

Book review

McQuire, S. 2016. *Geomedia: Networked cities and the future of public space*. Cambridge: Polity Press. 213 pp.

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The rise in digital mobile media usage has sparked a new interest in the interrelation of media and geography. In recent years there have been special issues (e.g., Ridell and Zeller, 2013), edited volumes (e.g., Couldry and McCarthy, 2004; Falkheimer and Jansson, 2006), joint papers (e.g., Adams and Jansson, 2012) and, fairly recently, a conference dedicated to the study of the connections between these fields of study (cf. the bi-annual Geomedia conference in Karlstad, Sweden). This recent book of Scott McQuire fits perfectly into this trend. For McQuire specifically, *Geomedia* falls in a long career that has largely focused on the aforementioned disciplinary confluence. In this book he explores what the proliferation of digitally networked media means for contemporary urban public space and, based on that, he sets out to develop ideas on how this new situation can be harnessed to engage in bottom-up place-making. To grapple with this situation, he develops the concept of geomedia which is loosely defined as a condition – or threshold – set by digital media and its applications for the mutual shaping of everyday public urban life. Although this *condition* more or less sets the context, I would argue that the more prevalent common thread in this book is the ambivalence of digital media, and how they are used as a means for top-down control while at the same time also holding a bottom-up emancipatory potential. The author extensively explores this ambivalence and eventually concludes that digitally networked media can be harnessed to trigger people to reflect upon their everyday urban spatial routines, and to develop the social skill of public civility. This skill is considered essential in dealing with the diversity of everyday urban public life that people are increasingly confronted with.

McQuire comes to this conclusion by systematically and coherently bringing together empirical and theoretical insights and building upon them chapter after chapter. In the introduction, he outlines the dimensions underlying the central condition of geomedia: ubiquity, real-time, location-aware and convergence. This is followed by a theoretical chapter that first retraces the historical transformations and processes underlying urban public space, and then does the same concerning the contemporary digital media environment. The tensions and fault lines identified and discussed in this chapter form the basis for

the following three chapters. In the first thereof, the author focuses on one side of the recurring theme of digital ambivalence, namely how it is and can be used to extend power in novel ways. This is done by critically assessing the production of digital archives by private companies in the context of data-driven smart city strategies. Specifically, he uses Google's Street View service to speculate on how this particular usage of digital, and therefore operational, databases function in what can be thought of as some kind of colonization of the lifeworld. In the following two chapters, McQuire turns to the other side of that ambivalence, and looks at how interventions in public space can create experimental environments that form a break in people's everyday routines and can entice them to participate in the construction of public urban space. He argues that such interventions' main accomplishments reside in how they trigger people into unexpected social encounters with strangers but also, and more profoundly, into being reflexive about their everyday routines within digitally networked public space. The key argument forwarded here concerns the design of urban public spaces that are unfinished or open-ended. As such, its users are allowed to appropriate these environments, which is considered a crucial element in the development of the social skill of public civility. The concluding chapter is used to philosophically reflect on the conceptualization of geomedia and essentially calls for "new practices – modes of social encounter, relations to others, ways of being together with others near and far – that do not entirely conform to the contours of older logics" (p. 168).

In making this statement, McQuire shows that *Geomedia* is more than a critique of the industry-led appropriation of digital media in urban contexts as it also points to possible ways out. Moreover, both the critique and the alternatives are conceptually well supported. Looking more closely at these conceptual underpinnings, we see that McQuire heavily draws on critical scholars from media and urban studies. For instance, urban public space is conceptualized through the works of Lefebvre, Jacobs, Sassen and Sennet, while digital media are, for instance, considered in the light of Habermas' notion of the colonization of the lifeworld. Yet equally important is his application of the notion of a media event (cf. Dayan and Katz, 1994). All of this is woven together, and applied in a coherent narrative and convincing thesis that is often illuminating. This is especially the case in the systematical development of his argument regarding the social skill of public civility. Still, there are a number of issues and concerns. These include the limited number of data points to support the stated claims or the implicit celebration of bottom-up digital media appropriations. Yet, my main concern relates to the writing style, which makes reading and understanding this book often a frustrating task. The author is clearly knowledgeable on this subject, yet expects the same of his audience in terms

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82 of media studies, social and cultural geography or art as he often touches upon
 83 ideas, concepts, events, artists or works of art, but does not always elaborate
 84 on them. Along the same line, I still have trouble appreciating the central concept
 85 of geomediality. McQuire presents often illuminating insights and does a really
 86 good job maintaining the overall coherence of the book, yet the vague way
 87 of outlining and sketching the book's central concept, that is sometimes a condition
 88 and at other times a threshold, does not add to the clarity let alone the
 89 applicability of this concept.

90 Still, all things considered, McQuire has put together an interesting book
 91 that sheds light on two very topical issues, namely the current trends of urbanization
 92 and mediatization. Moreover, he does so by drawing on very diverse and
 93 sometimes even unconventional (i.e., art) pieces of evidence. – In that sense, I
 94 do consider *Geomediality* an addition to the field. However, I would argue that
 95 this recommendation is conditional. Because of the often difficult and relatively
 96 impractical way in which this book is written, it is probably more useful for
 97 scholars who 1) already possess the necessary knowledge on the subject and 2)
 98 are looking for novel ways of interpreting the contemporary situation, rather
 99 than being in the process of setting out to empirically study it.

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