Urban and Suburban Communication in the Digital Age

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Can community be sustained in the 21st century without dependency on global media connections? To what degree does our contemporary vision of community depend on communication? How much can a community depend upon external connections and remain an identifiable community? Paul Goldberger, the former architectural critic of *The New York Times,* has described the urban impulse as "an impulse toward community — an impulse toward being together, and toward accepting the idea that however different we may be, something unites us" (Goldberger, p. 3).

The World Charter on the Right to the City, a document developed by a range of social movements, municipalities, national governments, universities and non-governmental organizations, was proposed in 2004. It is an instrument invented in order to recognize the ideal characteristics of a city, those that make a city more human, more sustainable and more democratic. This instrument helps to accomplish these goals by identifying those rights that complement and extend the exercise of city-dwellers' classic individual human rights. The charter calls for these rights to be recognized as part of the international human rights system, and is being used by UN-HABITAT and UNESCO to launch an international debate about these issues.

The charter predicted that by 2005, urbanization would have reached 65 percent. This means that the conditions of people living in cities with regard to physical, economic and social needs are becoming an ever more critical concern in terms of quality of life around the world. Demographic trends also reflect a move toward suburbanization, a process begun on Long Island. The combination of the physical and virtual technologies of transportation and communication define cities, suburbs and rural areas, and the relationship between them. The city has many faces: some contemporary and some historical. We are not neutral about whether an environment is urban, suburban or rural because we live, work, go to school, shop and play in these linked environments. These landscapes are the sites of social interaction once thought to be essential to our social well-being. But these landscapes have also been fundamentally altered by two major developments: transportation and communication — both of which have radically altered our "geography of place."

The study of urban communication begins with the notion that cities are inherently places and products of communication, and they provide meeting spaces for interaction and/or observation. However, urban America and suburbia are facing a critical time. Communication technologies alter the relationship between city and individual. In addition to traditional face-to-face communication, the urban communication environment includes: regional and local media, the ethnic press, the global media, and the media technologies that provide security through surveillance, such as closed-circuit television (CCTV) surveillance cameras, microphones and even webcams. Images of the city in journalism and popular culture abound in music, films, television and advertising. Cell phone towers, broadband and Wi-Fi rollout challenge public and private policy makers who seek to find ways to maintain, update and improve cities by integrating the latest technologies. Major initiatives that rely on media technologies to make urban streets safe and rejuvenate city centers are taking place throughout the country. These programs are reflected in the widespread introduction of Internet protocol (IP) networked closed-circuit television (CCTV) camera systems like those installed throughout Chicago, and free wireless Internet access in urban public places, as evidenced by a project being undertaken in Philadelphia. The Executive Committee of Wireless

Philadelphia describes the initiative as a project that "aims to strengthen the city's economy and transform Philadelphia's neighborhoods by providing wireless Internet access throughout the city. Wireless Philadelphia will work to create a digital infrastructure for open-air Internet access and to help citizens, businesses, schools, and community organizations make effective use of this technology to achieve their goals while providing a greater experience for visitors to the city" (Wireless Philadelphia Mission Statement, 2005).

The study of urban communication around the world has spawned new research and curriculum development and a new foundation to promote and support this work. In the Media Studies program at Hofstra University, a special topics course titled "Media and Urban Communication" has been offered. The author is a founding board member of the newly formed Urban Communication Foundation, which was established with the recognition that urban centers and suburbia (intimately connected) are facing a critical time, and that communication scholars have much to contribute to this issue. The fundamental questions being asked are:

1) What can communication research and theory provide in order to better understand and design vibrant urban centers?

2) Should city planning and media planning be linked and coordinated?

3) What can communication experts contribute?

4) What is the role of journalism in maintaining a community?

There was a time when newspaper coverage and the city were synonymous. All else was peripheral. There was a time when radio and television were primarily local and served to define place, particularly important from a regulatory perspective. There was a time when local broadcast coverage and the city

Millennium Park, Chicago, November 2004. *Photo by Susan Drucker.*

were synonymous. In terms of radio and television, the de-emphasis of locality can be traced to the rise of clear channel stations and super stations, cable and then satellite. As we gained the ability to communicate over broader and broader areas, local became regional, local was removed from place, and some local went global. Now we speak of things "glocal."

There was also a time when the telephone defined community —

defined by operators, party lines, the name of a person or a business's telephone exchange and later by the area code and dialing prefix. We are now in the process of "de-locationizing" the telephone — triggered by the rise in use of the mobile phone. This is due to the mobile phone operating from "nowhere." There was a time when the regulation of broadcasting was based on geography and the public interest of a community. But was there ever a time

when cities were recognized as central to communication and journalism studies, structured programs that can provide relevant expertise?

The state of community in the city and suburb is a precarious one, as it faces serious challenges from a number of internal and external sources:

1) **Corporatization**
2) **Immigration**
3) **Balkanization**
4) **Gentrification**
5) **Communication technologies**

Communication technology has been the product of careful economic planning; however, its accelerated rate of invention over the past few decades and its integration into the fabric of consciousness has been so gradual as to appear seamless. We are so immersed in a technological world that it has become virtually (in the old sense of the word – almost or nearly) impossible to examine ourselves and the transformation of self and city and suburb by increments in the advancement of communication technology.

Innovation is often linked to a sense of apprehension and uncertainty. In the 15th century, uncertainty surrounded the introduction of moveable type and altered the way we communicate knowledge, which in effect altered our views regarding worship. Printing put the Bible into the hands of all people; it was no longer a luxury item for the few, and is evidenced by the rise of Protestantism, with its doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers." The invention of television as a mass form of entertainment and news was seen by some critics as a threat to the

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more traditional forms of performance and news dissemination – the stage, the motion picture, and the newspaper. And the impact of each new medium was radical and changed the nature of social interaction. Each of these inventions altered the urban place as it relates to the intricate nature of mass communication, interpersonal interaction, and public space. We express concern about the impact of communication innovation upon the urban landscape. We continue to ask similar questions regarding the impact of the digital revolution upon our traditional conceptualization of the city. What impact will Wi-Fi have upon social spaces? How does the ubiquitous mobile telephone alter our sense of privacy and our relationships with others? Will the integration of the telephone and text messaging plus Voice over Internet Protocol devices alter the concept of the office and the workplace? To what extent will increased telecommunication mobility be reflected in the design and development of housing? How is public space augmented or enhanced through communication technologies?

New technology is constructed upon the accumulated layers of previous innovations. Each period of technological change and innovation creates new expectations and assumptions. Communication scholars refer to these different periods as media generations.

Cities and their media infrastructure are built by layering one media era upon another. As archaeologists unearth layers of history through the process of excavation, layers of technologies accumulate, reshaping and sometimes obliterating the previous media generation. As durable and eternal as the form and function of the city can appear, the rise
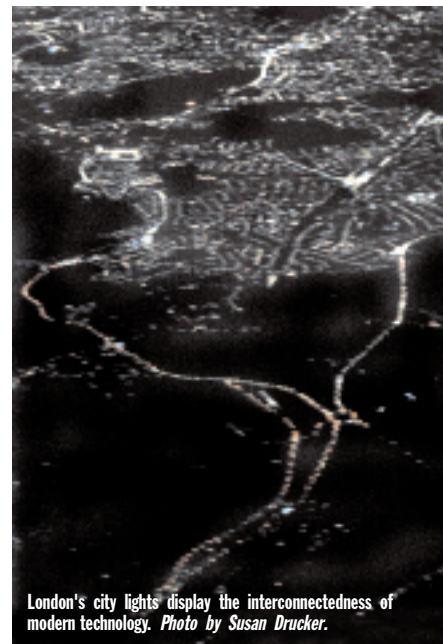
London's city lights display the interconnectedness of modern technology. *Photo by Susan Drucker.*

of new technologies incrementally erodes the form, function and influence a city can exert. For many, unaugmented cities (those without radical communication innovations, such as fiber optic cables) are outdated relics of the past while others look to augmented cities and digital communities as the means of salvation, supporting the continued value of cities. Augmented or traditional, the fundamental function of a city is still the heart of the matter. The challenge for current society is to maintain a sense of community without creating more and more isolated or fragmented populations who rely solely on these new forms of media for communication.

To this end, communication scholars have been working. With their varied expertise, we scholars have been trying to affect public policy and law to prevent the uncontrolled evolution of media technology and its effects. *The World Charter on the Right to the City* represents an important step in the effort to critically examine the urban condition and the quality of life and civil society in cities. The charter, while considering the challenges of globalization, is weakened by not explicitly addressing the fundamental issues of

communication so integral to cities today and in the future. Among the 23 articles of the charter, two address dimensions of communication. Article VI underscores the importance of the right to public information from city administrations, or from the legislative or judicial authorities; this in an age when e-government and digital cities offer "one-stop" public access for local information. From news channels broadcasting 24/7 to the proliferation of online publications, the illusion is the apparent increased coverage and information about government. Article IX reaffirms the right of association, assembly, expression and the democratic use of urban public space, emphasizing that cities should make public spaces available for meetings and informal gatherings. However, the social functions of the city and the technological communication infrastructure are neglected in the document.

"In the 20th century the prosperity of communities was defined largely by the proximity of an interstate highway to the community. Today, communities and neighborhood developments with affordable broadband access and good connections to regional and national networks will prosper" (Cohill, p. 60). Many cities and suburbs are repairing decaying infrastructure while building new communication infrastructures to provide services like broadband access. Ubiquitous computing, mobile, wireless connectivity, fiber optic telecommunications systems, and surveillance cameras reflect the wiring of cities; they are now a reality and a part of our everyday lives.

Modern urban life, shifting demographics, and the ascendancy of suburbanism challenge scholars and policy makers with diverse expertise. Communication scholars have much to offer in the development of public policy and law, which takes into account communication needs, practices and culture.

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Susan J. Drucker joined the faculty of Hofstra University in 1989 as an assistant professor in the Department of Speech Arts and Sciences. Today, she is a professor in the Department of Journalism, Media Studies and Public Relations, as well as an accomplished scholar. Professor Drucker earned a B.A., summa cum laude, from Queens College of the City University of New York with a joint major in communication and political science as well as a major in history. She earned a J.D. from St. John's University School of Law and subsequently earned an M.A., summa cum laude, in media studies from Queens College/CUNY. At St. John's University, she specialized in constitutional law and its relationship to communication and media. In addition to this specialty, she focused on land use and real estate law. Although these areas may seem removed from each other, they are both relevant to her research on communication and the city today.

Professor Drucker teaches courses in communication law, media history and society; global media; urban communication; celebrity, media and culture; and media and privacy. She has also been involved in further curriculum development in the Media Studies program. She serves as faculty adviser to Lambda Pi Eta Honor Society and is the track coordinator of Media Studies. She is on the Board of Directors of the Urban Communications Foundation, an organization supporting research on communication and the urban condition.

Professor Drucker specializes in communication and law, cross-cultural communication and the relationship of communication technologies to public space. Her work examines the relationship between media technology and human factors, particularly as viewed from a legal perspective. She is on the board of directors of the recently established Urban Communication Foundation, Inc., a not-for-profit organization supporting research on communication and the urban condition. She publishes extensively on the emerging laws of cyberspace, press freedoms, and wired cities. Much of her published work on urban communication has been co-authored with her longtime writing partner, Professor Gary Gumbert. She lectures widely internationally.

Professor Drucker is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Eastern Communication Association's Distinguished Research Fellow Award (2002), Distinguished Teaching Fellow Award (2004), and Distinguished Service Award (2005).

Her most recent books include *Real Law @ Virtual Space: The Regulation of Cyberspace (2nd edition),* co-edited with Gary Gumpert. She is currently working on a volume titled *The Communication Division of Cyprus.* Her latest book, *Heroes in a Global World* (with Gary Gumpert), will be published by Hampton Press in spring 2006.