

## **The Routledge Companion to Urban Media and Communication**

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## **The Routledge Companion to Urban Media and Communication**

ZLATAN KRAJINA and DEBORAH STEVENSON (eds.), 2020

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Definitions of urban media studies remain imprecise. There is no one consensus on what this burgeoning field encompasses. Perhaps, then, the definition is more about its interdisciplinary nature, with academics from a range of fields converging to discuss the role of urban space, and of the city, in a media context. From geography and sociology, to art and performance, to film and media, to politics and urban planning, to history, psychology and sociology, urban media studies is broad, sprawling, and growing. Stephen Graham, in 2004, used the phrase urban new media studies as a means to describe how it was to an urban context that we increasingly needed to look in order to understand the development, use, and impact of new media. After all, the process of urbanisation merely seems to be accelerating as the twenty-first century progresses. Graham's may be one of the first uses of the term that explicitly linked the urban space to the study of media and communications technology. But since then, the concept of urban media has widened to comprise media old and new, broadly defined, but to include an understanding that media is an increasingly central focal point in our lives, both the way we live in the city, how we interact in the city, right down to how we understand cities and our place within them. And academics from a range of disciplines have influenced a varied approach and an array of methods to the study of urban media, many of whom have contributed to *The Routledge Companion to Urban Media and Communication*. It is an impressive and comprehensive edited collection that serves both as an introduction to the study of urban media, as well as advancing new ideas and perspectives on both established

topics as well as flourishing areas of research. In short, it is an important account of the state of urban media some sixteen years after Graham's pronouncement of the term.

The sheer scope of the collection is overwhelming, in a good way. Split into four parts, each with introductions, and featuring a total of forty-four chapters, the book covers every aspect of urban media studies that will appeal to scholars from whatever discipline they specialise in (within reason). I only wish I had time to discuss each of the insightful and thoroughly researched chapters, but there simply isn't the space in this review. Instead, I want to highlight some of the key features and highlights, as well as discuss the editors' vision for the collection. Because what Zlatan Krajina and Deborah Stevenson have attempted with this book is to work towards a definition in a bid to overcome the imprecise nature of urban media studies. And while they may not be entirely successful (the collection is just far too wieldy for a *precise* definition), they, and the contributors, certainly raise fundamental questions and debates. Perhaps most important, Krajina and Stevenson make it clear that what is really the focal point of urban media studies is the city: 'Cities are from the start imagined as much as they are materially constructed, and they only ever make sense to us through communicative practices' (p. 1). The editors tasked their contributors with addressing the full disciplinary range of urban media studies, the breadth of its methodological toolkit, the need to fully historicise the objects of study, and to debate how 'culture becomes integral, space definitional, representation inescapable and technology functional in the specific form of urban media and communication they studied' (p. 3). The editors see the urban experience as a fundamental condition of the contemporary human existence, an experience that is mediated and expressed via a myriad of forms. As they state, 'cities have never been only about buildings and media have never been only about symbolic transaction [...] the parallel study of cities and media/communication offers unique ways for deeper understanding of each other' (p. 9).

Part One, 'Trajectories of Mediated Urbanity', lays out the origins and developments in the study of the urban/city-media symbiosis, 'as well as highlighting phenomena particular to urban media and communication' (p. 9). The twelve chapters cover a host of topics, from an archaeology of the media city, in which Scott McQuire argues that the media city should not be narrowly contextualised within a digital media framework. McQuire suggests that there is a tendency for an 'historical amnesia' in the study of the media city, and instead we need to 'establish a frame for thinking of the problematic of mediated urbanism as an ongoing process resulting in the production of new relations between urban structures, media infrastructures, and individual and collective social life, including subjectivities and cultural forms' (p. 14). The problem in this historical amnesia is that we may assume that the 'smart city' is a desirable progression from earlier, primitive forms of the city. Making this assumption can lead to a 'largely vendor-driven agenda that seems unlikely to support a rich and diverse social life in a future of intensively, if unevenly, mediated urbanism' (p. 14). Other chapters in the section consider the range of media cultures that thrive in a city (from photography and public advertising, to the increasing multiplicity of urban screens), or the way the city has been represented in film and television, all of which work towards understanding the formation of urban space and place. And time and again, the concept of the *flâneur* recurs throughout the chapters, culminating with a discussion of the urban stranger by Myria Georgiou and Jun Yu, a figure that is seen to encapsulate the 'cultural, social, and geographical origins and trajectories' of the urban space' (p. 120).

Part Two, 'Media as Urban Infrastructure; City Spaces as Media', and Part Three, 'Media Cities as Sites of Creative Industries and Post-Industrial Urbanism', to some degree cover similar territory, including issues of communications technology, media industries and the creative economy, cultural management and policy, and the regeneration of urban space in the post-industrial city. Current debates about surveillance and the smart city are also

discussed, as too are chapters that challenge the new media metaphor of the information city as a computer, including that by Shannon Mattern. The city as computer metaphor is misleading, with the city, including in classical civilization, always acting as a 'communicative space, rich in information' (p. 135). Ranging from libraries and archives, to museums and galleries, the city is 'where urban intelligence is generated, organized, preserved, distributed, and activated' (p. 134).

Part Four, 'Spaces and Practices of Daily Life in Mediated Cities', considers the quotidian practices of urban living – the lived experiences of you and me – but also the role of the city as a site of resistance and protest. Chapters include discussions of activism, sexual politics, urban art, and community media. But the chapters are not limited to an urban sociology context, but are designed to demonstrate how 'a considerable proportion of urban everyday life is linked with media practices in particular' (p. 367). The chapters consider the embodied experience of urban living, and the 'daily uses of media in navigation and negotiation of urban space' (p. 367), all towards arguing that the urban space is not merely a predetermined built environment, but one that is mediated and open to critique. As Tina Richardson suggests, 'Urban space is a mediated space that enables a form of reflexivity to take place when the individual engages with it in a critical way' (p. 406).

The collection provides an excellent insight into the key themes of urban media, with the chapters serving both as comprehensive literature reviews of their particular topic, as well as providing detailed reading lists and sources for further consultation. There is also a commendable final chapter that outlines the methodological toolkit available to the urban media studies scholar. And while at times it can feel like authors are repeating accounts of their own research, many are illuminating pieces of work that synthesise debates and begin to point towards new critical directions. In all, Krajina and Stevenson are to be lauded in their editorial efforts for bringing together this field defining work. One final point must be made

about the extortionate price of the collection, a continuing feature of the *Routledge Companion* series that makes such an important work inaccessible to some.

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