Mediating urban politics

Scott Rodgers
Email: s.rodgers@open.ac.uk

Clive Barnett
Email: c.barnett@open.ac.uk

Allan Cochrane
Email: a.d.cochrane@open.ac.uk

Faculty of Social Sciences
The Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes MK7 6AA
United Kingdom

Media in urban political theory

Most work on urban politics acknowledging the importance of media has tended to follow a particular conception of mediation. In the urban political economy tradition, for instance, the urban or regional newspaper has long occupied a privileged status (see Ward, this issue). Here, the newspaper has been seen as serving a two-sided role: as a crucial medium through which spatially embedded interests get knitted together into coalitions in pursuit of coherent political programmes (e.g. growth machines, urban regimes); and in turn, as the principal medium through the these programmes are legitimated to a general, urban public.

If there has been a place for media in studies of urban politics, it has generally reproduced a centred image of 'the media' and a functionalist account of mediation. This style of conceptualization has been the subject of sustained critique in media and communication studies (see Couldry 2006), and in our context, engenders a limited and instrumental approach to the mediation of urban politics. We think a shift in perspective is needed to bring together the shared political concerns of urban and media studies, so as to take advantage of the converging spatial imaginations and reconfigured understandings of mediation emerging across both fields.

Urban/media studies

One explicit concern shared by media studies and urban studies is the spatial constitution of social action. However, this shared concern tends to be thought through using significantly different spatial imaginations. Paradigmatically, media studies works with a conceptualization of distanciated spaces of communicative

interaction, in which space is understood to be a plastic configuration for variable relations of presence and absence. In contrast to this sense of space as a vector of dissemination, urban studies focuses on the co-presence or gathering together of processes, practices, actors, and technologies into spatial objects such as localities, scales, or places. Indeed, human geographers have engaged with media studies debates most effectively by drawing attention to the urban and regional geographies of media production and cultural innovation (e.g. Scott, 2000).

There are signs however of an interesting convergence in the spatial imaginations of these fields. Recent work in media and communications has begun to pluralise how spatiality is conceptualized, often drawing on theories developed in human geography and urban studies (e.g. Couldry and McCarthy, 2004, Falkheimer and Jansson, 2006, Morley, 2006, Silverstone, 2007). Meanwhile, recent work on cities and urbanization has been marked by a shift towards a non-scalar and relational vocabulary of intensities, distributions, connectivities and mediations (e.g. Graham and Marvin, 2001, Amin and Thrift, 2002, Sieverts, 2003, Massey, 2007). Yet urban studies still tends to treat 'the media' functionally, as a discrete domain for the transmission of particular effects and affects, and as something 'political' primarily due to its role in practices of subject-formation (cf. Barnett, 2008). The turn to relational vocabularies in urban theory has still to fully register a more phenomenological conceptualization of media, as aspects intrinsic to practices of world-disclosure and the spatio-temporal formation of inter-subjectivity (Scannell, 1996, Iveson, 2007). We suggest that this sense of media, as neither *functional* nor *effective*, is where urban studies has the most to learn from media theory.

Urban media practices

So how might we reposition 'media' in processes of urban politics, while escaping the related traps of functionalist and effects-oriented understandings of mediation? We want to suggest, as a starting point, that media be studied by placing a specific emphasis on *practices*. This will, in turn, serve as our entry point into thinking about urban politics as those communicative practices which identify and subject to action a range of issues that are, in one way or another, identified as 'urban'.

We follow Schatzki's (1996) conceptualization of practices as activities composed of 'doings' (understandings of how to do things) and 'sayings' (explicit statements relating how to do something or that something is the case). A practice-based lens implies a concern not with the effects of media on subjects, but instead with what people *do* in relation to media; and what people *say* in relation to media (Couldry, 2004). Schatzki (1996: 98-109) further refines this conceptualization by distinguishing between dispersed and integrative practices: *dispersed practices* are open-ended features of many activities, and include actions such as describing, walking, handwriting, listening and so on; *integrative practices* are made up many dispersed practices bound together by normative ends and emotions shared amongst those performing the practice. Examples of the latter are cooking, motoring, or being a football fan. From this perspective, we might think of watching television, for instance, as one dispersed practice amongst others helping to constitute more complex practices: of informed citizenship, of childcare, of friendship, of hospitality, of passing time, and more.

Practices depend on the competencies and arrangements of human bodies, technologies, nonhuman organisms and other material things (Reckwitz, 2002, Schatzki, 2002, Shove *et al.*, 2007). This implies an understanding of media-in-practices, leading inquiry in two directions. On the one hand, to exploring how various media technologies are embedded in and flourish through the dispersed practices making up routine urban life, and how the dynamics of cities and urbanization help generate innovative forms of media-in-practice (e.g. Berland, 1992, Fritzsche, 1996, Moore, 2005). In other words, it becomes possible to think of media not as a discrete domain of practices, but rather as helping to constitute various types of inherently mediated practices. On the other hand, this approach allows us to rethink the qualities of 'the media' as various integrated practices engaged in the production, distribution and authorisation of communicative forms articulated around various urban issues. Approaching media as practice enables us to acknowledge at once that there is much more to 'the media' than journalism, while also clarifying just why understanding practices of journalism might be important to grasping the specificities of urban politics. Journalism practices produce a public world made available in the everyday through dispersed media practices, divided into normatively differentiated fields such as Politics, Entertainment, Sport, or Weather. These fields are distinguished communicatively by their presentation in ways that require not just public interest but variable degrees of concerted public action.

In making this argument, we are holding to an ordinary sense of 'politics' understood as practices of claiming and negotiating who gets what, when, where and why. Politics, on this understanding, is the form of communicative practice through which potential matters of public concern and concerted public action are articulated. Media

are intrinsic to how such articulating activities assemble coherent communicative fields of deliberation, display, reflection, and representation. This understanding has the potential to draw together media studies and urban theory, since political space – whether of global communication or of the city (see Silverstone 2007, Isin 2002) – is re-imagined as various practices of addressing dispersed others (see Iveson, this issue).

Thinking of media-in-practices, then, helps us move away from a functionalist and effects-oriented view of media, while conceiving of urban politics in a more contingent fashion, without relying on a priori concepts of the urban or the city. This perspective points to a wide array of overlapping investigations at the interface between the urban, media and politics. It suggests, for example: an analysis of the communicative practices through which grievances, interests, and problems show up in the world as urban ones; an analysis of how the rhythms and material settings of urban life open spaces of interaction with the potential to configure new identifications, affiliations, and differentiations (see Bridge, this issue); and an analysis of the communicative practices involved when the urban gets staked out as a spatial object or agent of political will-formation, allocation, and decision-making. Conceptualized as technologies embedded in *dispersed practices* of urban life, media can be understood as constitutive of the phenomenological conditions of communicative practice in general. Understood as an assemblage of *integrative practices*, 'the media' can be conceptualized as practical fields helping to constitute the objects and agents of politics performed as urban. In pluralizing what might count as urban politics, a practice-led approach to thinking mediation holds the promise of freeing the study of urban politics from its self-imposed subservience to the 'real'

politics of the national or geopolitical variety. In so far as so much contemporary politics takes place through technologically mediated communicative practices, which thrive in the interstices of urban economies and urban cultures, this approach helps us see that all politics is increasingly being urbanized.

References

Amin, A. and N. Thrift (2002) *Cities: reimagining the urban*. Polity Press, Cambridge.

Barnett, C. (2003) *Culture and democracy: media, space and representation*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.

Barnett, C. (2008) Political affects in public space: normative blind-spots in non-representational ontologies. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 33, 186-200.

Berland, J. (1992) Angels dancing: cultural technologies and the production of space. In L. Grossberg, C. Nelson and P.A. Treichler (eds.), *Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London, 38-56.

Couldry, N. (2004) Theorising media as practice. *Social Semiotics* 14, 115-32.

Couldry, N. (2006) Transvaluing media studies: or, beyond the myth of the mediated centre. In J. Curran and D. Morley (eds.), *Media and cultural theory*, Routledge, London, 177-95.

Couldry, N. and A. McCarthy (eds.) (2004) *MediaSpace: place, scale and culture in a media age*. Routledge, London.

Falkheimer, J. and A. Jansson (eds.) (2006) *Geographies of communication: the spatial turn in media studies*. Nordicom, Göteborg.

Fritzsche, P. (1996) *Reading Berlin 1900*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Graham, S. and S. Marvin (2001) *Splintering urbanism*. Routledge, London.

Isin, E.F. (2002) *Being political: genealogies of citizenship*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Iveson, K. (2007) *Publics and the city*. Blackwell, Oxford.

Massey, D. (2007) *World city*. Polity, Cambridge.

Moore, P.S. (2005) Everybody's going: city newspapers and the early mass market for movies. *City and Community* 4, 339-257.

Morley, D. (2006) *Media, modernity and technology: the geography of the new*. Routledge, London.

Reckwitz, A. (2002) Toward a theory of social practices: a development in culturalist theorizing. *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, 243-63.

Scannell, P. (1996) *Radio, television and modern life: a phenomenological approach*. Blackwell, Oxford.

Schatzki, T.R. (1996) *Social practices: a Wittgensteinian approach to human activity and the social*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Schatzki, T.R. (2002) *The site of the social: a philosophical account of the constitution of social life and change*. Penn State University Press, University Park.

Scott, A. (2000) *The cultural economy of cities: essays on the geography of image-producing industries*. Sage, London.

Shove, E., M. Watson, M. Hand and J. Ingram (2007) *The design of everyday life*. Berg, Oxford.

Sieverts, T. (2003) *Cities without cities: an interpretation of the Zwischenstadt*. Spon Press, London.

Silverstone, R. (2007) *Media and morality: on the rise of the mediapolis*. Polity Press, Cambridge.