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### Rethinking Communication After the Mobilities Turn

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## INTRODUCTION

# Rethinking Communication After the Mobilities Turn

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Much recent research in the field of communication has focused on mobile communication, including studies of the diffusion, uses, and social implications of mobile phones, mobile gaming, and mobile social media (Katz, 2008; Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Kavoori & Arceneaux, 2006). The works presented in this special issue of *The Communication Review*, however, address a different set of questions about communication and mobility by starting from a different place. These articles are concerned with the production of social space, asking how social space itself is constituted through practices that include, but are not reducible to, mobility, communication, and mobile communication. This approach differs from traditional understandings of the field of communication on several fronts.

First, by situating questions of communication within a more general analysis of the production of social space, this work attempts to counteract a media-centric conceptualization of the social that has characterized much communication research. Such a conceptualization is evident when we frame research as “the effects of television on children,” “the ways in which Facebook is changing social networking,” or “the impact of mobile phones on everyday life,” for example. As Patrick D. Murphy (2005) argued, if our aim is to understand the significance of media and communication technologies in social, economic, and cultural life, we should not begin by placing those technologies at the center of analysis, which in effect answers the question in advance. In place of a media-centric approach, the work presented here situates communication technologies and discursive practices within a broader social field that includes the social relations of production and reproduction, social networks and interactions, the circulation of capital,

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the mobilization and immobilization of bodies, the movement of commodities and other materials, the development and regulation of infrastructures of transport, the installation of regimes of surveillance and control, and the reorganization of public and private spaces. When the production of social space is understood in terms of these more general social, economic, and political processes, it is clear that communication plays a strategic, but not exclusive, role in constituting the social world.

Second, as an alternative to the traditional understanding of communication as signification, representation, and the transmission of messages and meanings, the work collected here builds on an older understanding of communication as the overcoming of barriers in order to facilitate the movement and interaction of people, goods, and culture. Communication, in this sense, is not only about the transmission of messages and meanings; it is concerned with the production of *the common* via articulations, networkings, territorializations, surveillances, mobilizations, and immobilizations. To put it another way, these articles are concerned not only with the ways in which discourses and cultural practices produce imagined communities (Anderson, 1991), but also with the ways in which social formations, institutions, infrastructures of communication and transport, policies, and regimes of power and force both enable and simultaneously regulate the circulation of bodies, materials, information, and money. This is communication as culture (Carey, 1988), if by *culture* we mean the production of a common time/space through the organization of transport, mobility, and shared discourse—culture as a “map of space that [is] also a map of probable movement” (Carey, 1997, p. 322).

Third, the articles included in this special issue build on recent work calling for a reconceptualization of social space itself after the “mobilities turn” in social theory (Adey, 2006; Cresswell, 2006; Hannam, Sheller, & Urry, 2006; Larsen, Axhausen, & Urry, 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006). The mobilities turn may have been catalyzed by the growing awareness of the importance of migration, business travel, tourism, and other forms of geographical mobility, as well as by critical reflections on the more recent diffusion of mobile devices on a global scale. However, building on earlier critiques of anthropology (Clifford, 1992; Marcus, 1995), recent work in the mobilities paradigm has now gone much further, calling for a wholesale rethinking of modern theories of society, culture, and place, along with the development of new methods for mapping the contours and flows that are constitutive of place and space.

Once we take mobility into account as a fundamental feature of human life (and indeed, nonhuman life), we can no longer accept the sedentary assumption (Cresswell, 2002) that culture, identity, belonging, and agency are anchored in a single place (Clifford, 1992; Nowicka, 2007; Sinclair & Cunningham, 2000; Urry, 2000). This is not only a historical shift caused by greater mobility; it is a rethinking of place and space from the standpoint of connectivity and flow. From this perspective, places may be understood not

as geographical sites or even socially constructed locales, but as dynamic productions or performances—practices of temporary territorialization that construct an inside or home that may have nothing to do with permanence or stasis (see Clifford; Morley, 2000; Wise, 2000). And, even when people do have a strong connection to a place or territory, there are multiple ways of belonging to, depending on, and identifying with that place, according to the history and current conditions of one's mobility or immobility. One's connection to place or territory may be voluntary or coerced, consciously chosen or taken for granted, based on economic exigency or economic mobility, for example. When we understand place as a spatiotemporal territorialization enacted within relations of (im)mobility and power, we can also begin to see how such performances are structured by racial, gendered, and class-based differentiations (and identifications) in which unequal power relations are relied upon to negotiate the temporal and spatial demands of capitalism, patriarchy, and other structures of inequality (Sharma, 2008).

In short, the articles collected in this special issue offer ways to rethink the production of social space in light of the recent mobilities turn, to rethink the role of communication in the production of social space, and to rethink the place of media and messages within a broader understanding of communication. Each of the four articles develops that line of thought in a different way.

Mimi Sheller's contribution to this issue, "Air Mobilities on the U.S.–Caribbean Border: Open Skies and Closed Gates," exemplifies this approach. To grasp the logics that are reshaping Caribbean space and the U.S.–Caribbean border as a contested boundary zone, she analyzes the complex articulations of financial flows, technologies and infrastructures of air travel, discursive constructions of the region, practices of both mobility and immobilization, the regulation of migration and borders, the surveillance and securitization of checkpoints, and the increasing militarization of airspace. The Caribbean is undergoing a respatialization, she argues, as rhetorics of mobility and financial openness, differential immigration policy, and border security practices, among other elements, legitimize and enable the mobility of some while subjecting others to increased surveillance and containment. Information and communication flows play a key role, in both the construction of the Caribbean as an imagined paradise for tourists and offshore bankers, on the one hand, and the surveillance of subjects and control of mobilities, on the other. Sheller's analysis illuminates the technologies, practices, and logics of power that constitute the Caribbean as a region, illustrating how the mobilities turn in social theory repositions communication as a strategic component of the production of social space.

John Sloop and Joshua Gunn take up a different set of questions about social space in their article, "Status Control: An Admonition Concerning the Publicized Privacy of Social Networking." As social networking Web sites and mobile technologies proliferate, they ask, how is social space reorganized

around new logics of public and private, of exposure and surveillance? How do networked subjects rely on older understandings of private space as the space of the domestic (epitomized by the notion of the closed door), even as they share intimate images and texts via social media, engaging in what the authors call “public intimacy”?

Sloop and Gunn build on Raymond Williams’ (1974) influential analysis of mobile privatization, updating that analysis and demonstrating how a particular arrangement of the public and private, long associated with television and the home, is being rearticulated around new mobile technologies and practices of social networking. The new communication and information landscape, with its technologies of networking, mobile communication, surveillance, data capture, profiling, geographical positioning, and passkey access, is interpreted by many as evidence of an emergent regime of power based on logics of control (Deleuze, 1995; Packer, 2008). As Sloop and Gunn argue, however, disciplinary logics (Foucault, 1995) continue to operate, enabled by new social networking technologies, practices, and ideologies that promise freedom even as they enable surveillance and discipline. Social space, from this perspective, is constituted at the intersection of shifting logics of power and evolving practices of communication, both of which operate in the context of a move toward technologies for mobile, networked interaction.

In “From Windscreen to Widescreen: Screening Technologies and Mobile Communication,” Packer and Oswald offer a generalized theory for understanding mobile media. They develop the concept of *screening technologies* as a way of building upon Williams’ (1974) notion of mobile privatization while acknowledging that the age of analog broadcast television (Williams’ specific concern) has clearly passed. For Packer and Oswald, screening technologies simultaneously encompass personal viewing technologies and practices of socially screening persons through such technologies to manage conduct. They suggest that with the transfer to digital media, greater storage and access, interactivity, mobility, control, informationalization, and extensive convergence and translation, screening technologies become an increasingly pervasive part of our everyday lives. They provide a history of the integration of communication technologies and automobiles that serves as a means for establishing how screening technologies have come into being and how they work to reorient analog screens corresponding to a model of disciplinary power with digital screens that create malleable forms of social control. Their analysis thus demonstrates how logics of power operate through technologies of transport and communication to organize specific historical formations of social space.

In the final article of this special issue, “Assembling Social Space,” Steve Wiley, Daniel Sutko, and Tabita Moreno ask what happens when Lefebvre’s classic analysis of the production of space, which Lefebvre thought of as occurring “in a given society” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33, 182, 215), is rethought

in the context of globalization and mobility. They offer a conceptual model of social space that draws on mobility studies, social network theory, media ecology analysis, and assemblage theory. Arguing that grand theories of mobility, networking, and spatial reorganization need to be tested through more concrete historical analysis and empirical fieldwork, they offer a new approach to the ethnography of social space and place, proposing a “hydrological” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 397) analysis as a research strategy that is adequate to the current context of mobility and global connectivity. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, activity journals, and interviews conducted in Concepción, Chile, they present three case studies that illustrate different practices of geographical mobility and emplacement, different social networks, different media ecologies, different modes of articulation to the translocal, and different experiences of place and space. Working outward from the case studies, they follow the flows to identify and map four assemblages operating in the everyday lives of the three individuals. By analyzing the topology and the logics of those assemblages, Deleuze and Guattari argue, we can illuminate the ways in which local and translocal materials, bodies, and discourses constitute social spaces and subjects. The analysis allows us to observe how different social spaces are produced, with different subject positionings and different logics of articulation linking the local and the translocal.

The articles offered here do not derive from a single theoretical or methodological framework, and as editors of this collection we do not claim to have outlined a new program of research on communication, mobility, and social space. We do hope, however, that the work presented in this special issue, “Communication and Mobility,” will spark a new conversation, or perhaps a new line of thought within an existing conversation (for we aren’t the first to arrive at the party). We also hope that readers of *The Communication Review* will take an interest in the mobilities turn that inspires these articles, a turn in the conversation that we believe will lead to productive new ways of thinking about communication.

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