Mapping: a metaphor for understanding communications and media phenomenon

By Monica Martinez

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Professor Joseph D. Straubhaar has a solid relationship with Brazilian scholar community. Amon G. Carter Centennial Professor of Communications in the Department of Radio-TV-Film at The University of Texas at Austin, he first came to Brazil in the 1970s, working for the U.S. Embassy located in Rio. It was the beginning of a long and fruitful relationship. After quitting the diplomatic service, he engaged a successful career in teaching in the Communication field, being Director of the Center for Brazilian Studies within the Lozano Long Institute for Latin American Studies in the 2003-2006 period.

His primary teaching, research and writing interests are in global media and cultural theory, and his latest course in the University of Texas in Austin was about media and migration. But you can discuss other topics with him, such as digital media and the digital divide in the U. S. and other countries, global television production, and flow, or even the Brazilian culinary, and he will always engage in lively conversation full of good points. His graduate teaching includes media theory, global media, media and migration, Latin American media, and he is known for using ethnographic research methods. As a matter of fact, he is back to the field work and enthusiastically using the family life story method, diving into how three generations of the same family perceive television contends.

He has a new book, *Television In Latin America*, co-authored with John Sinclair, recently released by BFI/Routledge. His edited book, *The Persistence of Inequity in the Technopolis: Race, Class and the Digital Divide in Austin, Texas,* was published in 2011 by University of Texas Press. His book, *World Television from Global to Local*, was published by Sage in 2007 (being translated into Portuguese by Unesp). A revised 8th edition of his textbook with Bob LaRose, *Media Now*, was just published by Wadsworth, and was released in Portuguese in 2004 by Thompson as *Comunicação, Mídia e Tecnologia*. Also in Portuguese, he published in 2005, co-authored with Othon Jambeiro, *Information and communication policy, journalism and digital inclusion: the local and global in Austin and Salvador*, by UFBA.

In this interview, Professor Straubhaar shares his vision on the interface of two important fields of knowledge: Communication and Geography.

Tríade: How would you define the concept of Communication Geography?

Joseph Straubhaar: There has been a larger turn toward cultural geography as an important source of theory and as a crucial context for many kinds of media and cultural studies in the last 15-20 years. It seems to start with a focus on cities and urban communication, but at the other extreme, as globalization continues to be an ever more dominant force, communication geography seems to help us understand that, too.

Mapping has become a metaphor, taken from geography, for understanding many kinds of phenomenon, including communications and media. Maps help us understand communications infrastructure, like undersea cables and satellite coverage maps, for understanding the reach of global media, for example.

People talk now about the spatial turn, how thinking about placing phenomena like communication in space (and time) help us understand them. For example, when I think about communication in Brazil, I tended to think first of the national media that consume so much time and attention, like TV Globo. But as I traveled more, lived in different cities, and spent more time there, I realized the importance of local media directly linked to local cultures, and to regional cultures, the way they also occupy a huge space of Brazilian identity, such as being Paulista vs. Baiano.

Tríade: What is the importance of this sub-area for communication studies in countries like Brazil?

JS: Both spending time in Brazil and living in Texas in the US have helped me begin to define a sense of cultural geography that works at a variety of levels, from local to global.

Much of our time and attention at a daily level, for example, are taken up by the local, city or municipal level. I am intrigued with how those city cultures relate to regional cultures. For example, some people say Austin is in Texas but not of Texas – the city is embedded in a very distinct state or regional culture, but has its own very specific culture, much more liberal,

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intellectual and arts oriented. Similarly the complex cultural and mediated relations between the city and state of São Paulo, or the city of Salvador and the state of Bahia. Regional media don't seem as well developed as local media, but some regional chains like RBS have been steadily developing strength for years. So understanding the regional and local communications spaces of Brazil has become a huge priority for me.

Regional communication spaces have been explored increasingly in large countries like Brazil, India and the US. Anamarial Fadul and her students have begun an exploration of regional cultures within Brazil. Several BRICS focused groups have begun interesting comparisons in IAMCR/AIERI, for example. Several of the first papers I have heard in that context make me realize that India is far more regionalized than Brazil, for example, with distinct television networks, radio networks, film industries and musical cultures that fit with enormous regional differences in ethnicity, religion, language and culture across India. We then have to understand the history of India to realize that those languages, religions, cultures and spaces were quite well developed before India was conceptualized as a single country. That pre-existing cultural geography is crucial to understand how media develop in the modern media system of India.

I am also extremely interested in the supra-national spaces of communication, which are also ever more important for understanding our communicational lives. We tend most often to talk of supra-national regions, like Latin America or the Arab World. But some of the most important transnational communicative spaces are linked by language and culture but not by space the way a geographical region is. Both Brazil and the US are crucially embedded in transnational spaces for example. Brazil is so large that many Brazilians seldom think about the Lusophone space, except perhaps to make disparaging jokes about the Portuguese, but Brazil is an enormously powerful actor in that space, perhaps more important there than in the space of Latin America, per se, where Brazil is an important actor, but less culturally dominant than in the Lusophone space. The US is somewhat more respectful of the UK as the source of its cultural matrix, in part because British culture imports, like Harry Potter, Sherlock Holmes, etc. continue to have a powerful impact on the US. Few Americans think about it much, but the great majority of cultural imports to the US come from other Anglophone countries, UK, Canada, Australia, etc. While US culture has a global footprint and impact, but its impact is also much higher in the countries that are most culturally proximate to it, first the Anglophone world, then Europe, then perhaps Latin America.

The national space and the global space are obviously importance, too. But they are more known and commented in current research, so I won't talk about them as much. Still one

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thing I find interesting is that the much anticipated erosion of the national space of control by global forces is more erratic and less powerful than many theoreticians anticipated 20-30 years ago. Strong states like Brazil or the US control a vast sector of the communicational space of daily life for their residents, by structuring national television and radio networks, by incentivizing and supporting film, etc. However, a lot of other states are far less strong. There are even many cases of failed states, from Somalia to the Ukraine. In those spaces, local, transnational and global actors have much greater relative power, in media and communication, as in politics.

Tríade: What are the main references in this field of knowledge, which proposes an interface between Communication and Geography?

JS: In the US and Europe, city or urban communications studies in particular has been gaining force for a number of years as a specific field of study within communications. Several US programs, like Rutgers University and University of Southern California have been integrating urban studies literature into their curriculum and research agendas for over a decade, in part because they can see the importance for understanding communication of the great urban centers, New York and Los Angeles, that they are embedded in. Like the earlier efforts of the Chicago School, they have linked to classic urban geographers like Lewis Mumford or more contemporary ones like David Harvey.

In urban communications studies, some of the main studies have been done by Gary Gumpert and Susan Drucker, who have been tirelessly promoting the field for a couple of decades now. Gene Burd has also developed ideas for urban communication. Important studies of migration, ethnic media growth and use, and the complexity of urban communication in LA have been done by Sandra Ball-Rokeach of the USC Annenberg School and her former students, such as Vicki Katz and Matthew Matsaganis. Quite a bit of that can be found in a book by Ball-Rokeach, Katz and Matsaganis called *Understanding Ethnic Media*. With graduate students from UT, I have done similar work in Austin. One book so far from our group is *Inequity in the Technopolis: Race, Class, Gender and the Digital Divide in Austin, Texas* (2012). Similar efforts are underway at NYU and many of the pioneering works that we refer back to came from the Chicago School of Sociology, which had tremendous impact on communication. Extremely valuable work has also come out of Spain, starting with Manuel Castells, but continuing with groups in Madrid and Barcelona.

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The same is true with Garcia-Canclini, who has done extremely valuable work linking urban communication with national and global communication in Mexico.

Regional media studies in the US have often taken place within the milieu of popular Communications studies, folklore, and ethnomusicology, not unlike the way that some of the most interesting regional communications and cultural studies in Brazil have been done in the context of *folkcomunicação*.

Tríade: In your opinion, what is the relation of territory and the historical process of media systems implementation with the formation and maintenance of identities?

JS: The creation of media, its flow between cultures, and its reception by audiences or users all seem to be closely related to an ever more complex set of levels of identity and media at local, city, regional, national, transnational and global levels. We communicate at all these levels, develop identities at many of these levels, and use media at them, as well. Scholars from Stuart Hall on have anticipated increasingly multiple and complex identities. I think that much of that can be understood in terms of cultural geography, although other aspects or layers of identity, such as race, class, gender, religion and education cut across this cultural geography of indentity, too.

In some of my work, like *World Television: from Global to Local* (being translated into Portuguese by Unesp), I have tried to explore the historical development of spatially linked identities and media systems. It seems that in most earlier times and places, communications was largely local or what we might now call regional. In both Brazil and the US, for example, regions were so autonomous for hundreds of years that quite strong regional identities developed. Even though the US has a distinct national culture, I experienced just as much cultural shock moving from the hippie culture of northern California to still very establishment, very social class conscious Boston in 1973 than I experienced moving to Brazil in 1976, in part because I naively did not expect regions of the US to be quite so different.

Much of the 18th-20th centuries seem to have been taken up by the creation of the nation state. Benedict Anderson became quite famous for his depiction of the role of the media, particularly print media of the 19th century, in this process. But for many countries, including the US, a much greater degree of real national integration came from first radio, then television in the 20th century.

My own argument, building on Stuart Hall, de Certeau, and others, is that what we see is the steady accumulation of multiple layers of both media and identity based on these

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increasingly multiple layers of cultural geography. The nation state may have taken increasing pre-eminence in communication in the 19th-20th centuries, but the local and regional were hardly erased, or even much diminished. They co-exist with the national in our consciousness, and as we can afford it, in our media. (The multiplication of these layers presumes an increasing economy that can fund them, so the overall political economy of media has to change in order to make such a multiplication of media possible. Now we see an increasingly proliferation of channels as digital media, such as the varied package of Technologies that we think of as the Internet develop.

Tríade: In an era that excels in digital media and the portability of mobile devices, can we still say that the notion of space has an actual impact on human knowledge?

JS: Clearly yes. Digital media and more portable channels enable us to have more access to more kinds of media in more diverse places, but I do not think they completely change the nature of these accumulated media and identities, and their connections to a complex, accumulated cultural geography, that is reflected in the people we know, the languages we speak, the music we listen to, etc.

Something like the iPhone facilitates hyper-local media like FourSquare (a program that indicates where your friends are hanging out) or Yelp (a restaurant, etc. review integrated with local maps) just as well as it facilitates my checking Facebook updates in Portuguese from friends in Brazil. One major current theory is about digital media, strong ties and weak ties: our strong ties tend to come originally from face to face interactions, which may now also be facilitated by digital media, but they build on people, languages and spaces that we already know from life, work, travel and study. One of the changes with digital media is that they also enable us to keep a much larger network of weak ties, people that we know but maybe not as closely, including maybe people we meet for the first time on-line.

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Tríade: Researchers such as André Jansson, Professor of Media and Communication Studies at Karlstad University in Sweden, find that it is precisely the ephemeral character of contemporary culture and society that will cause a return to the issue of space in communication studies. Do you agree with his statement?

JS: I would return to the question of what we are tied to strongly by our concrete experiences in spaces that are important to us: cities, universities, beloved aspects of local or regional life (like going to the beach or mountains), local cuisines and music, networks of people tied to specific places, our experience of the national on television. These things are like a solid substratum underneath the flash and rapid flow of a certain number of new digital experiences. Even some of the most important new technologies, like *Facebook*, essentially tie us more to our pasts, tied to place, than to some kind of ephemeral present.

So I would call it less a return to the issue of space than a re-discovery that the importance of space has been there all along, as the basic infrastructure of our experience. A young North American man may well have the interesting discovery that some of his new friends on World of Warcraft are based in South Korea, 12 time zones away, but how he interacts with them with be formed in large part by his training in his own very spatially informed experience of being American, Texan, Anglophone, etc.

Tríade: Is it all about space? From the first satellite TV in the 1990s to the contemporary digital media, what is, in your opinion, truly available to people not only in terms of physical access, but also in terms of what they can understand and enjoy?

JS: I see it as a sedimentary process, a formation of layers of experience, knowledge and capability in a way that refers back to Bourdieu. We form our basic experience and our cultural capital for dealing with the world first with our families and local schools. Media begin to delocalize us as we watch national television, read books from not only our nation but our cultural linguistic system (or even from beyond, in translation). Depending on that accumulated cultural capital and our evolving interests, we might tune in to what is being offered to us by satellite television, starting in the 1960s, or the Internet since the 1990s.

I first found my way to Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital as I was trying to explain why Brazilians and Dominicans preferred national television in general, but why certain classes and groups of people did like imported culture on television quite a bit. From books in

translation increasing in the 19th century, to music circulating widely on record in the 20th century, to satellite TV and now the Internet, our options are steadily increasing, but what we are prepared to understand and enjoy has not necessarily grown nearly as fast. We are still creatures of language and culture, which is still largely defined by the spaces we grow up in. Clearly we can act as agents to change that, within limits placed by our economic capital and our knowledge and disposition. Growing up on a dairy farm in rural Idaho in an isolated corner of the US, I could not really have anticipated spending a large chunk of my life in Brazil, but by steadily increasing my cultural capital by reading, I knew I wanted to go see what the rest of the world looked like. I knew I wanted to get to know some other part of it well. That might have been Russia. As an eager young Marxista at 19, I traveled through the USSR in 1970-71, and found it more depressing than intriguing. A few years later, I found myself in Brazil, loved it and wanted to learn more about it. So the processo of gaining capital and experience to guide our use of media is sedimentar and not always entirely predictable.

Tríade: You have enough familiarity with the studies of Brazilian and Latin American researchers in Communication, as well as with the realities of U.S. and Brazilian societies. In emerging countries like Brazil, limited access to education, low average power consumption, and high cost of living will remain issues to democratic communication?

JS: Probably, but that also seems to be changing. The lower middle class in Brazil has expanded rapidly to where they now seem inclined to claim much more space, both literal (like the rolezinhos in shopping malls) and symbolic/political (like the huge demonstrations last year that began with local demands over bus fares, driven by a desire to fully join the middle class at accessible terms.) Likewise the rapidly increasing penetration of society by cell phones and Internet access seem to open greater technical capabilities of communication. But I completely concur that the great limitation now in Brazil on both economic development as well as democratic communication is education. It has been the great limitation in Brazil for quite a while. I remember a study comparing Brazil with Korea, how their very different growth patterns after 1970 had primarily to do with the availability and quality of education.Furthermore, access to it is not growing nearly fast enough to keep up with the technological possibilities that are growing rapidly.

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Tríade: In The Bias of Communication, the Canadian professor of political economy at the University of Toronto, Harold Innis (1894-1952), points out the relationship between means of Communication, knowledge, and power. In your point of view, what has really changed with the emergency of digital media? Mobility, convergence, and interactivity have changed this scenery or it remains the same, with powerful groups controlling the access to Communication?

JS: Both. Mobility and interactivity have created a variety of kinds of access to media, like the Internet, where both peoples' possibilities of accessing information from many places as well as the possibility of creating their own art and stating their own knowledge and opinion, are greatly increased. However, as noted above, social structures keep many people away from the knowledge and skill they need to use these Technologies effectively. Furthermore, at the level of mass communication, like broadcast television, powerful groups do still control much of the access to creating and disseminating media. In Brazil, this is not just at the top, where TV Globo dominates. Even in a small town in Mato Grosso, chances are quite good that one or two local families will control the local media outlets as well as local political power.

Tríade: In geopolitics, the predominant factor is the maps, i.e. the representation of space. In this perspective, what is the role of communication in this issue of representation of the world space?

JS: Part of the problem is that geopolitical maps only tend to represent nations, sometimes regions.   While nations are extremely importante in the way they structure communications spaces, maps of nations do mask other forces flows and centers. For example, Michael Curtin notes that media capitals, the global cities oriented to media production, are crucial to understanding global media. Media capitals like LA, New York, Rio or São Paulo are parts of nations, and appear that way on maps, but the maps would not indicate that those cities have their own direct roles in the global economy of media production. Interestingly, if you had a map of where the hubs of finance, airline connections, and optical fiber connections meet, you would have a pretty good idea of where to look for media capitals as well.

So sometimes maps of communication itself can be really useful. Lisa Parker of the University of California, Santa Barbara, has been emphasizing for years the importance of

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understanding the maps of satellite orbits and footprints for understanding globalization. George Barnet creates network maps of telecommunications interaction across borders which are very revealing of which countries Interact.

Tríade: Your university is located in the borders of the U.S. and Mexico. From this privileged stand, how do you analyze the development of global, hybrid, and multiple identity concepts in the last three or four decades? And how it will evolve in the near future, as U.S. is presenting a process of cultural Hispanicization.

JS: That situation of Austin and my university at what some call the northern border of the northern border of Mexico has been enlightening. Part of my idea of multiple identities came from watching people on the border engage in what is called code switching: switching to Spanish to talk with certain people about certain things, and then switching to English to talk with other people about other things. I could see two rather different identities, sets of knowledge, cultural codes and references at work in addition to language itself. But another major part of my ideas come from watching Brazilians switch between local, regional, national and sometimes global or cosmopolitan identities in speech, media consumption, etc. constrained or enabled by other identities, such as being well-educated, linked to class and cultural capital.

I have been doing an increasing amount of work with students here to study the complex identities of Latino migrants. One of the latest things I notice is a tendency towards translocalism, being situated not only on the border between the US and Mexico, but also trying to maintain identities linked to both the city they live in here and the city or town they come from in Mexico.

Large parts of the US, particularly in parts of the South (like Florida) and Southwest, from Texas to California, are increasingly facing a Hispanic plurality, and in some cases, majority. Over 60% of elementary school children in Austin now are Latino, so in twenty years they may well define much of the city's identity, although Austin's growth is also fed by heavy migration in from other parts of the US and from Asia, too. LA already has that feel, which you can read about in Ball-Rokeach's studies, of many different Asian communities and remarkably different Latino ad Latin American communities as well. So the US is moving beyond the melting pot to something multi-ethnic and multi-spatial, since these immigrant communities tend to be geographically situated or segregated, too.   You can

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certainly see multiplicity in all this movement, but in a slightly longer run time frame, considerable hybridity, too. In Austin, I can buy Korean barbecue tacos from Hispanic food trucks, and Esquina Tango hosts samba classes, too.

Tríade: After the global population reaching saturation in the use of mobile media, as it is occurring in the United Kingdom, there will be a move back to traditional local life values and local media encouragement?

JS: I don't think we ever left local life. We have just added other competing layers and options. While it is true that mobiles enable new kinds of connections, uses and consumption, they also can connect us even more strongly to local life, local values and local media. The thing is that also those local things now have to compete for time and attention with the more exotic and distant things accessible through the mobile, too. More layers of connection mean more completing layers of culture and media. However, my continuing work on cultural proximity leads me to think that people will not drift away from ties to and preferences for the cultures they grew up with and know best, but those cultures and their media do have to compete for what some call mind share with a lot of other options now.

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