



HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHIES OF MEDIA

Editor's Introduction

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The recent efflorescence of research on geographies of media is evident in the endlessly proliferating sessions on the topic at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers as well as the growth of the Communication Geography Specialty Group. The recent founding of *Aether: the Journal of Media Geography*¹ similarly marks the development of the field. All this novelty might seem anathema to historical geographers, but of course this is not so; in fact, historical geographers have been integral to the founding and development of the field.² This special issue of *Historical Geography*, then, is not about introducing geographies of media to a new part of the discipline so much as it is about highlighting the plural engagements between media geographers and understandings of historical geography.

In particular, the media geographies outlined in this special issue approach history in two ways (although in some ways they highlight the artificiality of these categories): as historical geographies *of* media, by which I mean changes in the technologies and practices of mediation, and as historical geographies *in* media, or the analysis of media artifacts as a particular variety of historical record. In some ways related to this division, these papers present research that spans, and occasionally bridges, two different genres of media geography research, what contributor Paul Adams has elsewhere described as “place in media” and “media in place.”³ “Place in media” refers to the ways in which places are discursively produced through mediation. This genre of research is one of the earliest products of the “new” cultural geography,⁴ and has been a staple of research in many other parts of the discipline, including political, historical, and environmental geography. “Media in place” refers instead to the embeddedness of media practices within particular geographical contexts, each impacting the other. This formulation of media geography is far less fleshed-out in the literature than “place in media,” but some of the articles in this special issue will contribute to that end.

The first paper, “Imaginative Cinematic Geographies of Australia: The Mapped View in Charles Chauvel’s *Jedda* and Baz Luhrmann’s

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Australia," immediately complicates the scheme introduced above. Media scholars Peta Mitchell and Jane Stadler have set out a fascinating study that might be characterized as "media in place in media." That is, they analyze the role of maps used *within* films that can be understood as articulating particular forms of "Australian-ness." Each film's cinematic cartography depicts the imagined journey of protagonists through the Australian north; by comparing the historical geographies of Australia as imagined in 1955's *Jedda* and the more contemporary geographies of the same in 2008's *Australia*, the authors trace historical changes in Australian norms and narratives of land ownership, race, and assimilation.

The second paper, Jason Dittmer and Soren Larsen's "Aboriginality and the Arctic North in Canadian Nationalist Superhero Comics, 1940-2004," similarly deals with the role of the northern reaches of a state in the national imagination, and as such can be thought of as a study of "place in media." In this paper, Dittmer and Larsen use the genre of nationalist superheroes to study the historical articulation of a national space; these comic book heroes, such as Nelvana of the Northern Lights and Captain Canuck, serve as metonyms for the Canadian nation-state. While these superheroes might be assumed to represent the entire national territory and the entire population in a liberal fashion, by comparing Canadian superheroes from 1940 with their more contemporary counterparts it becomes possible to trace both continuity and change in the Canadian relationship with their "own" Arctic territories and the peoples of those territories.

Paul Adams contributes his "Networks of Early Writing" as the third paper in this set. This paper marks a departure from the previous two by shifting from a primary focus on "place in media" to one of "media in place."⁵ Employing actor-network theory, Adams argues that the invention of writing enabled the promotion of political leaders in hearths of writing such as Upper Egypt, Mesopotamia, China's Yellow River valley, and Mesoamerica through the circulation of documents bearing their names. This circulation also enabled the circulation of religious/magical affect, which was associated with scribal power during this early period of literacy. Thus, kingship emerges as the effect of the network of scribes and *inscribed* objects distributed throughout the king's lands. This focus on the practice of writing itself illustrates a different kind of engagement with media than the previous two papers.

The final paper in this special issue is James Kneale's "Monstrous and Haunted Media: H. P. Lovecraft and Early Twentieth-Century Communications Technology." Much as Mitchell and Stadler's paper complicated the typology of "place in media" and "media in place" by studying "media in place in media," Kneale illustrates historical attitudes to media themselves through reference to—more media. Perhaps this should be termed "media in media in place," the place in question being early twentieth century New England. In particular, he looks to the works of American horror writer H.P. Lovecraft, who highlighted media innovations such as the telephone and wireless as forms of modern haunting through their enabling of an "absent presence." As in Adams's paper about early writing

networks, Kneale highlights the sense of media as “magically” opening up multiple non-adjacent spaces. In the case of Lovecraft, these media enable peeks through the thin barrier between normalcy and the monstrous.

Together these papers enunciate a variety of engagements between media geography and historical geography, both across the divide of historical geographies *in* and *of* media and across the boundaries of Adams’s typology. They hint at the potential for continued engagement and collaboration between these two sub-fields, and hopefully these papers will inspire yet more researchers associated with each sub-field to dabble in the other. Looking to the past has never had such a bright future.

Notes

1. <http://www.aetherjournal.org> (accessed on June 1, 2010).
2. For instance, Miles Ogborn, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the English East India Company* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); David Livingstone, “Science, religion and the geography of reading: Sir William Whittla and the editorial staging of Isaac Newton’s writings on biblical prophecy,” *British Journal for the History of Science*, 36:1 (2003): 27-42.
3. Paul Adams, *Geographies of Media and Communication* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2009). It should be noted that Adams introduces two further categories, “space in media” and “media in space.” For simplicity’s sake they will not be introduced here despite some applicability.
4. Peter Jackson, *Maps of Meaning: An Introduction to Cultural Geography* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).
5. It should be noted that Adams, in other work, describes his actor-network approach to media geography as existing at the borders of all four parts of his typology. In particular this paper has relevance to the “spaces in media” approach to media geography, as mentioned in endnote 3.