

a e t h e r
the journal of media geography

Aether: A Prospectus

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Aether—a substance formerly thought to permeate all space

Oxford English Dictionary

MEDIA, THE ORGANIZED MEANS OF DISSEMINATING INFORMATION, permeates space and power/knowledge. Media intervenes and arbitrates the semiological chain of signifieds and signifiers, infusing signs with meaning, ideology and hegemony. It is simultaneously naturalized as it intervenes, producing simulacra that allow ideology to appear as fact and myth to appear as truth. One can, of course, view media as a text, and the use of the textual metaphor runs deep in geographical theory. Johnston et al. (2000) and Smith (1999) discuss the concerns of qualitative methodology as to how the world is viewed, experienced and constructed by social actors while also stressing the importance of systems of meanings to any qualitative textual analysis. This methodology provides the access to the motives, aspirations and power relationships that account for how places, people and events are made and represented. The interpretation of texts that can include landscapes, archival materials, maps, literature, or visual images—all forms of media—is one of many qualitative methods. Said (1993) points out the importance of ‘fictional’ texts to the production of geographical knowledge, particularly how the interpretation of texts can provide insight into the ordering of society and space. Texts are culturally coded through the use of signifiers and contain clues to the political, social and economic circumstances of the society that produces them. This in turn results in what Harris and Harrower (2006) see as a larger and a more critical engagement

between cartography and social theory that can only bring about a better understanding of how media can be best utilized within the discipline of geography.

However, media is not a mirror of absolute signifieds; it does not re-present some ontologically stable reality. While often positioned as a representational praxis, it cannot wholly be constituted as a text. Rather it exceeds textuality and communication permeating identity formation, cultural (re)production, economics, and geopolitical practice. Media and space are dialectical and mutually constituted so much so that it is often impossible to separate them. Binaries like real-representation, primary and second experiences, present and re-present, bind the ontology and epistemology of media geography to outmoded discursive vessels. These vessels rely on an imaging of space as an abstract Cartesian plane waiting to be filled. In contrast, it is now widely accepted that space is a social construction, a mediated interaction between individuals and their environment. Therefore, in order to critically engage media landscapes it is important to understand that their places and spaces are not neutral. Massey (1992, 81) states that because "space is conceptualized as created out of social relations, space is by its very nature full of power and symbolism, a complex web of relations." Just how spatial social power structures are involved in the transformation of these geographies reflects the response to a contested space.

Aether fills a much-needed void by offering a refereed scholarly journal focusing on the spatialities of media. The goal is to position geography and media as mutually constituted; they are representational and non-representational, lived and virtual, practiced and performed, real and imagined. To do so requires an international and interdisciplinary critical dialogue about all aspects of the media. Clarity about what media is requires an acknowledgement of the affective and the kinetic aspects of media—by 'placing' the cultural context of mediaspace within the domain of geography we get some specificity of time and space and this clarity furthers our understanding of the nature of media and protects insights from simple generalization. *Aether* argues for a critical analysis of how media productions are often presented as universal and use critical analysis to make visible alternative narratives that allow us to see more than we already know. To best engage the representational spaces of media and its role in the construction of spaces and identities, *Aether* seeks critical methodologies that incorporate new geographic thought from within geography in addition to spatial theories arising from the larger geographic turn in social and cultural studies. *Aether* strives to create a geography of media that uses critical methodology to uncover patterns and relationships within the spaces of media in all its forms. By doing so, by utilizing a critical engagement with media to analyze the geography contained therein, we can better understand the geographical information located within these unique datasets.

Aether is committed to modes of dialogue that go beyond the written word. While the journal will be dedicated to open submissions and organized thematic editions, it will also move beyond text and into other mediated formats including

films, multimedia exhibits, and other types of spatial visualizations. Further, rather than being a static journal that simply waits for the next edition to be published, we envision *Aether* to be an interactive and ever changing resource for media geography.

For nearly a decade the editors of *Aether* have organized media-related sessions at the annual meeting of the *Association of American Geographers*. These “Media Geography” sessions are now a part of *Aether* in that all session abstracts and, when possible, full conference presentations will be posted to the journal in a section wholly separate from the peer-reviewed journal articles.

In this introductory volume we have asked members of the editorial board to speculate on the scope of media geography. By no means do we consider this a comprehensive assessment of this subfield, but rather hope it sketches a foundation from which future dialogue will follow. Subsequent issues already in the works include themed editions on gaming, media and the Middle East, journalism and, hopefully, on the works of sci-fi author William Gibson. Plus a special issue of online documentary films, produced by professors and students will begin *Aether’s* foray into non-traditional forms of discourse.

We welcome and look forward to your contributions and commentary on this endeavor.

The Editors,

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