AEJMC Presentation

“The Material and Social Mediation of Discourse in Urban Spaces”

Urban Communication Foundation Panel

5 – 6:30 p.m. Friday, August 10

Dr. Charles C. Self

University of Oklahoma

It has become clear in recent years that newspapers, once again, appear to have been elbowed aside as the primary source of important information for consumers. It happened with radio, then television, and then cable. Now it’s the Internet and mobile devices. It’s a familiar pattern. Tim Wu points out in his book *The Master Switch* thateach media innovation first claims to empower individuals then turns to profit, consolidation, and dominance.

I mention this because we have been asked to examine communication in the city. And I’ll just say, up front, that I think the answer to the two key questions posed today are all about the sweeping changes in the mediated communication environment driving our understanding—our reading—of the semiotics of the city.

I.

The Internet and mobile media have certainly expanded how we understand **who speaks for cities.** They offer us new voices—alternatives to the daily newspaper’s architectural critic, city planners and political negotiators. They offer us new viewpoints--interactive experiences with the built environment. They offer us new information—architectural and construction details on demand.

But it seems to me that perhaps more importantly they change our relationship with each other and with our built environment. These media change our relationship with urban landscapes. These changes shift away from conceptions of the primacy and stability of place toward the primacy and instability of relationships among urban spaces, media technology, and human beings, part of what Zygmunt Bauman has called “liquid modernity.” Interactive digital maps, sightseeing Web sites, metropolitan online service request sites, and even location based dating apps have changed how people interact with and within urban spaces.

And, most important, they change how we speak about cities and who is involved in the conversation. Just as the gatekeeping functions of news have been expanded to include citizen journalism, the gatekeeping about urban landscapes has become expansive. You could even say the conversation has become more like constant chatter.

II.

The field of urban semiotics has sought to understand human relationships with built environments and the conversations about those relationships. Kevin Lynch long ago “mapped” the paths, nodes, edges, and special elements that make up the “cognitive geography” of our mental maps of urban spaces—the “signs” of the city that give meaning (or signification) to the images we hold of our built environment. But his approach emphasized denotative signs located in the individual and used to guide activity and movement in physical space.

More recently the urban “socio-semiotics” of writers like Roland Barthes, Raymond Ladrut and Alexandros Lagopoulos has emphasized how the meaning of built spaces reflect the social, material, economic, and power relationships of a community. They embody codes of conduct, wealth, and ideology. They show us where we fit in and where we don’t--how we ought to behave.

Bauman offers powerful accounts of such meaning in his book *Liquid Modernity.*

*•* He describes “phagic spaces” designed to envelop strangers into a common purpose: places like shopping malls, those enveloping temples of consumption suspended in time and place where shoppers always “belong” and where they share the values of consumption.

• He describes “emic places” that cast out strangers, those “others” we ban from the larger society into places like prisons and ghettos;

• He describes non-places, places meant to be passed through, devoid of identity and home: places like airports and spaces between buildings.

• He describes empty spaces, leftover spaces devoid of meaning and planning, places like slums and side-yards to planned spaces.

And, increasingly, all these spaces are defined by our interplay with the commoditized media systems built to serve social, economic and technological functions.

Social-semiotics suggests that power and social status speak for these spaces. But in a world of interactive, digital and mobile media, the voices are legion. We all speak. The difficulty is not a dearth of voices, it is being heard, finding the voice of the **city speaking for us.**

III.

Matthew Fuller describes how the plethora of voices emerges from the material interplay and algorithmic proxies of the technologies of the media we use. The communication of the city is mediated through technology. It is mediated by the materiality of the built spaces and by the social relationships embodied in media systems. That materiality is manifest in what Fuller calls the “media ecologies” of the urban environment.

Fuller suggests that media ecologies include how organizations and technologies structure information flow and through it structure our social interactions in public and private spaces. He says media ecologies encompass the ideas of McLuhan, Postman, Ellul and Mumford—the unintended restructuring by the way technologies function. And media ecologies include what Guattari has called the cross-fertilization of the mental, material, and social modes of ecology.

**The City Speaks** through the mental, material and social modes embodied in media. The meaning of the city speaks out of our legion of voices interacting through the multiple media technologies that populate the built spaces we inhabit. And those technologies reflect the interplay of money, power, willfulness, ideology, and social structures, as well as technological necessity, to give voice to the “lifeworld” of the lived experience of the city.

**Thus, in our hyper-mediated environment we all speak. We speak and speak and speak in our millions of voices on television and radio, in newspapers, on the Internet, on our cell phones and iPods and iPads and company newsletters and fan magazines and films and mp3s.**

**And the technology algorithms that search and sort our interests, churn and connect and interact until the city speaks its mediated, networked and interconnected semiotic voice asserting meaning for the complex ecological system of mental, material, and social signs.**