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Going About the City: Methods and Methodologies for Urban Communication Research

Introduction

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This introduction to the special section on methods and methodologies for urban communication research discusses major approaches to conceptualizing and researching the relationship between cities and communication. We underline the increasing significance of scholarship on the various ways in which city dwellers relate to each other and their urban environment through symbolic, technological, and material means. We then argue that a systematic conversation on the methodological principles, protocols, and practices that set apart this burgeoning area of inquiry is not only timely, but also much needed. With this objective in mind, we invited a group of scholars to reflect on the key questions, instruments, challenges, and contributions of documentary, audiencing, material, visual, mixed-method, ecological, and applied perspectives on urban communication. Based on the seven articles included in the special section, we propose three distinct but interrelated conceptual heuristics—*the city as context*, *the city as medium*, *the city as content*—that highlight the importance of cities as both producers and products of particular practices, interactions, and narratives. We finally conclude that, vis-à-vis research on the automatic production of urban space, urban communication scholarship may contribute to strengthening a broader research agenda rooted in an understanding of communication as a human endeavor.

Keywords: urban communication, cities, empirical research, methods, methodology

In *Invisible Cities*, the Italian novelist Italo Calvino (1997) writes, “You take delight not in a city’s seven or seventy wonders, but in the answer it gives to a question of yours” (p. 38). Not surprisingly, *Invisible Cities* is one of the most cited works of fiction in academic writing on cities, and this particular

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quote illustrates the mysterious and poetic powers of attraction that cities hold—both as sensuous spectacles where many a wonder may be encountered and as ideal surroundings where intimate and universal questions alike may be explored. Over the past decade, cities have become privileged sites and subject matter for research in media and communication studies. Beyond the immediate appeal of any given city's wonders, scholars from across the discipline have become increasingly interested in cities precisely because a close look at urban life may offer answers to important questions about contemporary communication.

Urban Communication: What It Is and Why It Matters

Cities—and, in more abstract terms, “the urban”—are undoubtedly central to the mediated and nonmediated communication practices that set apart our current times and the everyday lives of many on this planet. From the wide appeal of urban popular cultures and the global resonance of protests in squares to the ubiquity of public screens and locative media in urban space, we often communicate in or about cities. The networks, proximities, creativities, and inequalities that animate cities are at the heart of some of the major debates that sustain our discipline. By the same token, considerations about patterns of communication between individuals and communities, technology and media uses, publicity and promotion, and both aesthetics and representation have become progressively fundamental to an understanding of what cities are and, as a consequence, also to urban planning and policymaking. With the rise of professional practices like city branding and the development of concepts such as “creative cities” and “smart cities” into veritable global formats for urban development and regeneration, research on media and communication has become central to making rather than just studying cities (Aurigi, 2005, 2012; Bell & Oakley, 2015; Pratt, 2011).

Broadly known as *urban communication*, this burgeoning branch of media and communication studies has therefore gained momentum through a series of monographs (e.g., Bull, 2008; Dickinson, 2015; Georgiou, 2013; Macek, 2006; Makagon, 2004; McQuire, 2008), edited books (Burd, Drucker, & Gumpert, 2007; Eckardt et al., 2008; Gibson & Lowes, 2007; Jassem, Drucker, & Burd, 2010; Matsaganis, Gallagher, & Drucker, 2013; Tosoni, Tarantino, & Giaccardi, 2013), and special issues (Gumpert & Drucker, 2008; Ridell & Zeller, 2013; Rodgers, Barnett, & Cochrane, 2009a; Tarantino & Tosoni, 2013; Vuolteenaho, Leurs, & Sumiala, 2015) that have developed some of its key trajectories and findings from the ground up, rather than simply establishing the more or less fictional boundaries of what may be seen as yet another subfield in our discipline.

And although, across publications, attempts have been made to define what urban communication actually is, there is also a widely shared sentiment that no single definition could do justice to the intellectual stakes and procedural aspects that set apart this particular area of inquiry. Scholars working in this area have engaged with a wide variety of academic traditions and conceptual frameworks. As we will see, the scholars who have contributed to this special section tend to draw mainly from the intellectual production of three individual thinkers and one scholarly tradition: James Carey's (1989) ritual model of communication (emphasizing the role that symbolic forms play in drawing people together as part of a community); Roger Silverstone's (1999) conceptualization of media as engrained in the textures of everyday life (highlighting the role of power relations in shaping the process of mediation and therefore

also the meanings that travel across communicative contexts); Henri Lefebvre's (1991) theory of spatial production rooted in the conceptual triad of perceived space, conceived space, and lived space (with a special focus on the importance of both the physical and symbolic dimensions of space, and of their interactions, in shaping a specific social experience of space itself); and, last, the Chicago School's empirical approach to researching the life of cities and urban transformations, particularly in relation to the ecological perspective (thus highlighting the role that media institutions and communication practices play in how different communities within a city may or may not speak to each other; Park, 1915).

Generally speaking, urban communication scholarship is concerned with the ways in which people in cities connect (or do not connect) with others and with their urban environment via symbolic, technological, and/or material means. In trying to understand these broader relationships and dynamics, however, it is necessary to maintain an ecumenical view on the various forms that this kind of scholarship may in fact take. And as we keep observing the growth and outreach of urban communication as an area of inquiry in its own right, we also need to take time to reflect on how we, as media and communication researchers, go about cities. This special section on methods and methodologies for urban communication research breaks new ground. For the first time, several established scholars reflect systematically on how research on urban communication is done, why particular questions matter, and how they and others design their research to examine specific aspects of the relationship between cities and communication.

Why Focus on Methods and Methodologies?

The special section includes seven articles that cover different disciplinary points of view, thus highlighting the complex and multifaceted nature of this body of research. These include documentary (Daniel Makagon and Mary Rachel Gould), audiencing (Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell), material (Greg Dickinson and Giorgia Aiello), visual (Luc Pauwels), mixed-method (Matthew D. Matsaganis), ecological (Stephen Coleman, Nancy Thumim, and Giles Moss), and applied (Susan Drucker and Gary Gumpert) perspectives on urban communication. Naturally, this is not an exhaustive list, nor do we see our endeavor as a comprehensive attempt to map out all of the different ways in which cities can or ought to be studied from a media and communication studies standpoint. Rather, this selection of articles offers a lively discussion of how urban communication research is often done and may be envisioned in the light of growing methodological cross-pollination and interdisciplinary collaboration among scholars who work at the crossroads of communication and the city.

It is not so much that scholars have not written about the specific methods they use or the methodologies that inform their work on and in cities. On the contrary, prominent scholars such as Myria Georgiou and Scott McQuire have promoted the adoption of "street-level" (Georgiou, 2013) and "non-media-centric" (McQuire, 2008) approaches to the study of the nexus of urbanization and mediation. Likewise, research groups such as the one gravitating around the Los Angeles-based Metamorphosis Project led by Sandra Ball-Rokeach (<http://Metamorph.org>) and that originating from the workshop "Mediapolis: Media Practices and the Political Space of Cities" held at the Open University in 2008 (Rodgers, Barnett, & Cochrane, 2009b, 2014) have actively developed cutting-edge theoretical concepts and methodological frameworks to examine both media and communication as central to the structures and practices of contemporary articulations of urbanism.

However, to date there is very little in-depth and openly reflexive writing on the procedural and epistemological dimensions of urban communication research. There is also a seeming divide between those who focus on “media”—ranging from cinematic or televisual representations to social networking and mobile communication—and those whose concerns lie mainly in the relationship between people and the urban built environment or in how different communities interact in urban contexts. In focusing both on methods and methodologies, rather than existing distinctions and potential barriers between key niches of urban communication research, we intend to interrogate the kinds of questions, agendas and conceptual frameworks that shape particular research designs, and highlight the productive nature of reflecting on the uses and implications of particular instruments across disciplinary fields (e.g., focus groups, surveys, and content analysis, but also participant observation, visual essays, or personal narrative). Ultimately, we hope that this discussion will lead to greater opportunities for scholars to merge differing vantage points on both methods and methodologies in the service of groundbreaking analyses on the urban/communication nexus. As the articles in this special section demonstrate, it is substantial critical issues in relation to specific research questions, rather than a priori affiliations, that ought to shape our methodological attitudes toward urban communication.

It is also in this sense that a sustained focus on the methodological—rather than more broadly theoretical or empirical—import of urban communication research is not only a desirable but also, in fact, an urgent endeavor. This is because both communication and cities are inherently heterogeneous, continuously shifting, and often contested. Cities, in particular, do not lend themselves to a direct translation and application of methodological approaches adopted in other more traditional or perhaps more fashionable areas of media and communication studies.

For these reasons, we asked scholars from different disciplinary corners to contribute an article reflecting on their own and others’ key theoretical principles while also outlining the processes, protocols, and practices that they adopt to design and execute research on urban communication. Admittedly, most of the scholars included in the special section had never written a full-length reflexive piece on how they go about conducting their research on cities and the urban. Some are well known for their key contributions to broader methodological debates in relation to approaches such as audio documentary (Makagon & Neumann, 2009), visual sociology (Pauwels, 2015), and communication infrastructure (Matsaganis, Golden, & Scott, 2014). Others have pioneered research on urban space in such fields as rhetorical studies (Dickinson, 1997) and audience studies (Ridell, 2014), or have spearheaded the development of urban communication as an academic community, scholarly endeavor, and field of praxis in its own right (Gumpert & Drucker, 1995). Finally, all have engaged in substantial academic research as well as pedagogical and community work addressing crucial and at times urgent tasks such as, for example, understanding the role of storytelling or news media in promoting a plurality of voices or, otherwise, reproducing patterns of urban equality (see Anderson, Coleman, & Thumim, 2015; Gould, 2013). As editors of this special section, it is also through our own work on communication-driven urban change (Aiello, 2011, 2013) and media-fueled urban conflict (Tosoni & Tarantino, 2013) that we came to the realization that, when researching urban communication, it is not sufficient for us to simply use the tools and forms of knowledge that we have inherited from our broader background in media and communication studies.

To facilitate the special section's shared discussion, we prepared a list of guiding questions foregrounding both the benefits and challenges of key methods and methodologies for urban communication research:

1. What are some of the major approaches that communication scholars have adopted to examine the urban?
2. How do questions, concepts, and instruments rooted in media and communication studies contribute to an enhanced understanding of the symbolic, material, economic, and political significance of cities?
3. What are some of the blind spots that set apart our discipline as well as other disciplines in relation to the urban?
4. Are there key "protocols" and/or "agendas" for urban communication research?
5. What are some of the current and potential conversations across the multiple lenses that characterize urban communication research?

Although no single article here addresses all of these questions, taken as a whole, the special section's contributions cover a wide range of propositions and applications as well as issues and concerns regarding the current state of the field.

The City as Context, the City as Medium, the City as Content

In particular, our selection of contributions coalesces around three different, though interrelated and often overlapping, ways of conceptualizing the city. These are *the city as context*, *the city as medium*, and *the city as content*.

In a first strand of research, scholars approach the city as a context for a range of communication practices, mediated or not, and address how these same practices relate to—and contribute to producing—urban space. In this special section, this perspective is perhaps best exemplified by Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell's article "Decentering Media Studies, Verbing the Audience: Methodological Considerations Concerning People's Uses of Media in Urban Space." In locating their work within a subfield that they call "urban media studies" (and that, before them, the urban geographer Stephen Graham (2004) called "urban new media studies"), Tosoni and Ridell outline some of the major ways in which scholars can tackle the increasingly pervasive mediation that sets apart contemporary cities. In the article, they discuss current scholarship on media uses in urban contexts from a vantage point rooted in Roger Silverstone's (1994) theory of domestication and David Morley's (2009) call for non-media-centric media studies. Following the cultural/audience studies tradition, Tosoni and Ridell consider media activities as integral to the practices and routines that constitute people's (urban) daily lives. In focusing on the key concept of "audience" (and, relatedly, "media users"), they offer a systematic

reflection on the key implications that urban contexts of media engagement have for the current conceptual and methodological development of audience research.

In a similar vein, and through a different methodological lens, Stephen Coleman, Nancy Thumim, and Giles Moss's article "Researching News in a Big City: A Multimethod Approach" examines the city of Leeds in relation to how both individuals and groups relate to one another and to the city itself via mainstream news media, community media, and the everyday circulation of news through local grapevines. In considering the city as an organic interactional arena, Coleman, Thumim, and Moss reject a focus on the digital networks and infrastructures of local news media, insofar as these alone do not tell us enough about actual patterns of urban communication. Instead, they promote a "small-data" approach to collecting and examining evidence from multiple sources, including interviews and surveys, content analysis, and digital research. What emerges from their article, therefore, is also a critical stance on how a multimethod approach may and ought to be designed to capture the richness of a city's "media ecology" in spite of current methodological trends and tendencies to fetishize a single research method or approach.

Not unlike Coleman, Thumim, and Moss, Matthew D. Matsaganis highlights the importance of combining a range of research instruments to achieve a more nuanced understanding of how various city actors communicate with each other in the context of particular urban structures. In "Multi- and Mixed-Methods Approaches to Urban Communication Research: A Synthesis and the Road Ahead," Matsaganis offers a systematic discussion of how mixed-methods research designs, and the truly interdisciplinary skill sets that these require, may radically improve urban communication researchers' ability to understand what types of communicative resources city dwellers need to fully belong, participate, and thrive in their urban communities.

Another strand of urban communication research covered in this special section focuses on the city as a medium of communication in its own right. Here, scholars consider cities and the urban built environment as key forms of mediation, and examine how "the urban" communicates, from a symbolic and visual point of view but also through its materiality and textures, its rhythms, and other "modes" including but not limited to sound and smell. Greg Dickinson and Giorgia Aiello's article "Being Through There Matters: Materiality, Bodies, and Movement in Urban Communication Research" underlines the role that the urban built environment plays in shaping, constraining, and ultimately mediating the everyday lives of urban dwellers. Drawing from the broader field of rhetorical studies, and in conversation with nonrepresentational and affect theories (Massumi, 2002; Thrift, 2008), Dickinson and Aiello reconstruct their research process as "being through there" and, in doing so, also articulate the significance of materiality, bodies, and movement for a full-fledged analysis of the city as a major form of communication.

In line with this conceptualization of the city as a medium, Luc Pauwels' article "Visually Researching and Communicating the City: A Systematic Assessment of Methods and Resources" outlines an array of research methods that can be used to harness the visual features of urban contexts and city life to gain a better understanding of how the city itself communicates through material and digital layers, how it is made and unmade by visible and invisible human behavior, and how the urban past maps onto the present. Specifically, Pauwels' article outlines three different typologies of visual methods—

exploratory, systematic, or participatory in nature—and different ways in which the visual layers of the city can be “translated” into the key academic medium, that is, “the article.” It is in this sense that the city also becomes both scholarly and creative content for a hybrid format such as the visual essay.

Finally, in some cases scholars consider the city as meaningful content for various forms of communication. Through a focus on the stories emerging from cities and those about cities (particularly in relation to economic, political, and social issues), scholarship in this area offers vivid accounts, analyses, and applications of urban communication as concrete praxis. For example, Daniel Makagon and Mary Rachel Gould’s article “Learning the City Through Stories: Audio Documentary as Urban Communication Pedagogy” promotes an original perspective on audio documentary production as a creative and sensorially engaging approach to urban storytelling, community-based education, and experiential learning in the context of Chicago. In emphasizing the status of audio documentary production as a form of urban communication in its own right, Makagon and Gould show how it can be used as a powerful methodological tool to learn about both the mundane and extraordinary aspects of urban life “on the ground.”

Speaking at the intersection of the city as content and the city as context heuristics, Susan Drucker and Gary Gumpert propose a normative approach to the “communicative city,” which they describe and promote as the outcome of particular municipalities’ ability to use communication assets in the service of a healthy and humane urban environment. Their article, “The Communicative City Redux,” discusses the rationale and methodological principles underlying the Urban Communication Foundation’s Communicative City Award, which was recently given to Amsterdam in recognition of this city’s achievements in relation to criteria such as the richness and variety of places of interaction, the adequacy of existing communication infrastructure, and the liveliness of politics and civil society.

Ultimately, each of the different perspectives covered in the special section entails the recognition that cities are not simple backdrops for the communication processes through which people may connect or disconnect in meaningful ways, whether in the context of embodied interaction or through the media. In fact, each of these articles emphasizes the role of cities as fundamental arenas for community-building, civic engagement, and participation in cultural production and social change.

As a whole, the special section’s articles highlight the importance of cities as producers and products of particular practices, interactions, and narratives. It is also in this sense that these articles promote a focus on communication—digital or analogue, media-based or face-to-face—rather than (digital) information. We, of course, recognize the significance of scholarship that examines the role of pervasive computing and, broadly speaking, “the digital” in shaping both the social and physical layers of contemporary cities through the agencies of code and software (Dodge, Kitchin, & Zook, 2009; Kitchin & Dodge, 2011). This approach is of particular relevance to urban media studies, inasmuch as the digital production of space is directly related to key urban practices and processes of mediation. For the purposes of our discussion here, it is nevertheless important to clearly demarcate the conceptual boundaries of urban communication research, stressing the relevance of communication as a human endeavor over other forms of technological mediation and the “automatic” production of the urban (Thrift & French, 2002). This said, we also believe that urban communication scholars and digital geographers can mutually

benefit from sharing their often similar critical concerns and complementary research agendas in relation to the discursively and materially hybrid nature of contemporary cities.

Through the three conceptual heuristics that we have just discussed (the city as context, the city as medium, the city as content), we hope to find—to say it once again with Calvino—some of the answers that cities may give to questions of ours. Taken together, the special section's articles kick-start a collaborative reflection on how urban communication research comes into being and why it matters; in this way, they also contribute to further consolidating this now fundamental area of inquiry within media and communication studies. We also hope that the readers of this special section will use our discussion here to keep reflecting on how media and communication scholars can go about the city: The special section is intended as a springboard for continued work on the key methodological principles, processes, and practices that underlie urban communication as an area of inquiry in its own right. We believe that it is only through systematic debate and ongoing conversations across the various perspectives that inform urban communication research that we can begin to outline some of its major methodological contributions and challenges. As the first collection of its kind, the special section highlights the multifaceted nature of this body of work and foregrounds the multiple ways in which media and communication research can produce groundbreaking empirical knowledge on cities. Even more, the special section shows that research in and on cities may fundamentally change our outlook on media and communication as a whole.

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