical information (such as directional signage), in a circuit that is being tightened by the capacity for pervasive data gathering? Or will we learn to utilize the distributed potentials of digital media to develop new forms for the collective authoring of public space, to elaborate new forms of public communication?

Myria Georgiou:

The city history and present are inscribed in the different urban creative forms – from music and photography to cinema and graffiti. Creative forms are fascinating to me for two different reasons. First of all, they invite us to think of *the media* beyond a narrow definition that draws directly on a singular mass media landscape and what is often seen as mass media's evolution or replacement – e.g. digital media. Creative forms in the city that write its histories on walls, in lyrics, and in musical themes for example, present a whole domain of mediated representations and mediation of urban life, which has never been fully assimilated and absorbed by the institutional media structures. This does not mean that systems of mediated communication, such as music and graffiti, have not been appropriated by media institutions. On the contrary, they have been extensively and increasingly so, as for example, the evolution and commodification and urban musical genres such as hip hop and rap demonstrates. But this is precisely the second reason why I find creative forms so fascinating. Because they reveal the parallel life and the struggles around urban communication – being on the one hand used as powerful tools for expression and claim-making, especially from the city's margins, and also for incorporation and commodification of the city, its creative capital, and its difference. This contradictory potential of creative forms associated with urban margins is also the reason I find urban music and graffiti most interesting in thinking of the complex articulations of the media city interface. In many ways, they represent the symbolic terrain where many struggles for the future of our cities are being fought: for cities as sites for the people who live them or as sites for profit and exploitation of concentrated creativity and difference.

Both in the public and academic imaginary, new information and communication technologies are often celebrated for various forms of liberation and political emancipation (i.e. 'big data') or cursed for the reinforcement of hierarchical power relations (i.e. 'digital divides'). In what ways do contemporary media-cities differ from pre-digital precursors? What dimensions of urban everyday life have remained unchanged despite the pluralization of the forms of mass-, data- and personalized media in the digitalized present? How can we account for the importance of public space vis-à-vis the popular imagery of digital protest and mobilization? How can we offer more balanced accounts?

Myria Georgiou:

In my recent research on the communication infrastructures of multicultural London we observed the collapse of some of the most widespread academic, policy, and often public myths about the 'digitalised present'. The nuanced realities of the hyperlocal environments often reveal what is missing from theorisations of the digital world. What we observed on the ground is the persistence and the enormous significance of face to face communication in organising everyday life but also in building social capital in the case of three different ethnic groups. This is the case in an urban global environment like London, which is intensely mediated and connected. The persistence of face-to-face communication proved to be critical in supporting conviviality among diverse populations, when their media practices were more likely to keep them separated. Thus the relation between the mediated – which includes the digital – and the face to face communication is a dialectic one: they both constitute components of making the city and of making urban public space. A balanced account needs to take into account the 'double articulation' of urban public space: to a large extent as stubbornly physical and to a smaller but significant extent, as changing through different forms of mediation and digital practices. For example, hyperlocal social media in our study have brought to the attention of authorities the voices of many citizens; at the same time, the absence of many already marginalised citizens from these hyperlocal media meant that the very old community organisation structures were the only systems of advocacy for those marginalised groups. Thus, if you like, a balanced view is an empirically informed view which takes into account the actual meanings of technology for people, as these are shaped in their everyday lives, not as these are perceived to exist in virtual and abstract digital systems.

Scott McQuire:

'Digital divides' remain potent, and constitute real limits to the mythic appeal of a global society, both in terms of ongoing regional and national inequities, but also in terms of the unevenness of developments in particular urban terrains. But it is increasingly important to extend the traditional concerns of such debates beyond the basic questions of access to connectivity or devices in order to consider more deeply the critical and creative capacities that are needed for urban populations to take up their 'right to the networked city' in any meaningful way. For instance, governments in many countries around the world are currently adopting a rhetoric of public participation in urban planning processes. Putting aside any evaluation of the actual depth of investment in genuine public participation, we can note this has led to a plethora of schemes for using the web, mobile apps and social media platforms to deliver information to citizens, and to provide (limited) avenues for feedback and dialogue. It has also led to a concerted push to open vast stores of publicly-held urban data with the aim of facilitating private sector-led service development (a simple example would be the integration of public transit schedules in many territories into *Google Maps*). This situation creates a number of tensions, including the transfer of public goods to private platforms, and the extent to which growing dependence on online services might further disenfranchise segments of the urban population such as the homeless.

What remains obstinately the same is the seemingly ever-present tendency to treat new technology as a quick fix, as some kind of a magic bullet to long-standing problems of urban inequality and political disenfranchisement. One important task and opportunity that this moment provides is to at least try to hold different levels of government (and their partners) accountable to the standards of their own rhetoric. In order to do this, we need to think more broadly about – and be prepared to experiment with – different strategies that might generate new forms of meaningful public engagement. And I think this is where public space is critical in a way that exceeds its valorization in popular imagery. Public space, which today is also already a media space, has historically been an arena for contact between different urban actors. In the modern city, public space was frequently a critical contact zone for those coming from different countries, who had to learn to cohabit in the absence of shared language, religion and cultural background. In Richard Sennett's terms, it is the space in which the social skills for living with others were developed, nurtured and practiced (2012). Can networked public space still play this role in the present? Insofar as it is able to, I think this will only be because we succeed in broadening the current agenda of urban communication. The challenge is to move beyond a consumer-oriented model where the participatory role of the public is largely limited to commenting on service quality, and to instead reimagine ourselves as citizens who have a responsibility to others that exceeds our personal interests. From this perspective, 'participation' demands using the new connective and communicative capacities of the digital to produce networked urban spaces capable of supporting diverse modes of citizen-appropriation – from inscribing places with diverse and contested histories to supporting transversal and transnational connections between different sites and groups, to staging playful interactive events and imagining new urban rituals, and so on.

How can we balance innovative knowledge production on the media city with accountability? The concepts coined including 'smart city' and 'urban big data' etc. are readily appropriated by city planners and marketers for exploitative purposes. When concepts are disconnected from societal transformative goals and applied as yardsticks, like for example the notion of the ultimate smart city, which may for example be contrasted with underdeveloped 'dumb' or 'digital data-poor' cities, how are we, as academics, implicated? How can we productively engage with this tension? In short, what ethical and political issues lurk behind the pecuniary motifs of the ongoing mediatisation of space and the spatialisation of media?

Scott McQuire:

As a number of writers such as Adam Greenfield have pointed out (2013), contemporary smart city agendas tend to be vendor-driven, dominated by a narrow instrumental focus and an over-estimation of what knowledge 'data' can provide, with only lip service paid to rhetorics of information transparency, and quality of public life. One of the challenges for academics using big urban data is the uneven playing field affecting both access to data, and capacity to analyze it. While there is strong pressure in many jurisdictions to make data

held by publicly funded bodies more open, in practice this often means open to development by private service providers rather than open to the public in any meaningful sense. In contrast, the data held by social media platforms such as Twitter, or, more pointedly, Facebook, often remains only partly accessible or completely inaccessible. Academics using this data need to critically acknowledge this unevenness, as well as the dependence of much big data analysis on particular software platforms. This ethico-political tension situates the ambivalence of digital media in the present, swinging between what Sassen evokes as the potential for an open source city (2011) and the ever-looming threat of the smart city as the realization of Deleuze's dystopian control space (1992).

Myria Georgiou:

Indeed, this is an important question. The ethical and political challenges associated with the mediation of city space and urban life are pertinent. So are the ways in which academics make sense of them. I will briefly address both. First of all, I feel the urgency of approaching the growing mediation of urban life through its politics, not to take it for granted as a condition. For example, the securitisation of urban life depends on big data used for surveillance of our civic and consumer practices. Urban securitisation has enormous consequences on who has the right to the controlled city and on what are the (diminished) rights within the urban world. Can we study the media city without considering such fundamental questions? There is also a second critical issue: the ethical challenges of academic research do not only depend on the questions we ask but also on the questions we do not ask. For example, part of the mediation of the city is its branding – celebrations of the smart city and the creative city have not gained legitimacy in policy and corporate campaigns but in the 'scientification' of such terms as they have been adopted by some sectors of the academia. While the advance of such concepts in research agendas and language might strengthen the case for the study of the media city, it also feeds into local and global hierarchies and policies of social cleansing and securitisation. Are we participating or resisting such politics? I think we need to keep asking ourselves such questions, not least as the media city is likely to grow as a space of production and consumption of the media, but also as an area of research interest.

In a global city, strangers of various backgrounds live in close proximity to each other. Do we however see or hear our neighbors? And what is the role of digital media? This question can be contextualized as follows: refugees and migrants' media use is often blamed for furthering isolation and possibly radicalization. Over the years, the focus has shifted from the satellite dish to the smart phone. TV news footage shows how freshly arrived Syrian migrants use smartphones to happily announce their safe arrival on European soil to loved ones elsewhere. In response, prejudicial discourses about migrants have centred on smartphones; for example, anti-immigrant politicians frame refugees who own 'luxury' smartphones as less deserving of asylum. In the meanwhile, in most western global cities such as for example Manhattan, NYC, white

middle(upper) class elites increasingly live segregated lives and do rarely interact with African or Hispanic Americans in meaningful ways. Such dynamics make us wonder, to what extent are social media new markers of gated communities? What happens to the right to the city in the digital era?

Myria Georgiou:

Indeed, our recent research in a multicultural neighbourhood of London, revealed that media – digital and other – often separate people across ethnic and class lines. However separation does not always equal segregation. I think we need to be careful with making this assumption. Urban dwellers have been congregating in communities of familiarity for a long time and even early media supported them in this process, as Chicago School's early 20th century research on ethnic press demonstrates (Park & Burgess, 1925). Thus, in answering this question, I would again call for a non-media-centric approach and call for a complex understanding of the ways different modes of communication function in the city. Urban dwellers congregate around the familiar to sustain a sense of security, especially when they are surrounded by the unfamiliar and different. Ethnic media, and more recently digital media and social networks have become important mechanisms in supporting urban dwellers in this process. What is critical to study is what balances (or does not balance) mediated separation along ethnic or class lines. The most important question for me is whether our cities support enough opportunities for communicative congregation and convergence and for strategic, even if momentary, togetherness. And this is where urban planning, architecture, and social policy matter as much as the media. If the city has public spaces which are open and democratic, high streets and schools that are socially and culturally mixed, and if the urban poor are not pushed out of the city through gentrification, then it is more likely that conditions of conviviality can emerge. Thus, to me, the right to the city in the digital era is a right to sustain communities of difference, as much as it is the right to come together to make collective claims in urban spaces that are democratic and open. Digital media can support or restrict this right but they can never do this on their own.

Scott McQuire:

I'm unfortunately all too familiar with the prejudicial discourses you describe, to the point that Australia – which, in modern times, has been largely created through migration and has had bipartisan political support for a policy of multiculturalism since the 1970s – has instead adopted a hardline policy of mandatory detention for all asylum seekers arriving by boat. To some extent, management of this situation has been orchestrated by fairly traditional propagandistic techniques. For instance, when the Howard Government infamously refused permission for the Norwegian ship the MV *Tampa* to enter Australian waters in 2001, even though it was carrying more than 400 refugees it had rescued from a sinking fishing boat stranded in international waters, it used the naval intervention to imposed a media blackout of sorts, making it impossible for any journalists to

get close to those on the ship. This kind of restrictive policy has continued with the 'processing' of asylum applications in off-shore locations, rendering information flows uncertain and minimizing reporting by mainstream media. So this is one form of separation, enforced by combinations of physical enclosure and media closure.

Another kind of separation is the dynamic social filtering performed by urban digital networks, where the sorting of urban populations can increasingly be accomplished according to data profiles. The extent to which customizable and personal media devices and services might lead to what Habuchi (2005) described as "telecocooning" is also a concern, although mobile devices don't always produce disconnection from others or from immediate surroundings. However, I think it is clear that over the last decade we have seen rapid development of applications and services that focus on forms of individual consumption as the primary mode of relating to the city. What has been explored far less are platforms and interfaces capable of facilitating collective social interactions, including those between strangers. This is where infrastructure such as large urban screens can play an important role in supporting what Myria talks about as moments of togetherness and conviviality. The challenge is to produce situations that don't impose a false unity that obscures difference and friction, but enables ways of being together in public that allow us to communicate from and across experiences of difference.

One current research lacuna that we point out in the introduction of this special issue concerns the spectacular aspects and intensified commodification of cities in the wake of their digitalization. Furthermore, initially the focus has mostly been on (global) media cities in the over-developed global north; and little is known about the purchase of these frameworks to consider emerging media cities outside the 'West'? Do you recognize these ignoring tendencies in current research? Can you both think of aspects of the digitalized media city future critical scholarship should focus on?

Scott McQuire:

I think a key issue is the way in which urban digital infrastructure is now being used to record, collect, aggregate and analyze enormous quantities of data. This is the double edge of the digital media city – that all forms of production and consumption, all transactions leave recordable traces. So the intensified commodification of which you speak is not simply the accelerated production and circulation of images and messages, or the increased scale and proliferation of screens, but the intensified commodification of the self, the process by which human singularities are converted into 'profiles'. This is the historical moment in which data becomes currency. This represents an immense appropriation, as social relations are more directly integrated into the value chain of the commodity economy.

I think there is growing awareness of these concerns, particularly in work being undertaken on critical accounts of 'smart city' agendas, but also in the work of philosophers such as Bernard Stiegler (2011). But

there is much more to be done to understand not only the extension of corporate surveillance but its relation to mass surveillance by the state (for instance, the harvesting of user data by the NSA for PRISM), and particularly to understand the choices and rationales being made by citizens in relation to digital media platforms.

I think your concerns about the 'northern' and 'western' orientation of much current research are valid, although this more marked in some areas than others. For instance, there is a lot of significant work being done on the media-city problematic in Asia, especially in China in the context of one of the most rapid urbanization programs in human history. English language scholars who have done research in China include Chris Berry (2013) and Audrey Yue (2013). But at present very little of the Chinese material is being translated.

So there is certainly a need for greater dialogue to enable a more representative mapping of emergent practices in different contexts across the globe. But there is also an urgent need for a different imagination as to how digital media cities might be configured – for how experimental interfaces, platforms for public participation, new collaborations might enable new logics of urban intervention, public organization, occupation and inhabitation.

Finally, I think part of the future challenge we face is the need to rethink foundational aspects of media studies as a discipline. As media become more implicated in, and integrated with, social encounters of all kinds, the oppositional relation between media and immediacy – which at bottom is based on the Platonic concept of writing as secondary, as the belated recording or re-presentation of the event – is becoming ever more problematic. However, this an enormously difficult shift to address, caught up on the one hand in the whole system of thought that Derrida defined as the "metaphysics of presence" (1982) but also caught up in what Kittler termed as the refusal of philosophy to think its reliance on media, its own mediation (2009). So while there is a growing need to describe and conceptualise the new forms of social encounter, of situation, event and the novel modalities of 'presence' that characterize social life in contemporary media cities, this will be a long term project, one into which we are thrown and inscribed as much as one that we write ourselves.

Myria Georgiou:

I feel that I need to start answering this question through a reflexive lens: it is absolutely important for all of us to be open and honest about the limitations and biases of our scholarship. The primary focus of my research for example has been the western global city – this is the city I know best and which I systematically study empirically. Arguably, this kind of research among others, reaffirms global research hierarchies, especially as these are set in English language publications. As many of us sit in institutions of the global north, we are presented with a challenge and an opportunity. For me, the study of the global city as a site of unforeseen constellations, especially as a result of the city's history of migration and social marginality, interrogates global academic hierarchies especially in addressing the unevenness and variety of experiences of the 'digitized media city' within and across geographies. Thus, and while recognising the biases of our scholarship, we need to continue reflecting on the range of trajectories and multiple modernities that make

media cities within and across regions. In light of this, I feel that we need to keep pushing for research (and research funding) that can support comparative perspectives between cities and across regions. I also think that the wider strand of research on the media city would benefit from studies on transurban networks that do not originate, end up or go through the global north but which fundamentally contribute to the communication geographies in many parts of the world – e.g. as this is the case with digital networks and their markets linking Asian and African cities. And finally, and as I am interested in the ethics and politics of the media city, I feel we need more research on cities of refuge and on the ways media and digital technologies support or oppose ethics of urban hospitality (Derrida, 2001) and conviviality (Gilroy, 2004).

Acknowledgements

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