

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Neither poison nor cure: Space, scale, and public life in media theory

Book Section

How to cite:

Barnett, Clive (2004). Neither poison nor cure: Space, scale, and public life in media theory. In: Couldry, N. and McCarthy, A. eds. MediaSpace: Place, Scale and Culture in a Media Age. London, UK: Routledge, pp. 58–74.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [\[not recorded\]](#)

Version: [\[not recorded\]](#)

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://www.routledge.com/9780415291750>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's [data policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Neither Poison Nor Cure: Space, Scale and Public Life in Media Theory

Clive Barnett

School of Geographical Sciences

University of Bristol

Bristol

BS8 1SS

c.barnett@bristol.ac.uk

N. Couldry and A. McCarthy (eds.) *Media/Space: Place, Scale and Culture in a
Media Age*, Routledge, 2004.

I. Media, Scale, and the Elision of Representation

Modern political theory connects the legitimacy of democratic rule to the capacities of citizens to exercise reasonable political judgement through the medium of public communication (Ferree *et al* 2002). In assessing this relationship, a number of commentators identify the media as bearing primary responsibility for the decline of active citizenship and the decay of democratic trust. The media has encouraged cognitive dependence, narcosis, and the attenuation of critical faculties (Zolo 1992); it has eroded the capacity of citizens to trust in public institutions and hold them accountable (O'Neill 2002); it has undermined the autonomy of science and a robust public culture of criticism (Bourdieu 1998); it has led to widespread civic disengagement and the withering of social capital (Putnam 1995). One variant of these melodramatic narratives of the decline of democracy is the argument that the acceleration of processes of mediated communication and information transfer overwhelms the capacity for reasoned debate and discussion. The speeding-up of communications leads to the rhythm of deliberate, deliberative judgement being replaced by spectacular display and appeals to emotion. There is a counter argument that holds that the acceleration of communication is the very essence of the democratising potential of new media technologies. Electronic town halls, on-line democracy, and instant referenda are all seen as providing problem-free, value-neutral means for more participation and better, more direct political expression. In this argument, increasing speed is used to signify the overcoming of distance, both literally and metaphorically, in the sense of transcending social division and political delegation. Technology is presented as having the potential to alleviate socio-economic inequality and political divisions by virtue of its apparent ability to transcend the materialities of space and time. This rhetoric extends beyond corporate

marketing strategies. It informs the communitarian left-liberalism of “the third way” (Leadbetter 2000), which embraces a communicative idealisation of globalisation to present whole sets of political and policy positions as obsolete. And it also underwrites the millenarian ultra-leftist optimism of Hardt and Negri’s best-selling *Empire* (2000), in which a planetary capitalist system with media and information at its heart is imagined to be prone to incessant de-stabilisation by myriad local insurgencies that are immediately transmitted world-wide through its own networks of publicity.

Each of these political visions assumes that political issues can be reduced to problems of more or less effective communication. The celebration of new technologies like the Internet as ideal for direct, plebiscitary democracy, or for the proliferation of subterranean resistance networks assumes that democracy is primarily about the expression of personal preferences or group interests outside of any context of transformative, deliberative justification (Sunstein 1992). They combine an unquestioned ideal of individual autonomy with an unquestioned norm of singular will. It is essential to confront the persistent elision of the problem of representation that characterises celebrations of the immediacies of new technologies. The stretching-out and speeding-up of communication does not do away with the normative issues of delegation, authorisation, trust, and accountability that define modern understandings of democratic rule (Barnett 2003). Moving beyond populist clichés requires us to rethink the plasticity of space and time. Time and space are not compressible forms moving towards a teleologically determined vanishing point. Communications technologies do not therefore obliterate time and space. They re-cast the organisation of the spatial and temporal scenes of social life. This chapter sketches the outlines of an alternative conceptualisation of the relations between the

geographies of communication and democratic public life, one that rests on two related propositions: that space is produced, and that scale is networked.

II. Communications and Spatial Formations of Public Life

To approach the relationship between communications and the plasticity of space and time in a more productive way, it is useful to consider the work of three very different writers, John Dewey, Harold Innis, and Raymond Williams. Taken together, these three sketch the basis for a nuanced understanding of the formative relationships between time, space, communications and public life. Dewey's progressive social liberalism understood democracy in a very broad sense, as a mode of associational living shaped by openness to new experience. He argued that the material transformations of communications laid down the possibility of an expanded public life. Dewey's definition of the public combines an emphasis upon self-transformation with a focus upon instrumental and purposive collective action. A public involves "conjoint, combined, associated action" that addresses the problem of how to control certain phenomena: "publics are constructed by recognition of extensive and enduring indirect consequences of acts" (Dewey 1927: 47). The emergence of publics is intimately tied to the material organisation of space and time through networks of economic trade, migration, and transport. A public only emerges through a degree of abstraction from social contexts of face-to-face interaction, when the extent to social life requires combined action to address issues that stretch beyond the scope of small communities. Dewey's diagnosis of the eclipse of the public turned on the contradictory relationship he discerns between the pluralisation of publics necessary to address the complexity of modern life, and the imperative for some co-ordination and channelling of this plurality to enable effective public action. The creation of

democratic state at a continental scale during the nineteenth-century was tied together socially and politically through “railways, travel and transportation, commerce, the mails, telegraph and telephone, newspaper” (*ibid*: 113). But continuing economic development meant that the scope of indirect consequences has become so intensified, complicated, and extensive that the ability of citizens to perceive and know them, rather than simply feel and suffer them, has been undermined. There was now, Dewey argued, “too much public, a public too diffused and scattered and too intricate in composition” (*ibid*: 137).

For Dewey, the eclipse of the public is not merely a matter of functional diversification, spatial and temporal extension, and epistemological complexity. The proliferation and fragmentation of publics is associated with the increase in the amount of distracting amusements in the form of movies, radio, and cheap transport. The main problem, for Dewey, with modern popular culture is that it encourages forms of identification that are shifting and unstable. In creating the conditions for an expanded public, capitalist industrialism has also facilitated excessive geographical mobility and encouraged a flourishing of cheap and accessible popular culture that together undermined the stable conditions required for a public to come into existence (*ibid*: 140-141). This evaluation reveals an understanding of communication as a medium for the sharing of meanings, one that overcomes divisions and brings life to the deadened materiality of physical means of transmission (*ibid*: 184). The ideal of communication stands as a norm of shared understanding and mutually beneficial self-activity that transcends the divided world of capital and labour. The transcendence of the social relations of capital and labour in Dewey’s philosophy underwrites the image of a “great society” being reconstituted as a self-governing public of shared interest through the medium of educative communication.

Like Dewey, the work of Canadian political economist Harold Innis was focused upon the formative relationships between the patterns and meanings of social life. The central theme in Innis' theory of communication is that of "bias". This refers to two elements, one related to experience, one related to knowledge. Firstly, Innis proposed that particular technologies emphasise a certain aspect of experience, either time or space. Secondly, different communications technologies favour centralisation or decentralisation, hierarchical or egalitarian distributions of power, and open or closed systems of knowledge. The bias of communication is therefore determined by the extent to which a particular medium favours extension in space or duration over time (Innis 1951). Innis developed a political phenomenology of communications, in which certain dimensions of experience were associated with particular patterns of power relations. This argument rested on a strong evaluative opposition between the space-binding technologies of control and time-binding technologies of shared understanding. The former enables the spatial extension of interactions, but are associated with the pre-eminence of instrumental knowledge and bureaucratic rule. Innis sees in the history of modern communications a steady ascendancy of space-binding technologies, which enlarge the scales of social organisation, and in so-doing, enhance the potential for the monopolisation and centralisation of control (Innis 1950). The main thrust of Innis' critique is that modernity is overwhelmingly biased towards the spatial over the temporal. This spatial bias of modern communications in turn undermines the ritual, meaningful character of social life. The spatial or temporal bias of communications is also strongly culturally coded. Spatially biased media such as writing, printing, and more recently photography, emphasise visibility over orality, the eye over the ear, and space over time (Innis 1951: 130-131). New popular cultures based on mechanisation are dominated by an ethos of ephemerality and superficiality,

in order to appeal to the large numbers of people that spatially extensive markets demand (*ibid*: 82-83).

In contrast to Innis, one might consider the spatial and temporal dimensions of social processes as being intimately related rather than diametrically opposed. One such revision is Anthony Giddens' account of time-space distanciation as a medium of modern power relations. This refers to the ways in which social life and social systems are stretched by different mediums (money, commodities, and writing), which re-articulate relations of spatial and temporal presence and absence. Time and space are not understood as neutral mediums for social and system integration, but as plastic configurations whose forms are inherently related to the constitution and transformation of relations of power, exploitation, and domination (Giddens 1984: 256-262). As a modality of time-space distanciation, print-writing is crucial to modern state-formation. It facilitated the centralisation of national authority, through uniform codes of law and administration and a uniform vernacular language; and the decentralisation of national administration, as a mobile and easily reproducible means of communication. The example of modern state-formation therefore revises Innis' one-dimensional analysis of power and knowledge. Far from simply extending the coercive capacities of centralised authorities, the spatial extension of modern power through communicatively mediated time-space distanciation depends upon the development of innovative forms of reciprocal social relations, expressed in the struggle for the extension of modern practices of representative citizenship.

Furthermore, the cultural dimension of Innis' account is also called into question by considering processes of state-formation. It is now a commonplace that the formation of modern nation-states needs to be understood as having a cultural dimension in addition to administrative and coercive elements. The most influential

cultural theory of nation-state formation and nationalism is Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983). For Anderson, communities are distinguished not by their degree of authenticity, but according to "the style in which they are imagined" (*ibid*: 6). What defines modern nationalism, from this perspective, is that it is a mass mediated form of social interaction that combines distinctive forms of public culture with private practices. Anderson's theory cuts across the conceptual oppositions of ritual and information that underwrites Innis' analysis of the bias of communication. Newspapers are certainly a means of transmitting information, but they are also embedded in practices of ritual sharing, which enable the emergence of new sense of self based on imagining oneself to be engaged in the same activity as anonymous and absent others at the same time. By folding ritual and transmission together in the notion of communicative style, Anderson emphasises that symbolic meaning and control are not opposed dimensions of communicative practice (see also Carey 1989: 13-36). The power-effects ascribed to space-binding communications by Innis are not alien to time-binding communications, and nor are space-binding technologies necessarily as inimical to social reciprocity as he suggested.

In contrast to Innis' somewhat mechanical materialism, Raymond Williams shared with Dewey a strong emphasis on the constitutive relationships between pattern and meaning that distinguish different configurations of communications. What is distinctive about Williams' approach to cultural analysis is that it focused upon the ways in which different social contexts are differentiated by the forms of connection and relation through which social life is made to hang together. His work is informed by a strong sense that experience is plastic, not shaped by the content of media, but determined by the variable forms of connections with others and the world. Williams' histories of cultural institutions are guided by a democratic ethos of

inclusive communication. This communicative imagination is at one and the same time an empirical entry point for the analysis of cultural practices, but it also doubles up as an evaluative framework, using norms of communication to judge different practices according to their adherence to principles of equal participation in a multiple range of communicative practices.

An example of this focus upon the production of the forms and configurations that shape social experience is Williams' elusive notion of mobile privatisation. This refers to the double movement of localisation of social interactions into the regulated spaces of the domestic sphere, and an accompanying imperative for new kinds of contact, a movement that Williams diagnosed as being characteristic of the social changes wrought by new communications technologies in the twentieth century (1974: 26). There is in this idea the kernel of an essentially geographical conceptualisation of radio and television, in so far as Williams approaches media as a set of institutionalised practices that organize and giving meaning to the spatial and temporal dimensions of modern social life (see Moores 1993). The dominant sense of Williams's usage of mobile privatisation is, however, of a movement away from engaged forms of public association, and an extension of a private attitude (Williams 1989: 171). But one can just as easily argue that the re-articulation of spaces and mobilities might extend publicness into new areas, not least that of the home, so fundamentally transforming the meaning of what counts as public. Detached from a melancholic analysis of modernity, the notion of mobile privatisation directs attention to the ways in which cultural technologies bring individuals and groups into contact with people, places and events that are distant, enabling identifications with dispersed communities of interest, affiliation, and feeling.

Dewey, Innis, and Williams belong to a broader line of modern thought that understand time and space to be constructed through human practice. They each develop understandings of media and communications in terms of the variable formation of the dimensions of public life, combining an emphasis on new forms of sociability with new forms of concerted action. However, in each of these thinkers, new patterns of association are evaluated by reference to the idealized being-in-common of a genuine community, so that the innovative idea that modernity is shaped by the changing spatio-temporality of communications is expressed in an idiom of loss. With this in mind, the next section considers less melancholic considerations of the public-forming qualities of modern communications.

III. Media Publics and Spaces of Interaction

The dis-embedding and re-embedding of institutions and interactions over extended times and spaces imply that there is a distinctive phenomenology of mediated public culture. The building blocks of experience are shaped by temporal and spatial configurations of communications media, understood in the broadest sense. As already noted, there is a long tradition that points to the ways in which media technologies enable new forms of integration over expanded spatial scales. The paradigm of this understanding is the rise of print capitalism and print culture. The combination of low cost, high durability, and high mobility accounts for the cultural impact of print in re-shaping culture and politics over extended scales, typically that of the territorial nation-state. The capacity of print media to detach symbolic forms from local contexts and re-inscribe them in new contexts depends on the physical transportation of material objects over material infrastructures. Nationalism, as a cultural form, is a product not just of newspapers and novels, but also of postal

systems and railways. This doubled sense of communication and transport is captured in human geographers' research on time-space convergence, understood as a function of improving transport efficiency that progressively overcomes the friction of distance (see Brunn and Leinbach 1991).

Telecommunications and broadcasting mark a decisive break with previous communications media. They cannot be easily contained within the paradigms developed around print culture precisely because of the distinctive relationship between communication, infrastructure, and transportation that distinguishes them. Beginning with the advent of the telegraph, communication is detached from the transportation of tangible objects over space (Carey 1989: 203-4). Electronic communications technologies *uncouple time and space*, so that the transmission of information or symbolic forms over space can take place without the physical transportation of objects (Thompson 1995). Thus, spatial transportation is no longer dependent on temporal distancing, giving rise to the sense of immediacy associated with the telephone, radio, television, and now the Internet. And the flip side of the reduction of transmission time to close to zero is that the experience of simultaneity is detached from conditions of shared spatial locale with persons or events. This accounts for the distinctively modern experience of *despatialized simultaneity* (*ibid.*), referring to the way in which the experience of "now" is detached from shared locales, and how the sense of "distance" is detached from physical movement and travel. Both are now shaped by the available means of communication. This suggests that media forms re-articulate spaces of public and private action. They extend "presence-availability" beyond contexts of physical proximity and the immediate corporeal limits of the body (Giddens 1984: 122). As such, electronic media and communications produce virtual spaces of "para-social" interaction, characterised by

more or less rudimentary forms of co-presence (see Samarajiva and Shields 1997). This leads beyond a consideration of communications networks solely in terms of conduits for the transmission of information, redirecting attention to the distinctive forms of communicative action and subjectivity that different mediums open up (Hillis 1998).

This conceptualisation of the time-space constitution of public communication is particularly important in understanding the role of cultural technologies in constructing modern meanings of the home as both a public and private space. Radio and television are amongst a range of domestic technologies through which the process of mobile privatisation has been sustained. Broadcasting in particular has been pivotal in re-shaping relationships between public and private: “broadcasting redefined the geography of public and private, relocating a new version of public sphere within the privacy of the domestic” (Donald 1992: 82-83). The scrambling of categorical divisions between private domesticity and public life accounts both for the centrality of gendered meanings in shaping the development of broadcasting, but also for the broader role of broadcasting as a technology for gendering public life in particular ways (Lacey 1996). The gendered inscription and re-inscription of public and private space through cultural technologies such as radio and television requires a revision of highly abstract, rationalist understandings of the grounds through which proper public action and political mobilisation should be conducted. Paddy Scannell presents broadcasting as a means by which modern life has been re-enanted and made meaningful, acting as a medium for the “re-personalization” of public life (1996). The characteristic “for-anyone-as-someone” structure of the communicative process of radio and television re-personalises public life according to norms of sociability, sincerity, and authenticity: “[b]roadcasting transposes the norms of

everyday interpersonal existence into public life” (*ibid*: 172). Private life and public events are now intermingled in new spatialities, and public life is as much about pleasure and enjoyment as reason, information, and education. The saliency of public events must accord with the rhythms and norms of everyday life: “The world, in broadcasting, appears as ordinary, mundane, accessible, knowable, familiar, recognisable, intelligible, shareable and communicable for whole populations. It is talkable about by everyone” (Scannell 1989: 152). By rendering public life accessible to all, broadcasting cultivates a form of reasonable subjectivity, characterised by a willingness to listen and openness to other viewpoints that is essential to the maintenance of a shared public life. On this account, popular media culture is embedded in wider social transformations through which the virtues required to engage in public life are re-ordered around a set of traditionally feminine-coded competencies (Hartley 1996).

The distinctive phenomenology of broadcasting culture suggests that the “where” of public life needs to be rethought in terms of the spaces opened up by spatially extensive networks of media communication. This implies a fundamental transformation in the norms of public action and conduct. Samuel Weber notes that mediated communication is stretched out across three locations: the place from where images and sounds are recorded and produced; the places where they are received; and the spaces in-between, through which images and sounds are transmitted (Weber 1996: 117). This sense of the space in-between through which any communication must pass points towards the fact that the experience of “despatialized simultaneity” depends on putting in place a complex material infrastructure that enables the uncoupling of time and space. Communications technologies do not overcome distance and separation, they render them invisible. The experience provided by radio

and television is divided across multiple spaces and times, and extended beyond the immediate emplacement of the sensuous body. This implies that the unity of place as the site of experience is shattered, and “with it the unity of everything that defines its identity with respect to place: events, bodies, subjects” (*ibid*: 125). The geographies of modern media practices therefore require a reassessment of the normative value ascribed to values of identity, authenticity, and place in both ethics and politics, suggesting instead a practical philosophy of dissemination and displacement (Peters 1999).

The distanced geographies of mediated public intimacy associated with radio and television directs analysis to the ways in which different media enable caring and moral action to be extended across time and space. As Bruce Robbins (1999) observes, the main lesson Anderson’s theory of imagined communities discussed earlier is that the scale of human feeling is dependent on the variable institutionalisation of technologies and social organisations. The forces that once stretched and embedded culture at the national scale might well now be “steering it beyond the scale of the nation” (*ibid*: 21). Robbins point out the crucial role of media institutions in mobilising what he calls “global feeling”, and is keen to avoid the tendency to present mediated forms of identification as modes of alienated, vacuous attachment by virtue of the intercession of distance. There is a particular ethical and political stake in insisting that proximity and distance not be thought of in terms of an opposition between concrete presence and alienating absence. This opposition allows media technologies to be both chastised for fostering inauthentic forms of identification and celebrated for reconstituting a lost sense of community. In contrast to both of these judgements, the dependence of patterns of interaction, identification, and subjectivity upon particular configurations of temporally and spatially mediated

communication should be treated as the basis for a social theory of the flexible spatial and temporal formation of trust, interest, empathy, belonging, and care which does without the consolations of idealized images of community and communication (Silverstone 1999).

The social-theoretic phenomenologies of media culture discussed in this section underscore the ways in which the dimensions and meanings of public life are shaped by the spatial and temporal relationships opened up by media practices. There is still, however, in the work reviewed here, a persistent tendency to conceptualise space as a gap or a distance bridged by different media, indicated by recourse to a “grammar of interaction” (see Gregory 1994: 117-119). The focus upon the interactional potentials opened up by different media tends to underplay the significance of the production of the material infrastructures that enable communication. With this in mind, the next section re-connects the interactional dimensions of communications to the temporal and spatial dynamics underwrite the production of communicative spaces under conditions of generalised commodification.

IV. The Production of Communicative Spaces

I want to suggest that it is necessary to supplement the grammar of interaction that underwrites mainstream media and communications studies with an analysis of the organisational, economic, and politically determined production of the material infrastructures of space and time. This task might draw fruitfully on David Harvey’s analysis of the production of capitalist spatiality. Harvey explicitly challenges conceptualisations of space understood in terms of the friction of distance, or as a gap to be overcome. Instead, the contradictory relationships between fixity and mobility

are central to Harvey's geographical imagination. According to his argument, space and time are not progressively overcome, they are perpetually reconfigured.

Harvey conceptualises how the production of space opens up new possibilities for interaction and circulation only by laying in place fixed material and organisational infrastructures that are characterised by their own forms of inertia. In Harvey's account, capitalism is driven by a contradiction between investments made at one point in time and the imperative to devalue these during crises of overaccumulation (Harvey 1982). In this narrative, a series of communications innovations (turnpikes, canals, railways, the telegraph, telecommunications) reduce the costs of circulating commodities, labour, money – value – through space and time. The more capitalism develops, the more it embeds tendencies to geographical and temporal inertia: it takes a specific organisation of space to annihilate space; and it takes capital of long turnover time to facilitate the more rapid movement of the rest. The material and organisational mediums through which space and time are co-ordinated eventually come to serve as a brake for the further expansion and speed-up of accumulation, leading to a reorganisation of spatial and temporal configurations. The recurring theme in this conceptualisation is the contradictory process of creative destruction through which the material configurations of accumulation laid down in one period of development are transformed in a subsequent period of crisis.

Harvey's conceptualisation of the crisis-dependent dynamics of the production of capitalist spatiality is linked to an analysis of socio-cultural change and political mobilisation. Innovations in the means of communication not only enable new phases of capital accumulation, but they are also associated with new political forms, new forms of cultural expression, and new forms of social experience (Harvey 1990). There is an implicit phenomenology of modernity in this understanding of capitalist

space, one most clearly expressed in the notion of “time-space compression” (Harvey 1989). This should not too readily be assimilated to other, similar sounding formulae, such as time-space convergence or time-space distanciation, precisely because it is derived from a conceptual analysis that explicitly breaks with friction-of-distance understanding of time and space implied in both those other notions. Time-space compression refers to the idea that the expression of crisis in periodic restructuring of the spatial and temporal configurations of everyday life disrupts stabilised patterns of meaningful social action. Crisis at one level of a social totality is mediated through the changing material dimensions of space and time, triggering changes in structures of cultural expression and consciousness that are also experienced in crisis-mode.

Compared to the accounts of spatiality and temporality discussed earlier in this chapter, Harvey’s conceptualisation of the production of space is more sensitive to the ways in which the restructuring of communications involves both the convergence and divergence of differentially situated actors. This emphasis has been most fully developed in critical elaborations that have challenged Harvey’s implication that material transformations in communications lead to a uniform shift in modes of consciousness. Doreen Massey (1994) argues that greater attention should be paid to the power-geometry of contemporary spatial and temporal restructuring. This refers to the ways in which groups and individuals are differently located in relations to flows, interconnections, and mobilities. Processes of time-space compression are socially stratified by class, gender, race and ethnicity, and other unequal social relations. Placement within these relations will define crucial differences in degrees of movement and interaction, and differences in the forms and degrees of power deployed in relation to such networks (Bridge 1997; Kirsch 1995, Leyshon 1995).

Harvey's analysis of the contradictory imperatives of fixity and mobility in shaping the landscapes of capital accumulation is particularly appropriate to the case of media and communications, because of the extent to which the commodification of these sectors depends upon the putting in place of complex material and organisational infrastructures through which expanded circulation can take place (see Mosco 1996). The low incremental costs of media reproduction leads to an imperative to expand market share as the easiest avenue of expanding profitability and extending accumulation. However, this imperative to expand circulation is dogged by the problem of maintaining the economic scarcity of commodities that are durable and easy to reproduce. These contradictory tendencies, between the drive towards expanding market share and extending the spatial scope of markets on the one hand, and the difficulty of maintaining price-regulated scarcity on the other, mean that the development of media and communications is shaped by a double imperative of *circulation and containment* (Gaines 1991). The expansion and deepening of the spatial scope of media commodity production depends on containing the circulation of media commodities within formal boundaries of commodity-exchange.

Understanding media commodification in terms of the double movement of circulation and containment requires an acknowledgement of the extent to which the constitution of modern media publics has historically depended upon the political and cultural construction of private property rights in various media products (Lury 1993). The key point is that, historically, this process has embedded cultural technologies at particular scales, primarily those of the nation-state. But this contingent stabilisation, while facilitating commodification and patterns of accumulation in one period, has gradually come to serve as a restriction on further accumulation. Thus, from the interpretation developed above, the development of new media such as satellite

television, video, the Internet, the Walkman, and mobile telephony can all be understood as having been motivated by an explicit aim to re-order the stable national regimes of policy and regulation that have historically shaped broadcast radio and television cultures, in order to facilitate the deepening and widening of the scope of media commodification. But it is important to underscore the point that commodification is not something that befalls modern, democratic public culture from the outside. The spatial politics of media commodification is central to the construction and contestation of different understandings of publicness. What is more, it should not be supposed that genuine public life is best contained within one particular geographical scale. This means that predominant approaches to media citizenship need to be rethought.

V. Rethinking the Spatiality of Media Citizenship

Media citizenship is defined according to overlapping rights to information, rights to receive and register opinions, and rights to fair and diverse representation. This raises a set of questions concerning the structuring of access to material resources (money, free-time), symbolic resources (languages, idioms, meanings), and social resources (membership of social relationships, or social capital) necessary for participation in the cultural practices (Murdock 1994, Garnham 1999). The importance of the concept of media citizenship is that it moves beyond binaries between production and consumption, textual meaning and creative use, to focus upon the institutional dimensions through which cultural value is produced, reproduced, and contested. The theme of media citizenship was initially developed in relation to debates about the future of national media and cultural policies. Normatively, it is an idea that implicitly presumes that citizens' access to cultural resources is spatially congruent with the

scale of formal political participation at the national scale. Over the last two decades, stabilised patterns of national regulation of media and communications have been transformed. As suggested in the last section, the restructuring of corporate ownership and market control, the development of new communications technologies, the increasing convergence of computing, telecommunications, and media, and the reorganization of the scales at which regulatory and policy decisions are made – these can all be understood as being driven by the imperative to produce new material and institutional infrastructures for the extension of capital accumulation over larger spatial scales at accelerated pace.

The most sustained consideration of the relationships between the changing scales of media economies and the possibilities of democratic citizenship is the work of Nicholas Garnham. His interpretation of globalisation is premised on the assumption that the territorial scope of political and economic power must be matched by the territorial scope of a singular universal media public. The public sphere concept, he argues, necessarily implies a strong concept of universality, understood in a procedural sense as a minimum set of shared discursive rules necessary for democratic communication (see Garnham 2000). On these grounds, globalisation is seen as leading to a disempowering fragmentation of the public sphere. From the assumption that democratic citizenship requires a singular and universal public sphere coterminous with the territorial scale at which effective political power is exercised, Garnham (1997: 70) deduces that “the process of cultural globalisation is increasingly de-linking cultural production and consumption from a concrete polity and thus a realizable politics”. Conceptually, Garnham’s argument runs together an assumption about the spatial scope of power, which he considers to be universal on the grounds

that capitalism is now a global system, with an argument for a universal set of norms embodied in a singular institutional structure of mass media (Garnham 1993).

Garnham's evaluative opposition between the ideal of a universal and singular public sphere versus pluralistic fragmentation depends upon an unquestioned assumption that political power is naturally territorialized. This presumes that the key issue in assessing globalisation is determining the most appropriate territorial scale at which power should be subjected to democratic oversight. An alternative is to think of debates about globalisation as the occasion for reassessing how we conceptualise the spatiality of geographical scale (see Low 1997). If the scales at which social integration and cultural engagement are modulated are no longer necessarily congruent with the scales of national political participation, then this might open up new possibilities for political action, not least at the national scale itself (Staheli 1999). In contrast to the assumption that political power is always exercised within a territorialized power-container of one scale or another, John Keane argues that the conceptual relationships between media and democracy should be based on a networked conception of political power. The power of large-scale organisations, like states and corporations, depends on "complex, molecular networks of everyday power relations" (Keane 1991: 146). This means that power is much less consolidated, centred, and coherent than is often supposed by areal, territorial conceptions of scale. And it follows that the "often uncoordinated and dispersed character of state power makes it more susceptible to the initiatives of social movements and citizen groups, backed by countervailing networks of communication, which change prevailing codes and practice the art of 'divide and rule' from below" (*ibid.*: 144-145). In turn, Keane (1995: 8) suggests that the public sphere is better understood as "a complex mosaic of differently sized, overlapping, and interconnected public spheres". According to a

networked model of space and scale, spatially extensive public networks might include large numbers or small numbers of people, and vice-versa. The key variable is the durability of networks, the extent to which they are institutionally embedded, and the ways they exercise influence. From this capillary perspective on power, conceptualisations that idealise unified and territorially bounded media publics are ill suited to assessing the progressive potential of contemporary transformations in the spatial organisation of media and communications. They underestimate the potential of a multiplicity of networked spaces of communicative practice to induce changes in organisations and political institutions. This suggests that Garnham's either/or formulation of the main questions facing theories of media and democracy needs to be re-thought. The fundamental issue is not whether effective democratic media publics can be constituted at the same global level to match the jump of scale by capital and by administrative and regulatory authorities. The pressing question is, rather, whether and how actors embedded at different territorial scales are able to mobilise support and resources through spatially extensive networks of engagement (Cox 1998).

To illustrate this final point about the relationships between media, politics, and the networked spatiality of scale, it is worth considering an example, taken from the process of contested media reform in post-apartheid South Africa. Formal democratisation has been associated with an opening up of a previously tightly controlled media system to international investment, a diversification of radio and television outlets, increased levels of competition and commercialisation, and the heightened commodification of audiences. At the same time, as part of a broader emergent culture of transparency and public accountability, an infrastructure of independent media regulation has been established. These structural and organisational shifts have opened up new opportunities for locally embedded social

movements to mobilise media attention as a means of applying pressure on local, provincial, and national political and business elites. In particular, they have enabled the development of an oppositional “politics of shame”, in which grassroots organisations are able to mobilise mainstream media attention as a lever for bringing pressure to bear on powerful actors (see Barnett 2003, Chapter 7). It is not necessary to idealise the democratic potential of media in order to acknowledge this possibility that media attention can be mobilised to act upon the conduct of powerful political and economic actors, especially in a context such as post-apartheid South Africa, where both public and private organisations are publicly committed to constitutional government and to discourses of service delivery and institutional transformation. After an initial post-election lull in political mobilisation after 1994, South Africa has witnessed an upsurge of grassroots oppositional activism. This process is associated with new forms of issue-based mobilisation. These include environmental movements mobilising against the impacts of industrial pollution, national mobilisations around government policy on HIV/AIDS issues, more localised campaigns around housing, infrastructure, and service delivery, as well as the role of South African activist organisations in the broader politics of anti-globalisation campaigns. What these all share are two characteristics. Firstly, attracting and maintaining mainstream media attention has been crucial to these new forms of grassroots activism, for mobilisation and validation purposes, but in particular as a means of exerting pressure on powerful institutional actors. But secondly, dense networks of connection between South African based activists and organisations and wider international campaigns have shaped the forms of campaigns and protesting used to achieve this objective. Routinised Internet-based communication between locally embedded activists and

spatially dispersed campaigns is crucial as a means of sharing information, developing strategy, raising funds, and borrowing discourse and repertoires of protest.

The South African experience illustrates two related issues. Firstly, the political significance of media and communications is not technologically determined, but in large part depends upon the capacity of social interests for mobilisation, organisation, and self-representation. Secondly, the ability of activists to organise political action *through* media spaces and communications networks is dependent on the politics that has been going on *around* the media in South Africa in this period. The shaping of independent regulatory authorities has become a new site through which citizen participation can be channelled. In South Africa in the mid-1990s, the politics of independent regulation saw significant successes for progressive organisations in embedding procedures for accountability, transparency, and public participation into national communications policy and law. This success has been pivotal in the pluralisation of media cultures and the popularisation of news agendas in this period. However, the ongoing internationalisation of South African communications policy has more recently seen the degree of participation and accountability curtailed by a prioritisation of investment-led regulatory principles. In turn, there is an emerging network of Southern African media activism, sharing information and expertise, and engaging in multiple policy contexts. This internationalisation of media reform movements underscores the point that the success of campaigns for the continuing democratisation of mass media *within* South Africa will be shaped by the capacity of nationally embedded actors to draw upon networks of support and resources that stretch beyond the confines of the nation-state. The point of this brief excursus on South Africa is not, then, to reiterate the cliché that new media and communications are rendering the nation-state irrelevant as an arena of

progressive political action. Quite the contrary, it is to emphasise that the real significance of new practices and scales of communication is still most likely to be found at national levels. Re-scaling the networks through which social movement mobilisation is organised enables the development of new forms of political action that are still most often articulated with scale at which citizenship rights continue to carry most substantive weight, that of the nation-state.

VI. Conclusion

This chapter has argued for a reorientation of the normative geographies of media theory around the dual theme that space is produced and scale is networked. The common rhetoric about the death of distance works to hide practices of inter-mediation from view, whether these are policies, regulatory systems, corporate structures, or social practices. The idea of the “production of communicative spaces” is meant to capture the double emphasis upon both the production of new spaces of communicative sociality through social practice and upon the institutional production of material infrastructures of communication. It underscores the sense that the social uses of modern communications technologies open up of new spaces of sociability and interaction, that transform the ways in which ordinary people engage in a wider world of publicly significant processes and events, as well as transforming the nature and meanings of those processes and events themselves. But it also reminds us that the social production of the spaces of communicative action needs to be supplemented with an analysis of the dynamics of the production of the material infrastructure of communication, an analysis that requires an understanding of the politically contested process of commodification, regulation, and policy making. Thinking of the active

production of communicative spaces therefore helps us keep in view the extent to which the politics that goes on in and around media is neither neatly contained within the space of a national polity, and nor is it free-floating in a weightless global space. Rather the politics of media citizenship involves the articulation of interests and subjectivities embedded at spatial scales that flow through, around, and under the national scale.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, B. (1983), *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso.
- Barnett, C. (2003), *Cultural Geographies of Democracy: Media, space, and representation*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998), *On Television and Journalism*, Pluto Press: London.
- Bridge, G. (1997), 'Mapping the terrain of time-space compression: power networks in everyday life', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 15, 611-626.
- Brunn, S. & Leinbach, T. (1991) *Collapsing Space and Time: geographic aspects of communication and information*.
- Carey, J. (1989), *Communication as Culture*, London: Routledge.
- Cox, K. (1998), 'Spaces of dependence, spaces of engagement and the politics of scale' *Political Geography* 17, 1-23.
- Dewey, J. (1927), *The Public and its Problems*, Athens OH: Ohio University Press.
- Donald, J. (1992), *Sentimental Education*, London: Verso.
- Ferree, M. *et al* (2002), 'Four models of the public sphere in modern democracies', *Theory and Society* 31, 289-324.
- Gaines, J. (1991), *Contested Culture: the image, the voice, and the law*, London: BFI.

- Garnham, N. (1993), 'The Mass Media, Cultural Identity, and the Public Sphere in the Modern World', *Public Culture*, 5, 251-265.
- Garnham, N. (1997), 'Political economy and the practice of cultural studies', in M. Ferguson & P. Golding (eds.) *Cultural Studies in Question*, London: Sage, pp. 56-73.
- Garnham, N. (1999), 'Amartya Sen's "capabilities" approach to the evaluation of welfare: its application to communications', in A. Calabrese & J-C. Burgelman (eds.), *Communication, Citizenship, and Social Policy*, Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 113-124.
- Garnham, N. (2000), *Emancipation, the Media, and Modernity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Giddens, A. (1984), *The Constitution of Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gregory, D. (1994), *Geographical Imaginations*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Hartley, J. (1996), *Popular Reality*, London: Arnold.
- Harvey, D. W. (1982), *Limits to Capital*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Harvey, D. W. (1989), *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Harvey, D. W. (1990), 'Between Space and Time: Reflections on the Geographical Imagination', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 80, 418-434.
- Hillis, K. (1998), 'On the Margins: the Invisibility of Communications in Geography', *Progress in Human Geography* 22:4, 543-566.
- Innis, H. (1950), *Empire and Communication*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Innis, H. (1951), *The Bias of Communication*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Keane, J. (1991), *Media and Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Keane, J. (1995), 'Structural transformation of the public sphere', *Communication Review*, 1, 1-22.

- Kirsch, S. (1995), 'The incredible shrinking world: technology and the production of space', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 13, 529-555.
- Lacey, K. (1996), *Feminine Frequencies: Gender, German Radio, and the Public Sphere, 1923-1945*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.
- Leadbetter, C. (2000), *The Weightless Society*, London: Texere.
- Leyshon, A. (1995), 'Annihilating space? The speed-up of communications', in Allen, J. and Hamnett, C. (eds.) *A Shrinking World*.
- Low, M. (1997), 'Representation unbound' in K. Cox (ed.) *Spaces of Globalization*, New York: Guilford.
- Lury, C. (1993), *Cultural Rights: Technology, Legality, Personality*, London: Routledge.
- Massey, D. (1994), 'A Place Called Home?', in *Space, Place and Gender*, Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 157-173.
- Moore, S. (1993), 'Television, Geography and 'Mobile Privatization'', *European Journal of Communication*, 8, 365-379.
- Mosco, V. (1996), *The Political Economy of Communication*, London: Sage.
- O'Neill, O. (2002), *A Question of Trust*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Murdock, G. (1994), 'New times/hard times: leisure, participation and the common good' *Leisure Studies*, 13, 239-248.
- Peters, J. D. (1999), *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Putnam, R. D. 1995. 'Bowling Alone: America's declining social capital' *Journal of Democracy* 6:1, 65-78.
- Robbins, B. (1999), *Feeling Global*, New York: New York University Press.

- Samarajiva, R. & Shields, P. (1997), 'Telecommunication networks as social space: implications for research and policy and an exemplar', *Media, Culture and Society*, 19, 535-555.
- Scannell, P. (1989), 'Public Service Broadcasting and Modern Public Life', *Media, Culture and Society* 11, 135-166.
- Scannell, P. (1996), *Radio, Television, and Modern Life*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Silverstone, R. (1999), *Why Study Media?*, London: Sage.
- Staeheli, L. (1999), 'Globalization and the scales of citizenship', *Geography Research Forum* 19, 60-77.
- Thompson, J. B. (1995). *The Media and Modernity*. Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Weber, S. (1996), *Mass Mediauras: forms, technics, media*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Williams, R. (1974), *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, London: Fontana.
- Williams, R. (1989), *Resources of Hope*, London: Verso.
- Zolo, D. (1992), *Democracy and Complexity*, Cambridge: Polity.