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Introduction

Over the last two decades, the study of urban media and communication has witnessed an upsurge of empirical research, characterized by a plurality of methodological perspectives on how the urban, communication, and mediation ought to be conceived, and consequently also by the adoption of a vast array of research methods.

Whilst a valuable asset, this multiplicity of perspectives may contribute to the establishment of a number of over-specialized approaches, thus fragmenting the field further and hindering the development of a shared debate. In this final chapter, we aim to help readers find their way through the field's main methodological heuristics, as a way to both foster internal dialogue and offer guiding principles for urban media and communication scholars to develop their empirical research. For this purpose, we distinguish three main strands of research within urban media and communication studies: approaches that consider the city as *content* of communication, as a *context* of media engagement, and as a *medium* of communication (Aiello and Tosoni 2016).

Cities as content of communication

The first strand of research sits at the intersection of the humanities and social sciences, addressing media representations of the city and considering them as constitutive of urban phenomena. As James Donald claims, there may be "no such thing as a city"; rather, we ascribe coherence to the multiplicity and diversity of "historically and geographically specific institutions, social relations of production and reproduction, practices of government, forms and media of communication, and so forth" (1992:422) that interact in and ultimately also produce the space that we come to define as 'city'. Instead, the city ought to be considered as an imagined environment, not unlike the now widespread idea that the nation is an 'imagined community'. This imagining, Donald argues, is as relevant as "the material determinants of the physical environment"

(1992:422) to understand the city. It is in this sense that scholars working in this area focus on "[t]he discourses, symbols, metaphors and fantasies through which we ascribe meaning to the modern experience of urban living" (422). Within this particular research strand, there are however three main, broad types of inquiry.

A first type focuses on representations of urban localities, cities, and urban processes in specific media texts, genres or in the production of an author. These representations are explored in relation to media as diverse as literature (Lehan 1998), comics (Davies 2017), videogames (Anable 2013), web documentaries (Holmes 2017), but also tourist brochures and guidebooks (Gilbert 1999; Siegenthaler 2002), and through interpretative methodologies that are strictly connected to the specificities of the *corpus* of texts under study. Particular attention is devoted to the relationship between cinema and the city, insofar as these are seen as "the most important cultural form – cinema – and the most important form of social organization – the city – in the twentieth century (and, for the time being at least, the twenty-first century)" (Shiel 2001: 1; for an overview of cases see Chapter 3, this volume). While this first type of inquiry has for long been centred on a single medium, recent research on place (Govers, Go 2009) and city branding (Dinnie 2010) has contributed to updating its methodological framework so as to include transmediality and multimodal representations (Paganoni 2015).

The second type of inquiry shifts the analytical focus from specific representations to broader logics and ideologies underpinning the media representation of cities. These ideological biases are traced, first of all, in relation to the content found in mainstream media discourse. Steve Macek (2006) has, for example, underlined how media discourse has promoted moral panic over the American city, by systematically depicting inner cities as morally decayed and uncontrollably violent and thus also promoting the adoption of reactionary social policies and surveillance techniques. Moreover, some scholars have integrated the analysis of mainstream media discourse with the analysis of people's everyday interactions with the media. Myria Georgiou (2013) has, for example, shown how media can support "liberatory" forms of cosmopolitanism, notwithstanding the neoliberal and market-oriented values informing mainstream media discourse. Another approach here focuses on media representations by integrating an analysis of their content with an

investigation of their enunciative strategies. For example, Deborah Epstein Nord (1995) traces the typical semiotic enunciator of the Victorian city in nineteenth century literature – the "invisible but all-seeing novelist effacing all of himself but his voice in the evocation of an urban panorama" (1) – back to the well-known figure of Baudelaire and Benjamin's flâneur. Yet, "if the rambler or flaneur required anonymity and the camouflage of the crowd to move with impunity and to exercise the privilege of the gaze", Epstein Nord reveals the concealed gendered nature of this enunciative subject by highlighting that "the too-noticeable female stroller could never enjoy that position" (4).

Through a similar approach, though focusing on visual representations of the city, Scott McQuire (2017) has shown how, historically, attempts to visually represent the modern city have been informed by two main semiotic strategies: the all-encompassing view from above exemplified by aerial photography, and the street view typical of the photo series, which is able to represent life in cities and urban transformation in a more fine-grained, yet fragmented way. These two strategies, he argues, have converged in the representational strategies of contemporary *geomedia* (e.g. Google Street View).

Finally, a computational approach sets out to detect representational patterns in large bodies of images and videos, for example pictures of cities and localities posted on social media. As an example, Nadav Hochman, Lev Manovich and Mehrdad Yazdani (2014) have addressed "the relation between physical places and their social media representations [analyzing 28,419] social media photos that were tagged and shared on Instagram during the street artist Banksy's month-long residency in New York, October 2013" (1).

The third type of inquiry within this research strand focusing on the city as content deals with issues related to urban data visualization, that is, graphical representations for the analysis and communication of data about cities. Over the last decade, this topic has gained momentum due to the growing importance of big data in public debates, academic analyses, and the institutional management of urban issues (Drucker 2014). This said, data visualization is not just a technical process nor is it a transparent window into information about cities and the urban. Rather, data visualization inevitably entails multiple layers of mediation, including the transposition of observable world phenomena into the data sources underpinning visualizations, the translation of

such data into imagery, and the transformation of visual imagery into "the socially, culturally, and historically specific 'ways of seeing' engendered in the data visualization" (Gray et al., 2016: 229; see also Chapter 22, this volume). To develop a reflexive understanding of the inevitable bias implied in these forms of mediation, scholars in the field – who are often also active in the development of applied and experimental data visualization projects – advocate forms of critical literacy rooted in disciplines like visual, cultural and urban studies, geography, semiotics, aesthetics and cartography, together with computer science. Visual analysis is often complemented with empirical methods like interviews, ethnography and document analysis to shed light on data visualization production, usage and reception practices.

Rob Kitchin's collaborative work, for example, employs participant observation, ethnography, and an analysis of archived correspondence to address the politics of data and design in the Dublin Dashboard, a website visualizing data about the city of Dublin that was built by two members of the research team (Kitchin, Maalsen, McArdle 2016). In a similar vein, though with an experimental design approach, Simeone and Patelli (2016) involved different stakeholders – architects, urban planners, managers, scholars, and companies – to assess "if these end users considered meaningful the results of the social media analyses as performed and visualized by Urban Sensing" (p. 261), an EU-funded project researching urban issues through social media analysis and visualization.

Cities as contexts of media engagement

A second research strand addresses the city as a context of media engagement, aiming to shed light on the relationship between media usage and urban daily life, or the plurality of practices and routines that unfold within and across urban spaces (Graham 2004).

Stemming from the ethnographic tradition within audience studies, this strand of research attempts to extend scholars' analytical focus beyond the limits of the household, where it had been firmly confined until last decade, notwithstanding some notable exceptions (i.e. Lemish 1982; McCarthy 2001). As empirical research agendas are updated to include squares, streets, parks, cafés or public transit, scholars are called to reflect on the peculiar *urban* nature of these public

and semi-public places—a theoretical and methodological issue that remained by and large implicit in the studies of the private space of the household. *Hybrid space* (de Souza e Silva 2004; Frith 2012)*, netspace* (Willis 2016) or *net locality* (Gordon, de Souza e Silva 2011) are only some examples of the methodological concepts proposed by scholars from different backgrounds to describe the intertwining of urban physical space, embodied place experience, and media-related practices.

Regarding the empirical methods employed to investigate this relationship, a key role is played by ethnographic observation, used alone or with other qualitative methods, mostly in-depth interviews. Not rarely, scholars back up their observations with the analysis of audio diaries (Krajina 2014) or video excerpts (Licoppe and Figeac 2015), recorded by them or by interviewees, sometimes with experimental recording devices designed for the purpose. These ethnographic approaches differ according to what can be called the 'extension' and 'intension' of the observation.

The extension of the observation refers to the breadth and the type of the portion of reality under study, and for the ethnographic approach it depends on the definition of the ethnographic field. Scholars tend to define the extension of their empirical studies through three different lenses. First, with a media-centric approach, by focusing on a communication device (e.g. portable mp3 players, see Bull 2013), a platform (e.g. Foursquare, see Humphreys and Liao 2013) or a service (e.g. sms/mobile texting services, see Kasesniemi and Rautiainen 2002), and by observing their usage across the different sites where they are actually engaged by people. Second, with a site-centric approach, where scholars limit their observation of people's media engagement to a specific urban public or semi-public locality (e.g. internet use in wi-fi cafés, see Hampton & Gupta 2008; mobile phones in the Tokyo underground, see Sugiyama 2013). Third, scholars who adopt a practice-centric approach focus on a social practice and investigate how it unfolds across different urban sites, involving different media-related activities. These practices can be "widely dispersed among different sectors of social life" (Schatzky 1996:91), like for example walking (Van Den Akker 2015) or driving (Haddington & Rauniomaa 2011), or they can be "more complex practices found in and constitutive of particular domains of social life" (Schatzky 1996:98). Among these practices,

defined as *integrative,* we find both ordinary everyday practices (Tosoni and Ridell 2016) and more specialized work-related practices, like media production (Rodgers, Barnett, Cochrane 2014).

These different ways of defining the extension of the observation entail different adaptations of the ethnographic approach. On the one hand, scholars tailor the technicalities of the observation to the specificities of the sites of engagement, according to what Zlatan Krajina (2014) calls *methodological site-specificity* (51). On the other hand, especially when adopting a media- and practice-centric approach – where media engagement is observed across different urban contexts and/or mobilities – scholars tend to adapt their methods of observation in ways that are inspired by multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995), and mobile methods of inquiry (Büscher, Urry, Witchger 2011; Manderscheid 2014).

The intension of the observation refers to the specific elements of the portion of reality under study that must be paid attention to, and depends on the theoretically informed objectives of the study and by the sensitizing concepts included in the researcher's methodological framework. Sensitizing concepts serve to bring some elements of the object under study to the forefront, thus inevitably overlooking others in the background (Blumer 1954) and constraining the researcher's perception and understanding. The study of media engagement in urban contexts is strongly influenced by a phenomenological conceptualization of space (Tosoni 2016), derived from phenomenological geography via the ethnographic tradition in audience studies. This is a methodological framework that has its linchpin in the distinction between space and place, where places are made out of space by repeated contacts that result in habituation, in the endowment of symbolic meanings and in the development of affective attachments (Cresswell, 2011). Media engagement in urban space is an integral part of these repeated practices of *place-making* (de Souza e Silvia, Sheller, 2015 eds.), which cannot be properly understood without a specific attention to media.

Recent research attempts to extend the intension implied by this methodological framework in three distinct, yet interrelated directions. First of all, by developing a dialogue with non-representational theories in human geography (Thrift 2007; Anderson & Harrison 2010), and therefore taking into account all the forms of bodily habituation and affect that contribute to define

one's relationship to a particular place and its material elements (Moores 2012; see also Chapter 10, this volume). Second, this focus on embodiment resonates with the call within visual anthropology to develop a sensitivity to multisensoriality (Pink 2006). Here, the main aim is to extend the understanding of how media-engaged subjects experience urban space to the role played by other senses (Mattern 2008; Pink 2007). Third, in dialogue with post-structuralist geographies (Murdoch 2006), there is also an attempt to extend the phenomenological conceptualization of space into a relational one (Jones 2009; Tosoni 2016), in order to grasp the interplay between the materiality of space, its symbolic meaning, and the practices of embodied subjects (Tosoni & Tarantino 2013b; Timeto 2015). Space is therefore conceived as possessing a processual and heterogeneous ontology, as it emerges dynamically from the uninterrupted interplay of material, symbolic, and pragmatic elements.

Cities as media

Finally, a third strand focuses on the city as a *medium*. Drawing from the traditions of semiotics and rhetorical studies, it considers the urban built environment as a form of mediation in its own right, and aims to understand how 'the urban' communicates—both from a symbolic and material standpoint (Aiello 2011). From this point of view, the physical qualities of cities mediate the everyday lives of both individuals and communities, as the urban built environment is a major observable manifestation of the "power-filled social relations" (Massey 1999:21) that both constrain and enable a range of actions and practices among urban dwellers.

At the same time, the urban built environment can also be seen as a form of mediatization, as it is often used as a form of currency that is exchanged through media like urban planning materials and promotional websites for tourism and real estate, for example. Often, this is done from the top down, in that global and second-tier cities alike are increasingly fashioned to project a desirable, 'world-class' image through photogenic cityscapes and lifestyle-oriented planning initiatives such as creative and cultural districts or waterfront developments (see also Chapter 24, this volume).

Within this broader approach to the city as a medium, it is possible to outline two main bodies of research, which are set apart by distinctive though compatible methods. These are critical and material rhetoric, on the one hand, and social semiotics and multimodality, on the other.

Critical rhetoric scholars have focused mainly on how "the material spaces of the everyday" (Dickinson 2002:6) contribute to shaping specific ways of being and forms of identification. Here, the urban built environment is seen as a rhetorical inducement and an understanding of urban space as a whole is key to gaining critical insight into how particular subjectivities, actions and/or forms of civic engagement are summoned by our surroundings. This perspective is rooted in US scholarship on material rhetoric and, particularly, the work of Carole Blair. Her argument that 'being there' (Blair 2001) – that is, being where the 'text' under study is located – is fundamental when analyzing paintings in museums or monuments in cities has shaped this field as a whole. As Blair and Michel (2000) claim, this kind of analysis focuses much less on "issues of symbolism" than "on the performative dimension of the site" (40).

When it comes to rhetorical scholarship focusing specifically on the urban and the suburban, the work of Greg Dickinson is particularly prominent. Dickinson's writing on spaces of memory and authenticity like, for example, American old towns and main streets points to relationships between consumer culture, the urban built environment, and everyday performances of the self (Dickinson 1997). Likewise, he examines the spatial rhetorics and place-making tropes that interpellate suburban dwellers in ways that, much in Foucaldian way, compel them to become productive enacters of all-American values and social structures (Dickinson 2015).

To account for the importance of affect (Massumi 2002) and embodiment in the analytical process, Dickinson and Aiello (2016) reconstruct the state of the art in rhetorical approaches to the urban built environment as a methodological framework that they summarize as "being through there". In doing so, they articulate the significance of both being in the presence of the materiality of the site(s) under study (e.g. to appraise their various textures, as in Aiello 2011, and Aiello and Dickinson 2014), and of moving through space with one's whole body and senses, at times in different directions and at different rates (e.g. in a car vs. on foot).

Scholars whose work is grounded mainly in British and Australasian critical discourse analysis (CDA) and social semiotics see the urban 'landscape' as a deployment of semiotic resources, which are typically examined as manifestations of major discursive structures and power relations. These semiotic resources are multimodal, ranging from writing and imagery to sound and texture. However, a focus on language has been historically dominant in this area of inquiry, with many scholars focusing their empirical efforts on researching 'linguistic landscapes', which Landry and Bourhis (1997) originally defined as "[t]he language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings" in "a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration" (p. 25). This is still a thriving perspective, particularly among linguists and sociolinguists interested in researching power relations among different ethno-linguistic groups in multilingual societies, together with the relationship between local identities and globalizing forces tied to consumption, tourism, and politics (see Gorter 2006; also, Shohamy et al. 2010; see also Chapter 2, this volume).

This said, in the early 2000s Ron Scollon and Suzie Wong Scollon (2003) developed a broader approach known as *geosemiotics*, which they defined as "the study of the social meaning of the material placement of signs and discourses and of our actions in the material world" (p. 2). In studying a variety of 'texts' displayed in public, Scollon and Wong Scollon highlight the importance of examining both their emplacement and indexicality, that is, their physical location in space and their material relationship with their context and functions. Their geosemiotic framework is made of three key analytical dimensions, each covering one of the major semiotic systems that are at work in the making of a 'place'. As a semiotic system, *interaction order* refers to the ways social relationships between different human actors are organized in space, and how these actors behave in each other's presence. *Visual semiotics* is somewhat narrowly defined as "the ways in which pictures (signs, images, graphics, texts, photographs, paintings, and all of the other combinations of these and others) are produced as meaningful wholes for visual interpretation" (Scollon and Scollon 2003:8). Finally, *place semiotics* refers to the meanings of spatial organization itself, in particular in relation to the uses of different kinds of space, which for example may be private or public, or else front-stage or back-stage.

The Scollons' approach has greatly influenced further developments in discursive and semiotic approaches to space and place (see Lou 2014; also, Gendelman and Aiello 2010). In this vein, Adam Jaworski and Crispin Thurlow (2010) have extended and replaced the notion of 'linguistic landscapes' with that of 'semiotic landscapes' to encompass the breadth of research on the "textual mediation or discursive construction of place and the use of space as a semiotic resource in its own right" (p. 1).

From a methodological standpoint, the two approaches to studying the city as a medium outlined here are germane as well as complementary. Both perspectives emphasize the entanglement of the symbolic with the material and, thanks to their emphasis on multisensoriality and multimodality, both perspectives also lend themselves to an investigation of under-researched aspects of urban communication such as, for example, smell- and soundscapes.

Conclusions

So far, attempts to integrate these three main strands of research have been fairly sporadic. Yet, the combination of symbolic meanings conveyed by the city as a medium and of its representations as content play a key role in molding those placemaking practices that are at the centre of research on the city as a context of media engagement. Similarly, people experience the city as a medium while being engaged in media-related activities, and with an understanding of urban locales that is often derived from media representations of cities. Through our modest attempt to summarize and define the key methodological heuristics of current empirical research in the field, we hope to highlight how a systematic dialogue between the three major approaches outlined in this chapter could prove to be fruitful for the development of a more nuanced approach to researching urban media and communication. By the same token, this final chapter is ultimately meant to work as an invitation for other scholars in the field to contribute further to cross-methodological dialogue and collaboration.

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