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Media change, urban publics and urban politics

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Many of the presentations in this workshop will undoubtedly point to a connection between newspaper journalism and the politics of cities. There is something about newspapers, perhaps, when one considers its apparent interest for so many writers in both urban studies and those in media studies concerned with urban politics. Many in the former camp tend to affirm newspaper journalism as a kind of urban political force, or even institution; the latter camp have more often taken newspapers to be a withering political force in cities, whether because of the declining resources and rationalizing tendencies of the newspaper industry, or because of uncertain futures in the face of proliferating new media practices and technologies. There is no doubt good evidence that would support either account. What I would like to do here, however, is offer some thoughts on how media change – as seen through the lens of a particular city newspaper – and its connections to a politics of cities might be understood without necessarily needing to black-box specific media as mediums. Via this one particular example, I would like to outline a contrasting view of media organization and media change: of heterogeneous assembly, constant becoming, and therefore uneven geographies and temporalities. In other words, a practice-led view of organization, whereby media organizations are not opposed to change, but rather are formations constituted *through* change (cf. Cooper, 1986; Linstead and Thanem, 2007).

The development of this line of thinking is closely connected to my PhD research, an ethnographic study of the *Toronto Star* – a major Canadian metropolitan newspaper – and its entanglements in a politics connected to Toronto. The *Toronto Star* was – at least for editorial management, one group focused upon in my study – an organization with deep historical connections to, and impacts upon, the politics and public life of its city (and being Canada's most read newspaper, something of a national political force). At the same time, editors faced a transforming city region, where the time-space constellation of work, family and leisure on which the newspaper had long depended was increasingly becoming ruptured. A growing and spatially dispersed city-region, readers living far-flung, pressed for time, working longer hours, and often making long commutes. Editors worried about two-income families, single-parent families, and later-forming families. They worried about the youth and their apparent disinterest in newspaper reading. And they worried about a city of burgeoning cultural diversity, and the sticky questions this posed around local attachment and language. What is more, this multifaceted, shifting montage of urban life was increasingly seen as engaging a range of newer-news media: drive-to-work and drive home radio, 24-hour news, cable television, free commuter newspapers, magazines, news websites and web blogs. At the *Toronto Star*, editors saw themselves as confronting a differentiated and mobile 'instant news' environment for a city region of increasing diversity and variable mobilities.

Together, these emerging realities made for a threat to the journalistic authority and democratic role most working at the *Toronto Star* presumed vis-à-vis the newspaper's urban publics. And this was, moreover, the main foreground for a series of efforts to align the futures of the *Toronto Star* with those imagined for Toronto as public and media market. I can only gesture here to three examples I will further illuminate in my remarks

at the workshop. The first of these was attending to a sense that audiences, particularly youth, have developed a sophisticated visual acumen and expectation for good design. A major response to this 'magazine sensibility' was a range of different experiments with visual presentation – photography, graphics, innovative page design – that often seized on the techniques as well as the professionals of magazines. Second there was a sense of inevitability about migration to internet-based platforms, despite its apparent problems for the temporal circulation, spatial form and editorial authority traditionally deployed by newspapers. Although initially reluctant, the *Toronto Star* significantly reorganized work flow around its most recent web redesign, using advanced web architecture, extensive photos and video, and RSS feed and tagging compatibilities. Lastly, there have been myriad attempts to organize journalism work so as to make its outputs more likely to align or connect with what might be called the various subjectivities and practices of urban audiences. Of many initiatives, the most notable was a reorganization of the newspaper's City Department along thematic teams, in an attempt to flatten organizational hierarchies and encourage journalists to become more interdisciplinary, visually-minded, and creative.

These examples hopefully at least indicate my claim that media organization is change. I would suggest, in turn, that this points to the need for a broader approach to understanding how the transforming geographies of journalism and news media connect to a politics of cities. This might be comprised by greater attention to at least four areas. First, as I have already noted, media should be considered less in terms of different black-boxed mediums (such as the newspaper) and more so as different time-space articulations of journalism practices and news media organization. Following Schatzki (2002), we might think in terms of the changing *sites* – as in, nexuses of practices and material arrangements – that compose the various relations of journalism and urban spaces. Such material arrangements, secondly, might be understood as not only the changing technologies at-hand for, and physical settings of, journalism work, but also in terms of the arrangements of *news form*. As the exemplary work of Nerone and Barnhurst (Barnhurst and Nerone, 2002; Nerone and Barnhurst, 2001, 2003a, 2003b) has argued, the 'representational environment' of news form (e.g. the classic social diorama offered in newspaper pages) is not merely an outcome of writing or graphic design, but bound up in a variety of *material* relationships, from the organization of journalism work practices to anticipations around how such news artifacts are practically used and understood by different audiences (cf. Scannell, 1996). Third, such sites might furthermore be seen as variably folding in, actualizing, or enacting various forms of circulation (Lee and LiPulma, 2002), such as professional journalism ethics, media business rationalities, and certain ideas about organizational and other histories. This might be seen as a more heuristic version of Pierre Bourdieu's 'fields' (a concept prolifically applied to journalism of late – e.g. Benson and Neveu, 2005) that is better attuned to a relational and geographical imagination (see Couldry, 2007; Cresswell, 2002; Painter, 2000). Finally, and although already hinted at above, central to understanding journalism practices is recognizing its implicit and explicit assumptions about how news is circulated to various social and political bodies that are understood, for example, as (potentially fragmented) audiences, markets, publics, residents, or citizens.

There is of course a far more complex discussion buried in what I have outlined above. But in light of these summative points, I would underline that one important task in apprehending an urban politics is the performance and entanglement of such politics through sites of journalism, and how these sites connect to the formation of media organizations, the circulation of media artifacts, and the addressing of various publics. To return to the starting point of this short paper, it should be clear that, in bringing forth the example of the *Toronto Star*, my intent was not to suggest any sort of special connection between newspapers and urban politics. Rather, my broader suggestion has been that urban studies would be best off neither holding to certain mediums as 'urban

institutions', nor completely fixating on what seem to be the newest and most ground-breaking media practices and technologies. The actualization of various forms of power in relation to cities through media will, as already suggested, be made of uneven geographies and temporalities. I might also end here by stating this in a rather bald and empirical way: the *Toronto Star* is for many a media artifact and organization that is near-synonymous with being in and identifying with Toronto; it is also the primary holding of a media company worth more than CAD\$1 billion. It is quite possible, if not likely, that in the medium- to long-term the changing practices and circulations composing this so-called old media organization will be able to marshal some significant interventions in relation to the city-region treated as its market and public.

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