Chapter 5.4

The Urban Communication Infrastructure: Global Connection and Local Detachment

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ABSTRACT

Does Wi-Fi, the Internet, the mobile phone, satellite communication, the I-Pod, flat screen television, wireless devices, Skype, Face Book, Twitter, virtual communities, laptops, Kindle, alter a sense of place and attachment? This area of exploration is absent not only in the areas of urban planning and design, but also other types of places such as schools and even the home where communication technologies are especially varied and proliferate. This chapter will propose a taxonomy of the relationship of people to places in a media rich environment suggesting a continuum ranging from place attachment through a sense of a-location. The taxonomy offers a classification system clarifying the need to examine the impact of media technologies on the people/environment relationship. This reflects not only how people’s use of space and place have changed as a result of the proliferation of laptops and I-phones, but also what this means in terms of how they connect or disconnect with their physical surroundings.

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INTRODUCTION

“The city, the city my Dear Brutus – stick to that 
and live in its full light. Residence elsewhere, as 
I made up my mind in early life, is mere eclipse 
and obscurity to those whose energy is capable 
of shining in Rome.”

—Marcus Tullius Cicero

The introduction of innovation is associated with 
sense of apprehension and uncertainty. In the 
15th century uncertainty surrounded the impact 
of moveable type upon the nature of knowledge 
and worship. Each new medium is perceived by 
some as a threat to the more traditional political, 
religious, economic and media institutions. Si-
multaneously, each new media invention altered 
the form and function of cities and communities. 
Cities function as a medium of communication in 
so far that messages are carried through communi-
cation in those spaces. These spaces are arguably 
among the oldest forms of communication and 
media. Yet cities have fallen on hard times. The 
detrimental impact of suburban sprawl can be seen 
on the economic, environmental and vibrancy of 
social life in cities. Cities struggle with the rise 
of privatization of formerly public spaces includ-
ing streets and parks; increasing surveillance, the 
demise of public space, decreasing tax base along 
with aging infrastructure, the loss of the small 
shop, the rise of the mall, and increasing fear of 
life on the street. Harold Innis saw a continual 
process of decentralization and recentralization 
with small communities trying to outrun metro-
politan influences only to be absorbed back into 
it later (Carey, 1992, p. 155). Digital media arise 
at a critical time for cities. In 1900, only 10% of 
the human population lived in cities, while today 
it’s 50%. Added to that the expectation that it will 
reach 75% by 2050, and there’s just cause for a 
thorough reevaluation of our urban environments.

URBAN COMMUNICATION

The city as an economic, social, and iconic symbol 
of national prosperity has been and continues to 
be under scrutiny by economists, geographers, 
sociologists, urbanists, planners and environmen-
tal psychologists. Traditionally, cities have been 
viewed as financial, commercial, and industrials 
entities. There is, however, a growing body of 
 scholarship examining urban, suburban, and 
rural communication. This work reflects both 
an emergent and interdisciplinary field. The 
advantage of this perspective is that it provides 
a fresh perspective from which to view the city 
and its transformation. The communication per-
spective provides a parallax or different way of 
observing and analyzing the urban environment. 
Foregrounding communication in the study of 
urban landscapes is not revolutionary given that 
the essence of the city is community, a relation-
to communication underscored by the etymology 
of the words.

Communication studies offer valuable perspec-
tives and methodologies for the examination of 
the urban and suburban life conceptualizing the 
city as a combinative environment of interpersonal 
interaction, media landscape of spaces, places and 
communication texts. Communication scholars 
have addressed how the understanding of urban 
and suburban life are reflected in and shaped by 
media coverage or representations in factual or 
fictional contexts. Some have turned to the close 
analysis of media texts to learn about urban and 
suburban life.

Two volumes, in particular, The Urban Com-
unication Reader (Burd et al, 2007) and Urban 
Communication: Production, Text, Context 
(Gibson & Lowes, 2006) typify the direction of 
the communication perspective. The Urban Com-
munication Reader represents research in rhetoric, 
media studies, political communication, health 
communication, organizational communication, 
legal communication, visual communication, 
conflict resolution, and cultural studies. The