Title: Spatialising social media debates: urban sociability and shifting sites of publicness

Bio: Dr. Wendy Willems is a Lecturer in Media, Communication and Development in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), UK (w.willems@lse.ac.uk).

Abstract

New media have either been conceptualised as technologies of freedom crucial in the mobilisation of demonstrations and protests globally or as 'middle class fads'. The role of social media in political change became particularly contested in the context of the protests part of the so-called 'Arab Spring'. What often marked these debates was the alternate focus of analysts on either physical space as sites of protest, as represented by Tahrir Square, or an emphasis on virtual space, epitomised by Facebook debates and Twitter hashtags. The artificial separation between physical and virtual space in analyses has masked the connections and movements between different spaces and has failed to appreciate the fluid shifts between different sites of publicness. Furthermore, it has underplayed the processes through which certain spaces – whether physical or virtual – are claimed and constituted *as* public and the way in which others lose their publicness as a result of private, commercial, or state claims on these spaces.

This paper interrogates these questions by examining urban sociability in the context of Zambia's 2011 hotly contested general elections. While public spaces - such as bus stops, public transport, market stalls and tuckshops – are normally important sites of political debate in Zambian urban locations such as Lusaka, the growing tensions following the announcement of the election results turned streets into spaces of unsociability due to self-imposed restrictions on physical mobility. This coincided with a court injunction on commercial media which were accused of publishing "speculative stories" on the election results. The information black-out led middle-class Zambians to resort to their internet-enabled mobile phones for updates on the elections on social media. The Facebook page of the commercial television station Muvi TV came to constitute an important, lively public space where Zambians actively discussed the elections. Drawing on an analysis of Muvi TV's Facebook page coupled with participant observation and interviews in an up-market shopping mall and an informal market in Lusaka, I argue that a more location-aware understanding of social media debates enables us to link conventionally detached arguments on public space (which

have situated urban sociability within concrete urban spaces) and public sphere (which have focused on political debates but have often remained insufficiently 'spatialised').

Title: Protest Parks: Digital Activism and the Public Leisure Sphere

Bio: Payal Arora is Assistant Professor in the Department of Media and Communication. Faculty of History, Culture and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands (arora@eshcc.eur.nl / Website: www.payalarora.com).

Abstract

This paper situates current conversations about political mobilization via social media into dialogue with the historical analysis of public parks as protest spaces. Public parks were, in a similar fashion, designed for leisure and sociality but were often appropriated as sites of resistance. Hence, 'protest parks' serve as a metaphor for contemporary digital networks of activism. Comparing these urban parks to digital networks can better explain the relationship between virtual and material public space and their role in political movements. It is worth examining why certain public leisure spaces attract political action while others do not. Also, this paper investigates the range of mediations that enable the transformation of these seemingly innocuous spaces into places of activism. The argument is illustrated by comparing the social architecture of and political enactments within urban parks and squares in the United States, United Kingdom and China with cyber-protests within their contemporary digital networks. It becomes clear how material and virtual leisure platforms have evoked similar reactions: Some are enthusiastic about these platforms, which are seen as a significant expansion of democracy into public space. Others, however, take a more dismal view of the platforms as prime spaces to disarm and manipulate the masses through their seemingly unregulated leisure character. In analyzing events and movements that started within urban park locales across these nations, this paper reveals how politics and leisure are historically and dialectically tied. In focusing on the range of social movements across park and digital geographies, we discover that protests do not so much detract from the park's primary leisure purpose but often are deliberate products of such infrastructures. Further, depending on the regulatory mechanisms of these urban parks, we see protest taking on more creative, play-like forms of expression, creating new rituals of communication between citizens and the state. Finally, we see a plurality of democracies emerge through the complex interplay of the public- private nature of leisure space and political action. By drawing parallels between the historic use of public parks and squares in the city, and the use of certain forms of digital networks like Twitter and Facebook, we can gain a more integrated and critical understanding

of the novelty of these spaces. Overall, we consider how virtual leisure territories serve as centers of democracy and sites of protest.

Title: The Right to the Citi(zen): social media sites and the transformation of urban space

Bio: Stina Bengtsson is Associate Professor in Media and Communication Studies at Södertörn University, Stockholm, Sweden (stina.bengtsson@sh.se).

Abstract

Following the publication of the pamphlet *The right to the city* (Lefebvre 1968) a vivid debate about neoliberal take over of urban spaces has emerged. This debate has primarily revolved around urban activism and civic engagement, putting forward an urge for resistance to structural and organizational restraints that commercial culture has laid on city inhabitants. According to Lefebvre, these restrains involved in the transformation and expansion of urban space force underprivileged groups away from the land they have appropriated and inhabit, and transform the basics for urban life, something the working classes must stand together against.

During the last ten years we have however seen a continuous expansion of urban space via social networking sites, and today most public institutions (as well as commercial organizations) in Western states use social networking sites to communicate with their 'citizens'. In this presentation I will address the discussion following *The right to the city* by way of an analysis of a public institution vainly trying to establish communication with its 'citizens' in an urban space in a virtual world: the virtual city of Malmö, *Malmo in Second Life* (2009-2010), a project to enhance civic engagement and to improve the city's communication with its citizens. Many different kinds of materials have been used in the analysis; interviews with producers as well as interviews and more informal chats with (Swedish) users in *Second Life*, web based- and mass media material, written documents, and a spatial analysis of the virtual city itself.

I argue that the users of the online urban space that the city administration met did not regard themselves as citizens when dwelling in this online environment, but were addressed as and thus behaved like, consumers. The reason for this is triple; due to the spatial character of the virtual world, due to the commercial character of the virtual world, and due to the different ways the city administration and the users articulated the virtual space. I argue that this came from a lack of shared articulations about the virtual island as (public) place, resulting in a lack of common motivation to cooperate in developing it. Digital media not only offers public actors possibilities to expand urban space in new exiting environments, it also

transforms the basis for whom we become and how we act in urban spaces and thus transforms the possibilities of the public actors to communicate with citizens.

Title: The social mediatization of public parks in the city and new ways of seeing (and shaping?) the public good

Bio: Erin Despard is a FQRSC postdoctoral fellow in the School of Geographical and Earth Sciences at the University of Glasgow, UK (Erin.Despard@glasgow.ac.uk).

Abstract

In the city, designed landscapes such as public parks serve as sites for activities that enable the ongoing negotiation of how people live together. Despite the democratic connotations of their designation as 'public', they shape this negotiation in ways that are informed by political interests: signifying the importance of particular aesthetic and environmental values, facilitating certain activities while discouraging others, beautifying government buildings, celebrating historic landmarks and so on. The visibility of this kind of political work, and its role in constituting particular publics and public goods, is enhanced in cases where 'park life' is mediated by online cultural programming.

I investigate the relationship between urban parks and visual social media as a means of complicating notions of 'use' and 'reception' as categories for understanding engagement with public designed landscapes. Taking the new (and thoroughly mediated) Grand Park in Los Angeles as my case, I am interested in the possibility that new ways of seeing public places may be emerging between visual social media and parks designed to rehabilitate problematic urban areas. In both cases, there seems to be an ongoing renegotiation of how social life is inflected with aesthetic value. Grand Park provides a scenic/photogenic setting for 'desirable' social and cultural activities, while also reducing the visibility of certain social problems by being inhospitable to the activities that bring them into view (crime, drug use, political demonstrations and sleeping outdoors). Photographs of the park circulated in self-consciously social contexts and seem to work differently than those presented as part of an aesthetic practice—including not only representational but performative uses suggesting a changing social and cultural importance of public places.

I will draw on examples from an ongoing analysis of Grand Park photographs collected by Instagram to sketch the outlines of what I view as the changing public 'good' as realized in urban parks. The role of visual social media in Grand Park's cultural programming makes a reciprocal influence between landscape form and media use impossible to ignore, and suggests that 'the public'—as both consumers and producers of media—have, if indirectly, a greater influence on landscape form. Of course, if this relationship is to realize its full

democratic potential, the reverse would also have to be true: people would have a role in determining landscape use (and, for that matter, media form). At Grand Park, it is not at all clear that this is the case.

Title: User-generated city

Bio: Aaron M. Shapiro is a doctoral student at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, USA (ashapiro@asc.upenn.edu).

Abstract

Participation has come to the fore as model for production. Emanating from discourses around new media technologies, specifically Web 2.0 and platforms for user- generated content, the cultural and political dynamics of participation are pitted against rigid, formal technologies of mass media and communication, promising a near-revolutionary upending of the traditional distributions of agency and power. A similar "participatory turn" can be observed in urban design and planning, influencing how the material world of urban space can be represented, planned, and actualized. This movement, however, attends the creeping privatization of public space and the entrepreneurialization of urban governance globally. Participation comes as a response to the renewed interest in urban public space's value generating capacity for the "citadels" (Marcuse, 1997) of consumer-oriented cities. Its proponents tout participatory design models as "user-centered," democratizing, and inclusive against a backdrop of the exclusionary, expert-driven traditional models for urban planning – a juxtaposition that mirrors that of new and traditional media. While it portends a politics of inclusion, the many contradictions of urban design's participatory turn remain under explored.

In part, this results from the fact that most accounts of urban design's participatory turn have failed to acknowledge the influence of new media's social logics. This paper aims to fill this lacuna by grappling not just with new technologies' usage in urban space, but with the social logics that attend the economies of participation in online contexts. Focusing on the often contradictory social logics of new media provides critical contextualization to the participatory turn in urban design. The paper first characterizes two key points where this migration takes place, flexibility and convergence, with attention to how these concepts are transmuted into models for urban design. It then moves to a discussion that frames participation as a form of "governance" that impacts cultural expressivity, political efficacy, and subjectivity. Followed by a detailed analysis of a specific public space, The Porch at 30th Street Station in Philadelphia, PA, which has been touted "one of the first truly user-designed spaces in the country." This analysis borrows Van Dijck & Poell's (2013) four-pronged rubric for understanding "social media logic" and applies it to the report on The Porch's design model and theory. It argues that the concept of the user-generated city, while imagined to

upend distributions of power and agency, ultimately falls short of its promise to erode the traditional hierarchies between "authors" and "users" of urban space.