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Re-engaging the intersections of media, politics and cities

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Re-engaging the intersections of media, politics and cities

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Robert Park is widely acknowledged as a forbear of urban theory and research. Yet equally, he is recognized as a forebear of media and communication studies. Not only did Park's early career as a journalist lead to some distinctively journalistic influences on the methods and writing genres of early urban sociology (Lindner 1996), but his academic writing spanned work on the urban immigrant press, on the connections of newspaper circulation and urbanizing culture, and notably, on the 'natural' history of the newspaper (Park, 1925). For Park, the newspaper was a kind of ecological emergence, countervailing the complexity of early 20th Century cities, and instilling amongst its readers an awareness of, and interest in, an unprecedented common urban cultural world. As a 'printed diary of the home community' (Park, 1925: 85), the newspaper became a condition of possibility for mobilizing the city as a social-political body.

Park's writing makes for a contrast with contemporary social theory and social science, in which urban studies and media studies are zones of speciality with distinctive theoretical traditions and substantive concerns. Yet when we hear of a contemporary world becoming both increasingly mediated and increasingly urban, there seems a clear need to re-consider the value of Robert Park's pre-disciplinary spirit, rather than presuming a clear-cut distinction between the urban and the media in understanding the constitution of politics.

Re-engaging the intersections of media, politics and cities was the focus of an interdisciplinary workshop held in June 2008 at The Open University in Milton Keynes, entitled *Mediapolis: media practices and the political spaces of cities*. Participants were encouraged to experiment with and rework the longstanding

conceptual differences and disciplinary policing so often setting apart media and urban studies. The workshop generated a wide ranging dialogue on various issues: the urban constitution of media; publicness as a lens for engaging the politics of media and urban spaces; the historical and present-day intersections of journalism and cities; media and cities as enablers of proximate/distant connections; and even some healthy reflection on how media, and newspapers in particular, are so often used in identifying and providing evidence for urban research.

In this Debates and Developments section, we showcase one dimension of this wider dialogue, focusing on the theoretical approaches of urban scholars in considering how cities and media come together around matters of politics. Kevin Ward offers a critical reflection on how media, and in particular newspapers, have been theorized in the ‘New Urban Politics’ literature emerging from the urban political economy tradition. Gary Bridge considers the substantive impacts media have in relation to practices of communicative action in the city. Kurt Iveson’s paper highlights the promise that the concept of ‘public address’ holds for understanding contestations of urban public space without opposing the media and the urban. In the final paper, Scott Rodgers, Clive Barnett and Allan Cochrane argue that an emphasis on media-as-practices offers the potential to avoid the functionalist and effects-oriented conception of media so common in studies of urban politics.

References

Lindner, R. (1996) *The reportage of urban culture: Robert Park and the Chicago School*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Park, R.E. (1925) The natural history of the newspaper. In R.E. Park, E.W. Burgess and R.D. McKenzie (eds.), *The city: suggestions for the investigation of human behavior in the urban environment*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 80-98.

