

CULTURE • POLITICS • TECHNOLOGY

Stream

A Graduate Journal of Communication • Summer 2011 • 4(1) • ISSN 1916-5897 • www.streamjournal.org

Stream: Culture/Politics/Technology is a peer-reviewed, open-access e-journal published by the Communication Graduate Student Caucus at Simon Fraser University.

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Review of the 2011 IAMCR Conference

Scott Timcke, Graeme Webb, and Jay McKinnon

The International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) 2011 conference was held in Istanbul between the 13th and 17th July 2011. Located on the south bank of the Golden Horn, an inlet off the Bosphorus, Kadir Has University (khas.edu.tr) offered excellent presentation facilities, smooth technical operations and ample opportunities for collegiality. Hosting an event of this size is a massive commitment and the Local Organizing Committee, led by Deniz Bayrakdar, must be commended for a job well done. The success of this event was due, in no small measure, to their preparations.

The principle theme for this year — Cities, Creativity and Connectivity — drew upon a number of complex and timely issues. As Sir Peter Hall once commented, cities “have throughout history been the places that ignited the sacred flame of the human intelligence and the human imagination” (1998, p. 7). Never has this been truer than it is today: in 2005 the world reached the urban tipping point when over half of the globe’s population lived in cities; the networks and spaces within cities are now the drivers of social, cultural, economic, and political development. Istanbul — a global city by any metric — represents the essence of Juraj Kittler’s observation that the city is the ultimate communicative environment.

This year’s conference was attended by approximately 1000 registered academics and researchers participating in some 340 concurrent panel sessions.¹ These presenters came from a wide variety of regions – Africa, Central America, Europe, Middle East, North America, South America, and South-east Asia – and through their papers represented a diverse yet complimentary set of voices. This geographic, political, cultural, and economic diversity bolstered the claim that the conference is international in scope. For these reasons the conference provided an excellent opportunity to track and assess the state of the discipline.²

Beginning with the first plenary session, there was much discussion about the possible rehabilitation of Cosmopolitanism and the political and cultural benefits it offers complex and diverse cityscapes. Generally, the sentiment is

1. Conference abstracts can be found at <http://iamcr.org/iamcr2011abstracts>

2. It was interesting to note the different approaches to the discipline of communication. Most noticeable was the intense focus that many Europeans placed on methods. This proved to be quite exciting for those impassioned by methodological pluralism, but sometimes one wondered whether this was at the expense of asking the big questions.



that some universal values are beneficial to arbitrate between value conflicts that arise due to cultural differences which are part and parcel of global cities. Cosmopolitanism, it is said, is particularly tailored to this task, provided it is decentred from a Western anchoring conception. This ideal is similar to that proposed by Immanuel Wallerstein in his European Universalism lectures given at UBC's Green College in 2005, and subsequently published as a book under the same name in 2006.

Further, Cosmopolitanism is said to offer a way to celebrate, incorporate and diminish possible political tensions that arise from perceived differences. It offers inclusivity without demanding conformity. It invites one to make cultural selections as opposed to following prescriptions. It is thus agent-centered and adaptable to the fluid forms life found in contemporary society thus able to strengthen our local and global communities by simultaneously integrating and fragmenting us.

However, one should not be overly celebratory: the concept generally neglects the roles of power and economic forces in shaping our world and the choices we make. For example, the question of how to attract and retain immigrants goes far beyond embracing the vision of a creative, urban cosmopolitan tapestry. We must acknowledge the disjuncture between different types of immigrants and how the economic valuations of their skills influence their experiences of the city. The counter-point between the transitory low wage workers, who are tolerated because of their production capacities, and the experience with the highly skilled workers, whose work involves travel and deliberate encounters with the cultural practices of others is poignant. While several papers presented case studies of first-language mass media consumption in diasporic migrant communities, and all found that assimilationist values drive immigration policy, there was no indication that these experiences applied equally to wealthier cosmopolitan expatriate communities. Given that cities have a tendency to exacerbate inequalities, attention to this issue would have been appropriate given the general theme. Addressing these factors might have been helpful to advocate the merits of the concept.

Regarding other trends at the conference, the authors noticed a strong administrative flavour to some of the work presented. This does not mean presenters were overly concerned with policy or governance, but rather their work was grounded in theoretical frameworks and conducted according to internal logic, which remained largely unchallenged. There was a distinct preference for "uses and gratifications" and quantitative content analysis without the intervention of what could broadly be called a critical perspective. Explicit

references to critical culture studies or political economy were rare; however, referrals from the floor to concepts derived from the Frankfurt School tradition or to the Audience Commodity were generally regarded as valuable contributions to session discussions.

The administrative flavour of the conference was also connected to another trend we noticed: The general absence of the active audience model of communication. Though this model was occasionally mentioned or acknowledged, studies more often focused on elitist (or technologically determined!) discourses and assumed this top-down communicative approach drove public development. While recognizing that technical systems do attempt to delimit and place constraints, consideration of the works of Michel de Certeau, Pierre Bourdieu and the Birmingham School would most likely demonstrate that public development is not as neat and tidy as some might think it happens to be. This is not to roll out the standard graduate student reading list, but rather to indicate some of these theorists were underappreciated at the conference. Delimitations are contested, and meaning of cultural or technological artefacts resides at the interface of semantic and pragmatic properties. Ignoring either attribute cripples analysis.

Our chief criticism is of the exclusion of agency used in modelling events and providing explanations. While a top-down imposition might indeed be the case in one study, surely this cannot be the case across the variety of projects presented at the conference; there is a deficiency in accounting for intentionality. Ironically, given the associations' progressive leanings, personhood was undervalued at the conference. People have agency, and their intentions can modify things in considerable ways. The city is more than the bare infrastructure carriage.

These comments hold for the political economy sections as well. Discussions after these presentations often revolved around many dated structural political economy concerns: Size and composition of audience, advertisers, time slots, revenue. The poverty of this approach was evident when compared to the type of political economy work produced by the likes of Gina Neff, Enda Brophy, and Grieg de Peuter.

Neff, whose previous work examined the rationalised risk taken by highly skilled ICT workers, presented an agenda setting paper entitled *Towards a Political Economy of Communication: Rethinking the Blind Spot of Work & Technology*. Iconoclastic in tone, her central message was that false con-

3. This is not to argue that all rationalizations are of course correct, but rather that one must at least give some credence to these accounts of self to world. Pulling the false consciousness card is a lazy explanation.

sciousness explanations are generally inadequate because they fail to respect the affiliations between many workers and their work, and the goals thereof. To repeat the criticism: traditional political economy has an inadequate understanding of workers intentionality.³ In Neff's mind three interventions are required. 1) A politics of information based on use value, as opposed to exchange value. This politics of information ought to be undertaken in the spirit that all time is work time. 2) A rehabilitation of the concept of species being, which is similar, although not congruent with the self's awareness of intention and how it relates to actions. And 3) A greater appreciation of technical agency. Neff argues that if one does not understand the technical aspects of systems, one will have a mismatched understanding of their political roles. Simply, she drives home the point that we academics require technical competency in the technological systems we study. By analogy, Neff would have us believe that many communication scholars are discussing the impact of the printing press without knowing how to read.

Both Brophy's (2011) *Organizing the "Eyes and Ears of Corporate Capitalism": Worker Inquiry And Labour Resistance In New Zealand's Call Centres*, and de Peuter's (2011) *Creative Economy and Labour Precarity: A Contested Convergence* talks provided good examples of how to implement such a political economy agenda as Neff's. Brophy's concern was with digital economics and how these circuits produce a digital divide between labour and capital, and effectively between producers and consumers. Marked by differences in marketable skills and technical competency, this divide has profound implications for class (de)composition. One area where we can see this is in emerging market economies which are attempting to develop technical service centers, but finding themselves betroth to the risks of capital flight. Here foreign direct investments and capital mobility create and maintain a digital labour class that is just technically competent enough to do menial digital work, but hindered from developing technical expertise. The lack of expertise keeps these digital technical workers on the consumption side of the divide, unable to make the leap to producer. Brophy also dealt with some measures that labour took to respond to capital mobility, and his findings point to the stake of local political struggles.

This theme was also present in de Peuter's presentation. Given the extent to which precarious labour has become one of the defining features of contemporary work, his test cases examined how workers organize to these types of working conditions through class recomposition efforts. Here de Peuter's follows Neff's research agenda by showing how labour attempts to develop and foster collective intention amongst workers who find are dissipate and in precarious circumstances. Like Brophy, de Peuter emphasised the local stake

of political mobilization, proposing that it offers the only real move available for labour in an era marked by the retreat of the State. The crucial skill differences between digital workers, which provide different reasons for mobility and desires for recomposition, supports Neff's conclusion about the role of technical skills and knowledge and the extent to which these allow one to work or rework the technical systems. This suggests a gap for a class analysis of creative labourers and their technical skills.

There are other papers which also require a few remarks. In one of the most engaging and thought provoking presentations, Zizi Papacharissi, in *Liquid Citizenship: Civic Engagement in the Era of Convergence* (2011), spoke to the nature of civic engagement in an era of communicative convergence in hyper-developed states. Through outlining the historical progression of the term citizenship and its relationship to communication technologies, modernity, and capitalism, Papacharissi suggested what 'good' citizenship means in a converged media environment.

David Hesmondhalgh, in his presentation *The State and Cultural Policy after (?) Neo-liberalism* (2011), spoke eloquently and convincingly on culture and human flourishing. Culture has an innate value as it both informs an emotional narrative and has within it emancipatory potential. However, he stressed the need for vigilance against the Neo-liberal encroachment and the marketization of culture.

In regulative work, Guy Berger's excellent presentation *The Silliness of Silos: Broadband and broadcast policy in South Africa* (2011), demonstrated how horizontal policy inference occurs when policy makers and regulators do not acknowledge the extent of technical convergence, or lack an adequate understanding of the technical systems they are trying to regulate.

Lastly, fallout from the IAMCR has included a spirited debate between Dwayne Winseck and Christian Fuchs about the role, extent, and centrality that materiality ought to play in any analysis of new media technologies. They debate the correct compass bearing of a materiality centered political economy; and whether it ought to be broadly Weberian or broadly Marxist inspired.⁴ Those interested in such debates would be well served in reading the debate on Winseck's blog (<http://dwmw.wordpress.com/>).

On a more pragmatic note, we would urge first time graduate attendees to make use of the Emerging Scholars Network. This section of the IAMCR

4. See <http://dwmw.wordpress.com/2011/08/06/critical-media-and-communication-studies-today-a-conversation-between-dwayne-winseck-and-christian-fuchs-part-1/>

provides constructive, timely, and insightful criticism of recently completed research and research projects in preparation. We also advise that students follow one's section, but also balance that by spending half one's time attending panels in other sections or working groups. We also suggest preparing a consistent and polished elevator pitch as one way to stand out.

As with any conference of this size, the IAMCR was not without its organizational issues; however, there were issues that should have been dealt with more efficiently. Specifically, many panels simply had too many presentations, thus reducing both the allotted time for presentation and the time required for the audience to reflect and engage with the material.

To conclude we generally believe that the conference was conducive to advancing and defending one's work. For this reason we would encourage others communication to attend the IAMCR's 2012 conference in Durban, South Africa.

Authors

Scott Timcke is a PhD Candidate in Simon Fraser University's School of Communication. He studies puzzles that arise from the peculiar tension between potential and actual states as these come to be reconciled by human consciousness and applied to political practices. His current project is an intervention into the luck-egalitarian debate. At the IAMCR 2011 he presented a critique of Robert Brandom's *Making it Explicit*.

Graeme Webb is in the PhD program in the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University. His research combines communication theory and political sociology through an investigation of New Media, Discourses of Technology, and the emergence of Networked Governance at the City-Region Level. At the IAMCR 2011 he presented an examination of the role creative-social entrepreneurs play in networked governance at the city level.

Jay McKinnon is a graduate student at Simon Fraser University's School of Communication. He researches the cultural practices that develop around technical artifacts and their continuity as obsolete technologies are replaced. His current project is a historiography of early ICTs and the social construction of the popular Internet. At IAMCR 2011 he presented the results of a quantitative analysis of scholarship on forgotten communication technologies of the 1980s.

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