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Media and the city: Making sense of place

Paphos, with its 76,000 inhabitants, is the third largest city in the island of Cyprus. Its demographic composition and its economic life resemble other cities of comparable scale in Europe, especially those with similar tourist and service industries. While there is nothing particularly unique in terms of the city's urban development, there is something about its mediascapes worth noting. Paphos has three local television stations, three local radio stations, five newspapers of its own, a monthly glossy and numerous satellite dishes – probably counting in the thousands – pointing to all different directions. Some point to signals that link the local Russian community to the rich Russian satellite mediascapes, and others to the hundreds of Arabic-language television stations popular among the Middle Eastern diaspora; numerous dishes provide access to British television stations for the large tourist population from the British Isles. Similarly to its other characteristics, the city's extensive media diversity is probably not that unique either. It is probably typical of a middle-range city in Europe, with mobile populations and transnational economic activity. The abundance of media available to Paphos' dwellers and visitors represents yet another ordinary element of the city's life. Importantly, they have a significant inward and an equally developed outward orientation, arguably providing a window to the world and possibly also a window to itself.

It is rare for cities like Paphos to be studied in the context of research on networked cities, or on urban cultures, and even less so in research on global cities. It is cities like London and New York that have been systematically studied

for their qualities as media and cultural centres. But there is something useful in looking closely into a city positioned outside the usual research radar. For example, in the case of London, it is almost impossible to have an accurate inventory of available media; they are in the thousands and they are always in flux. There are also many assumptions about cities like London or New York being so unique that they cannot help understand *the city* beyond their particularity. Look at a small-scale city like Paphos though and the easy-to-record (but still impressive in size and richness) inventory points to the special relation between the media and the city, this being Paphos, or London, or New York. Look at this inventory, and the coexistence of the rich inward-looking and outward-looking mediascapes are hard to miss. What usually becomes strikingly visible in observing the mediascapes of any city (at a certain stage of development) is the abundance of media looking outwards – visible in the constant presence of satellite dishes and recorded in high levels of broadband penetration. Satellite dishes and digital connections show that a city like Paphos is spatially and culturally open. Linked through tourism, economy and migration to locations across the world, Paphos, like other cities, is porous, always on the move. Like other cities in Europe, it is increasingly dependent upon transnational and transurban communication networks for sustaining its economic and tourist life, its image as an exciting place and as a cultural crossroads. Look within the city though and the abundance of local media tells some other kind of story: a story of small-scale connections and of an audience with interest in news that literally happens around the corner.

In this commentary I aim to illustrate how the two stories described above, and which we tend to define as the opposing poles of global media and local media, respectively, might not be opposing after all. What might seem as two cases of centrifugal and centripetal tendencies in relation to place (the city) might actually capture a single storyline: that of the media and the city and its interconnected inward/outward systems of media and communication. In order to understand this one story, I argue, we need to understand the reconfiguration of city as a place through the media, both in terms of the city's representation and its mediated consumption.

BETWEEN PLACE-NESS AND PLACELESS-NESS

Place has been studied in the context of media and communications research primarily as *space under erasure*. Especially in the context of globalization studies, place has been challenged as a category that bounds phenomena that cannot be grounded in physical place anymore – for example, interpersonal relations, financial activity, social networking (Giddens 1991; Meyrowitz 1985; Urry 2007). In other work, place has been seen as a counterpoint to the macro-changes that take place in global scale, a location of resistance and immediate connections (Bhabha 1994; Sreberny-Mohammadi 1991). However, conceptualizations of place as reconfigured in the context of globalization, as multiplied through mediated connections between places (Couldry 2000), or as pluralized in mediated communication (Moores 2004) become more relevant and reconfirmed when we look at the city as a place. As Moores puts it:

There are opportunities in late modern life, at least for those with the economic and cultural resources to access relevant technologies of electronically mediated communication, for relating instantaneously to a

wide range of spatially remote others, as well as to any proximate others in the physical settings of media use.

(2004: 23)

Thus, the binary of place (as the local) against, or as a counterpoint to, the global does not necessarily reflect what happens around media and communications, especially in and across cities. I am thus intrigued by the continuity in *the sense of place* sustained through the media, especially in relation to the city. But I am also interested in the reconfiguration of place, which might not be just about continuity and multiplication of the sense of place but also about the sense of placelessness of the city, as produced by the media and as a defining element of the contemporary city as a mediated place. Only if we look at place-ness and placelessness in their continuity can we make sense of the contemporary city and the relevance of media not just as a *way out* of place but also as a *way in* to it.

There are two aspects of the reconfiguration of city as a place that interest me, beyond what is proposed by Couldry and Moores above. First, the urban as a distinct kind of place redefines relations of proximity and distance, especially in the inevitable and continuous juxtapositions of difference encountered in the city on a daily basis. Any city is a location of difference; difference is an inherent and inevitable characteristic of urban life. People, products and ideas move in and out of the city (through transportation and communication systems) making it porous and transitive (Benjamin 1997); urban dwellers and visitors encounter each other in the space of the city in intense and close proximity. The proximity with difference (social, cultural, ethnic) in a city, in scale seen nowhere but in other cities, does not just reconfigure, but it also reaffirms the significance of place as a unique, organic location of social and communicational relevance. The actual place is so important, that, as Isin puts it:

city is a difference machine insofar as it is understood as that configuration that is constituted by the dialogical encounter of groups formed and generated immanently in the process of taking up positions, orienting themselves for and against each other, inventing and assembling strategies and technologies, mobilizing various forms of capital, and making claims to that space that is objectified as 'the city'

(2002: 49).

City becomes a difference machine largely through the media. The media play a dual role, both in advancing 'dialogical encounters' (Isin 2002: 49) between its different components and in orienting its people 'for and against each other'.

The second way in which the media reconfigure the city as a place is through the process of disembodiment and commodifying the city in ways that not only reaffirm its uniqueness as a place, but also reproduce its universality as a system of organization of social, economic and cultural life. Within modernity, cities have become recognizable as unique locations, having internal qualities found nowhere else. The process of their imagining as unique locations has largely taken place through the media. Since the days of the early national press, of the early cinema and photography, the life of the city and its significance as a place have appeared in images and text circulated within and beyond

the city. These same representations, that have reaffirmed the uniqueness of each city, have also interpreted this unique location as a version of a familiar and repeated storyline. Each city, no matter how 'unique' it is, is also one example of a universal format of social and spatial organization that is known and recognizable (for example, this is where governance is based, where the financial and economic centres are located, where intense cultural activities take place). The duality of the city as a 'unique' place and as a universally recognized image have been produced and sustained through the media since the early days of modernity.

However, there is something particular in the reproduction of the dual identity of the city at present that is specific to our times. The dual system of production of the city as a place and as an image has now become singular. The distinction between the place and its image is anything but clear and the crossover between the place and its mediated image has come to shape the city both as a place and as non-place. What media do on a daily basis is to reaffirm the identity of the city as an ambivalent location between the real and the virtual. Media and ICTs provide the technological infrastructure to connect, communicate and exchange information within the city and beyond, consumed by its inhabitants, prospective inhabitants, visitors and audiences. And they also become platforms where urban cultures are produced, not just represented, as is the case with urban music and video art, for example. In all these cases, the ambivalence of *the place* takes its shape through the media – the ambivalence of the location as neither fully grounded in a place nor as fully virtual avoids being a contradiction. Rather, it becomes a way to think of and to recognize a city.

CITY'S PLACELESS-NESS

A new geographical spatiality takes over the old placed geography of capital concentration and control as the city increasingly depends on the networks that link its financial district to other financial districts across the world, writes Sassen (2002). The new, networked spatial centrality becomes as much a strategy in defining the boundaries of the city as it becomes a tactic in reaffirming the city's significant position in the public imaginary, Sassen continues (2002). In addition, and through increased human mobility, both the urban financial centres and the humble, diverse neighbourhoods of the city become networked and connected to locations across the world through satellite and digital media. Money is exchanged through global market networks, as well as through digital transmissions of remittances, sent from the urban street to locations around the world. Beyond the enormous inequalities between the transactions taking place at the top and at the bottom of (trans)urban hierarchies, there is a commonality in the networked urban economy developed across cities' territories: they all depend on digital networks in sustaining meaningful relations and connections beyond the specific place. In these connections, the city becomes less relevant as a place and more important as a node in a network of exchanges – which might be financial, but which might also be cultural and social (as is, for example, the case of diasporic community networks, or the global distribution networks of consumer products).

The city has developed an aura of placeless-ness not only as a node in networks, but also as a commodity represented in the media. Often reflected in representations of the exciting and the new, the city has become a valuable commodity, packaged, exchanged and sold around the world as a visual and

virtual product and an attractive place-less destination. For the migrant, for example, the European city becomes an attractive location of opportunities, possibly of freedom, possibly a new home providing a new sense of security. Miles away from the actual location, these potential characteristics of a western city are reproduced in media representations and in ways that bring the *distant other* into close proximity (Silverstone 2006) to the imagined location. The location represented in the media lacks the tangible dimensions that might have made it less attractive to its global consumers and potential visitors. For the wider audiences that consume images of the city at a distance, the disembodied representations of the city make it an accessible commodity. The familiarity of a global commodity format becomes attractive to advertising markets, film audiences and television users. Exciting, mysterious, dangerous and multilayered as a place, the city of desire or destination is constructed as an ever-present space for shared (actors' and spectators') imagination. And as such it is easily and virtually reproduced and reconfirmed. The disembodiment of the city in its mediated exports is also a way to appropriate and commodify difference and to market it as an attractive quality of the city as commodity. 'When properly marketed, ethnicity is always a resource for particular cultural industries', writes Davila (2004: 97).

The disembodied representation of urban difference reaffirms the importance of the city as a symbol, as a product of global relevance (sold to its own dwellers or to consumers miles away). However, this is usually a representation sanitized and 'cleansed' from the real tensions emerging around difference. For example, urban music becomes an attractive commodity when packaged and sold in global markets, but when marketed as a commodity, it is often stripped from its cultural roots and routes attached to particular (often impoverished and marginalized) parts of the city. As a consequence, the representation of difference in the media partly reproduces and partly normalizes the deprivation and huge inequalities found within the city's different quarters. In the same way that the mediated urban imaginary becomes a mechanism for legitimating internal (place-specific) hierarchies, it also becomes a system for reconfirming global (place-less) hierarchies.

CITY'S PLACE-NESS

In his influential *No Sense of Place* Meyrowitz (1985) argues that media have changed everyday experience in a way that place – *where people are* – has become less relevant compared to *who people are with*. As media connections challenge limitations of physical space, the limits of social relations also shift and the boundedness of social groups and identities is also challenged. A result of new forms of proximity is that groups become more aware of each other. Meyrowitz's book has been a key reference for a large body of work exploring the role of the media in shaping the context, content and consequences of communication beyond physical and symbolic boundaries. Meyrowitz's work is particularly important in the present discussion, as it emphasizes the significance of *who people are with* as a crucial element in the formation of social relations. The study of the media and the city takes this discussion a step further as it invites us to think of *who people are with* as well as *where (they are with others)*. The city is a location where place does matter, especially because unforeseen constellations and juxtapositions of differences – mediated and physical – are attached to its demographics, and social and economic organization (Amin and Thrift 2002).

In referring to the ongoing importance of city as a place, in particular, I have in mind three forms of production of city as a place through the media. Firstly, I am referring to urban creativity and their mediated expressions. Urban music, a genre that has emerged in the poorer neighbourhoods of socially divided cities, has reached across its inhabitants in various zones of the city and has also turned into widely distributed and consumed productions and representations of those cities as 'unique' places. Secondly, there is the construction of the city as a 'unique' place through the development of media infrastructure and urban media industries.

For example, when Paphos' business people invest in numerous local media, they participate in projects that reinforce representations of their city as a unique, particular and distinct location (compared to other cities, the rural surroundings, the nation, the rest of the world). In the larger cities – and even more so, in the global cities – media infrastructure is more complex and more fragmented. Local radio stations function within neighbourhoods, nightlife cultures are grounded in specific zones of the city and reflect niche subcultures, and often the tensions between parts of a city and its social groups are reinforced through distinct media cultures. Even in these cases though, the fragmented media industries reflect attempts (often competing) to construct a particular ('unique') identity of the city and to have certain voices speak on behalf of the city and for the city.

Thirdly, I refer to media representations of the city as a porous and transitive place (Amin and Thrift 2002). Urban media, as also national and transnational media, often represent the city as a location of excitement, mystery, crime, diversity and as a location where the sense of the unknown is part of everyday reality. Such representations are familiar when looking at images of the city in popular media products, such as *Sex and the City*, the *CSI* series and *ER* located in particular American cities. Media tend to choose cities as the location for their stories – news or entertainment programmes – because the combination of the specific location (place) with its unique juxtapositions of difference creates an attractive product. Part of the attractiveness of the city, in its particularity as a media story, is the level of difference it incorporates in its territory. A mediated territoriality of the unknown, the exciting and the unpredictable makes good material for entertainment and for news stories. No wonder thrillers and action films tend to be located in big cities – this is where the porous city is interpreted and represented as the ultimate location of anomie, capturing the most widespread fears of crime, loss and social uncertainty (Macek 2006).

CITY AS AN AMBIVALENT MEDIATED LOCATION

Media and ICTs are used by urban dwellers in constructing their sense of their city as a loved as well as an unloved place, as a shared space and as a divided place, a place providing them with a sense of ontological security against the vastness of the global world they see at their doorstep (Giddens 1991) – a sense of place constantly under negotiation. For its people, the city is real, it is tangible and lived, but it is also a representation, which is positioned but which is also dislocated from its geographical territory, mobile and virtual. Mediated networks link it to other cities. Not only London and Paris, for example, but also Paphos, Liege and Paris, Texas, become largely imagined, branded and lived through their urban and transnational (mediated) connections; they cannot be imagined outside mediation. The urban space constantly shifts between

stability and change, and between mediation and immediacy. City is not a place, but a process, writes Castells (1996) in relation to the role of cities as nodes in global networks of exchange of information. Castells' proposition is important in highlighting the communicative element of the city and its dependence/role in mediated networks, yet it reproduces the assumption that media are *either* with the place *or against* it. But the shift of the meaning of place has to do with its dual role as both a place and a process. In the same way that networks inform the city's own organization but challenge its boundedness, so have the process and the place become closely intertwined through the meeting of urban representations, consumption, travel and transnational experience. In dealing with the ambivalence in meanings, consumers of the image of the city – as urban dwellers (virtual) visitors or mere media consumers – make sense of it, without necessarily challenging the limits of its construction as a place, and its politics, inequalities and struggles for power and control.

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