

# **public address and the city (or, what's wrong with outdoor advertising?)**

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As the organisers of this workshop point out, different ways of thinking about the city and the media suggest different critical and political priorities. In this paper, I draw on previous research (Iveson 2007) to outline a way of thinking about the public life of cities which dispenses with the popular attachment to ‘unmediated’ forms of publicness. The approach I outline places emphasis instead on the interaction between cities and media, and is hopefully suggestive of a different set of priorities for critical analysis of contemporary urbanisation.

## **the city versus the media?**

In the urban studies literature on public space, the forms of publicness associated with ‘the city’ and ‘the media’ are often presented as quite distinct, even incompatible. The city is frequently characterised a space of embodied co-presence, which (ideally, if not in reality) enables *unmediated* forms of public interaction. Newspapers, radio, television or the internet, on the other hand, are characterised as disembodied spaces which enable *mediated* forms of public interaction.

From this position, one's perspective on the importance of the city for politics depends on how one values unmediated forms of publicness. For some, the unmediated public interaction associated with cities is what makes their public spaces vital for a healthy public sphere. For others, the co-presence associated with the city's public spaces is what makes them increasingly irrelevant – the 'new media' have become the 'new town square'.

By associating urban forms of public address with unmediated co-presence, both sides of this debate fail to adequately take account of the dynamic geographies of public life. As such, the city/media opposition is a particularly unhelpful one for those who are concerned with developing critical perspectives on how different forms of urbanisation and urban governance impact upon public life.

### **public address and the city**

To explain why I think it is wrong to conceptualise the city's contribution to the public sphere as the provision of spaces of unmediated public address, let me briefly outline my approach to the spatiality of public address.

To address a public is to address a horizon of strangers. This practice, in all its many forms, requires a capacity to imagine 'venues of indefinite address' through which one might access members of a public *en masse*, rather than having to address each member of the public individually (Warner 2002). Those who engage in different kinds of public address know that there are different spaces through which they might access their public. So, the calculations involved in practising different forms of public address, such as knowing 'whom to speak to and when and how, *carry an implicit map of social space*, of what kinds of people we can associate with in what ways and in what circumstances' (Taylor 2004: 25-6, my italics). A public social imaginary, then, is also a spatial imaginary.

This spatial imaginary has at least three inter-connected urban dimensions. As well shall see, each of these is fundamentally related to (rather than opposed to) media practices:

## 1. Urban places as venues of public address

Certainly, streets and squares and other sites in cities act as venues of public address. This may involve co-presence (think of a speaker addressing a rally or a discussion in a town hall), or it may not (think of urban media such as posters or graffiti). But even where public address does involve co-presence, it is mediated nonetheless. For one thing, many instances of co-present public address in city spaces are designed to reach a wider public through subsequent mediation (think again of the staging of rallies in ways designed to achieve media coverage). Furthermore, encounters between people in public spaces are mediated by the knowledge or expectations that people bring to these encounters. Think here of how media representations of particular places as ‘dangerous’ may influence (if not determine) the way in which people regard others in those spaces.

## 1. Urban places as objects of public address

The places in cities which might act as venues of public address also become *objects* of public address, as their identities and norms are debated. The media is crucial here. Public discussions about what counts as ‘proper’ behaviour in a given space take place through a range of different venues of public address. Think of how the streets become an object of public address in newspaper, radio and television debates about ‘anti-social behaviour’.

## 2. The city as ‘the public’

Finally, different groups frequently claim to address, or act in the best interests of, ‘the city’. The city as a public or political community is imagined through mediated discussions – indeed, it could not possibly be imagined in any other way. This is frequently reflected in the very structures of the media – with newspapers, radio stations, television stations and even the internet being imaginatively and materially linked to a particular city as an imagined community. In Sydney, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *2WS FM* (the ‘WS’ stands for ‘Western Sydney’) and the *Sydney Indymedia* website are all examples.

## **critically interrogating the urban media landscape: outdoor advertising**

What kinds of intellectual and critical commitments are suggested by this approach to the urban dimensions of publicness?

Rather than critically interrogating changes to contemporary cities with reference to some unrealised ideal of unmediated, co-present public interaction, I suggest that we can instead usefully assess such changes with reference to the multiple urban dimensions of public address outlined above.

To illustrate, let me conclude by briefly discussing my current research into the outdoor advertising industry.

Surprisingly, given the decline of advertising revenues in most traditional media relative to new digital media, outdoor advertising is growing as percentage of total advertising spend in many countries. Why? The outdoor media industry argues it is because outdoor media are a very effective way of capturing attention in an increasingly fragmented media market (you can't turn off a billboard, as the saying goes).



*APN, an outdoor media company, uses an outdoor advertisement to advertise ... outdoor advertising*

However, there is another explanation. Most of the growth in outdoor advertising is not in traditional outdoor media such as billboards, but rather in

new media affixed to ‘street furniture’. Global outdoor media companies such as Adshell and JC Decaux are competing to sign street furniture contracts with urban authorities the world over. A typical example of such a contract is one in which a company provides and maintains bus shelters or telephone booths ‘for free’, in return for third party advertising rights which are then sold to advertisers – a textbook public-private partnership.



*JC Decaux Street Furniture Maintenance Team, Sydney (note the nice Australian flags on the van...)*

Now, if the city is primarily valued as a space of unmediated interaction, the incursion of advertising *per se* would be viewed as yet another problematic example of the privatisation of public space.

However, from my perspective, such a critique is not particularly useful. If anything, I would argue that the problem is that this new form of outdoor media is *reducing* the scope of cities to sustain a healthy level of advertising.

Many musicians, activists, artists, authors and others continue to make use of urban media for advertising. They do so because these media remain among the most accessible and cheaply available in comparison to other media. This advertising is a form of public address which is crucial to the production of a variety of publics.



*I've even done some outdoor advertising myself...*

But all this is changing in cities where outdoor media companies have entered into contracts with urban authorities. The posting of bills, political notices, notes about lost cats ... all these urban media practices and more are a threat to the monetisation strategies of outdoor media companies, which are premised on their ability to secure monopoly rights to the city as 'advertising space' (how can they charge some for advertising space if it is freely available for others?). And so, maintenance workers employed by these companies remove this material from 'their' furniture, and urban authorities actively clamp down on unauthorised urban media as part of their contractual obligations...



*Of course, they don't have things all their own way ... hacked APEC advertisement, Sydney 2007*

From my perspective on the city, then, it is not the growth of advertising *per se* that is the problem. Rather, the problem is that the growing monopolisation of the outdoor media landscape potentially curtails others kinds of ‘advertising’ practices which I think are necessary for a vital public sphere.

## **references**

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

Taylor, C. (2004) *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Warner, M. (2002) *Publics and Counterpublics*, New York: Zone Books.