The growth of transnational communications, most notably the Internet and email, has had a profound impact on social and political interactions across borders. Doreen Massey, a social and political geographer, has written widely about space, with an emphasis on examining relations between actors, rather than the roles that they play. Her research suggests that space can be conceived of as constructed of these relations and, as a consequence, power can be seen to operate at multiple and complex levels. This article examines Massey’s work, identifying areas of particular relevance to communications scholars. Massey’s thinking is applied to the contemporary communications arena, where her ideas on space and ‘power-geometries’ offer new insights into how the complexities of transnational relations can be understood.

Keywords Massey; space; spatial; power; communications; Internet; relations; relational; globalization; politics; social relations; power-geometries

Introduction

There have been few female scholars in the ‘key thinkers’ series so far and, to be frank, this is notable and slightly disturbing. As feminist scholars have been pointing out for decades, such a gender imbalance is sadly not unusual in academe. It is generally less evident in analysis of media and communications, however, and it seemed important to address some female and/or feminist work alongside that of the illustrious males already covered. To this end, in this article I discuss Doreen Massey, the social and political geographer, and set out to determine where her work fits within the series’ broad rubric of integrating our understanding of the effects of technological change with social analyses that have already been developed. In Massey’s case, of course, her ideas are still evolving and one of the pleasures of exploring her work lies in observing how its trajectories meet, merge and have been modified over time.

There are three dimensions of her work that are of particular relevance to
media and communications analysts. First, she has written widely about space, place and relationality. While scholars such as Crang & Thrift (2000) and Featherstone & Lash (1998) have brought these terms into the vocabulary of the communications scholar, Massey is the person who has paid most attention to shifting them from the abstract to the material. While she is an accomplished scholar and extremely adept at exploring esoteric and abstract thought, her work has a normative dimension, in that the practical applications of scholarship – how research can be used to understand, explain and alter the conditions within which we live – play an important role in her research and writing.

Second, the complexities of modern communications systems and the problems of analysing their impact on the wide range of actors affected by them are, of course, evident to anyone working in this field today. For Massey, it is necessary to recognize ‘power-geometries’ – the multiple and multi-layered power relations wrought by interactions between actors – in order to be able to understand how relations, rather than specific actors or practices, create and deny opportunities to act. For those trying to make sense of the new forms of interactivity the Internet brings, enhanced media access for some alongside a dearth of digital connection for others, the concentration of media ownership and the cross-promotion of media products, Massey’s work provides a strong theoretical tool for interpreting the impact of these complex and apparently contradictory developments. It should be noted here that Massey does not write on communications; the value of her work for communications scholars is thus extrapolated from her work, rather than being a direct application of her thinking.

A key theme of her work on spatiality is that it is much more fruitful – she would argue essential, I think – to view relations between actors as dynamic and shifting and to conceptualize them in such a way as to recognize this mutability. In focusing on relationality and power-geometries – as both theory and practice – Massey invokes a conceptualization of international, transnational, global and local activities as multi-dimensional and multi-layered. This, in turn, helps to provide a clearer understanding of the ways power is made manifest in the fields of contemporary communications and politics, where a wide range of diverse actors operate in different ways in the same arena.

Third, and related, but offering another dimension to communications research, she has produced incisive critiques of what could be termed the meta-narrative of economic globalization. In this, she challenges the widely accepted assumption of a particular form of (capitalist, trade-driven) globalization, arguing that there are many different kinds of connectivity that should not and cannot be ignored in our analyses of global interactions. Massey’s critique of the grand narrative of neo-liberal economic globalization strips away some of the over-simplifications of its discourse, encouraging us instead to consider how this discourse is directed and determined. Drawing together some of the broader themes of her work, the critique of globalization provides
an exemplar of its potential application. Massey’s work on both spatial theories and the discourse of globalization can be developed to analyse contemporary communications and are thus worthy of examination.

Massey’s thinking on space informs her thoughts on power-geometries, which is reflected in her work on globalization. Each of these areas of her work is explained here before being applied specifically to communications and the information society. Massey’s work on theorizing space has much to tell us about how we can address the multi-dimensionality of modern communications systems – in their development, use, regulation and ownership – and how we can link theory and practice in their analysis. The article suggests that some of her ideas can be relevant to the study of communications in four important ways. First, her work on relationality provides a means of interpreting actors and interactions as significant in their own right. That is, it identifies how relations as well as structures influence social and political power. Second, because communications today are frequently trans-border and multi-faceted, the concept of power-geometries provides a means of moving beyond notions of power being bounded and grounded within certain types of institution, or agency. This helps us to get a sense of, for example, why both political activists and the World Trade Organization can sometimes be construed as powerful actors. It also identifies why the use of communications technologies can have an impact on the power relations between actors. Third, Massey’s work on economic globalization gives us an insight into the spatialization of the global arena and a mechanism for understanding the position of communications technologies within this process. Finally, the application of Massey’s work to mediated social and political interactions provides lived examples of both the value of her research for this area of analysis and evidence of the limitations of some of the more traditional scholarly approaches to transnational communications.

This article first gives some background on Massey’s career as a geographer and then looks in more detail at the areas identified above. It draws partly on her earlier work on spatiality, in which she defined her terms and laid the foundation for much of her later research in this area. It draws too on her writings on ‘power-geometries’ and globalization through a number of chapters and articles written, and lectures given, by her during the past decade. In addition, it uses insights from an interview with this author in 2003. During that interview, Professor Massey elucidated and expanded upon some of the central issues covered in this article, developing ideas from her forthcoming book and giving new insights into her published work. In addition, she analysed her own work to address the questions raised by this article and, in doing so, provided a valuable insight into how her work can be used in communications analysis. Professor Massey also took time to address her thoughts to the specific concerns of this series – i.e. the merits of applying existing work to interpreting and understanding communications systems today. This went far beyond what could normally be expected of an interviewee and should be noted here.
Doreen Massey

Doreen Massey is a geographer who makes her personal politics explicit in her scholarly work. From a working-class background in northern England during the era of the building of the welfare state in Britain by post-war Labour governments, she sees herself as ‘a child of . . . those generations of social democratic interventionism’ (Freytag & Hoyler 1999, p. 84). Raised in state-owned council housing, and reliant on the National Health Service owing to health problems suffered since birth, she views a form of welfare state as a mechanism for providing ‘ordinary people with a decent life’ and points out that ‘a lot of one’s politics comes from that kind of thing, it’s not invented, you grow with it’ (Freytag & Hoyler 1999, p. 85). Her childhood environment has had a clear and direct impact on both her academic and her political personas, as has her later experience in the feminist movement.

Massey studied geography as an undergraduate in Oxford in the 1960s, still unusual for a girl from a northern, working-class background at that time. She has said that she left Oxford after graduating because she ‘couldn’t be an academic’ as she perceived a ‘serious difference between being an intellectual and an academic’ (Freytag & Hoyler 1999, p. 83). By this she meant the ‘game’ of academia, as she understood it, where it was not strictly necessary to be fully informed about or feel engaged with a topic, but simply to possess the intellectual agility to argue a case. The ‘game’ was based in part on the class and gender structures she perceived in the British academic system, which at this stage led her to feel that she could not identify with most academics there. Her early escape from the confines of Oxford was perhaps the first of her many demonstrations of non-conformity to the traditional academic model. It may also have laid the foundations for her later work on relationality and challenges to the types of power purportedly invested in certain types of institution.

For twelve years, from 1968 onwards, she worked as a researcher at the Centre for Environmental Studies (CES), looking at issues such as industrial location, regional inequality and urban change. The Centre was abolished by the incoming government of Margaret Thatcher in 1979, and Massey was made redundant from this post. The kind of work undertaken with the CES — research with a political orientation — conforms to the general timbre of Massey’s later academic life. During this time, she worked and studied for short periods in the USA and also acted as a visiting scholar at the London School of Economics. During the 1980s, she held a position on the Board of the Greater London Enterprise Board, the economic planning body of the left-wing Greater London Council. At the same time, she was embarking on what might be considered something roughly approximating a ‘traditional’ academic career. Since 1982, she has taught at the Open University (OU), a British academic institution dedicated to popular, degree-level education through
distance learning. The OU is Britain’s largest university, with a demographic of mainly working people who study part-time, far different from that of the academic world Massey rejected in the 1960s.

She is, in many senses, atypical in the academic world. She is a left-wing feminist who has trodden a number of different career paths but whose work has nonetheless positioned her at the top of her field. She is involved in policy making, she has been honoured by her peers (she is a Fellow of both the Royal Society of Arts and the British Academy, and, among other awards, she received the Victoria Medal from the Royal Geographical Society) and she continues to be involved with ‘ordinary’ activists (she co-founded and edits *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture* and regularly speaks at political meetings). Her publications output is extensive; she has written or been involved in the editing of over twenty books and has over a hundred chapters and journal articles in print.

While these brief highlights from a very weighty curriculum vitae offer biographical detail, they also provide some sense of how Massey’s personal politics inform her work on space, relationality and power. For Massey, politics are the product of social relations. As a consequence, concepts such as identity, or power, are not static but are constantly shifting; attributes evolve from and are embedded in the interactions between individuals and institutions. Moreover, relations and circumstances for all actors are subject to change. Power is experienced differently for all actors even within a fairly limited set of interactions. Thus, ‘in relational thinking, I am not me and then [I] go out into the world and interact. Nothing is like that. We are essentially social; we are what we are because of those interactions’ (interview). More traditional interpretations of the social and political realm would position power *within* institutions. Massey argues that social relations are one facet of the creation of institutions and that power, like other aspects of human existence, is not inherent to governments, states or multinational corporations. Such institutions are, rather, creatures of social interactions and should thus be analysed and interpreted as such.

The construction of ‘Englishness’ is one example that Massey uses to clarify her position on this issue: ‘(the construction of) Englishness isn’t something that grows out of the soil of England but is necessarily a product of relations with elsewhere’ (interview). The nature of Englishness is affected by Britain’s imperial and trading history, the UK government’s relations with European governments, the European Union or the USA. All of these things are part of ‘Englishness’ but its construction for individuals and institutions is subject to different interpretations. The individual experience of ‘Englishness’ depends on whether one is left, right, centre leaning; which ethnic group one belongs to; whether one is the prime minister or a nurse working night shifts. This is where Massey’s sense of relationality becomes so potent, as it becomes clear that all of the actors in any given situation are affected by both the actions and
the interpretations of others, as well as by the perceived history within which such relations operate. The Englishness of one person may not be that of another, but it contributes both to the social and political meaning of the concept.

This is reasonably clear, if perhaps a little abstract. At this point we can conclude that Massey’s work tells us that politics are a product of social relations. As such, the institutions and decision-making bodies of politics have, in a sense, been given an unwarranted amount of attention in scholarly analysis of political activity. In addition, how politics can be understood and the effects of political practices – of governments, of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), etc – are different for us all. Political institutions are not separate from social interactions; on the contrary, they are part of and constitutive of them, in a perpetually shifting manner. Some further explanation of the concepts underpinning these ideas on space will help to demonstrate their usefulness as theoretical tools, as well as their applicability to political practices.

Massey and space

Massey’s work on space, like that of many others, begins with a challenge to conceptualizations of space as contained, finite or fixed: ‘Our starting point . . . is very often an imagination of spaces which are already divided up, of places which are separated and bounded’ (Massey 1999b, p. 30). This way of thinking ‘enabled the establishment and universalization of particular theoretical frames, which in turn underpinned the material enforcement of certain ways of organizing both society and space’ (Massey 1999b, p. 30). These theoretical and conceptual frames are not merely abstractions. They are deeply embedded in social and political structures, perpetuated through policy making, disseminated by the media, and underscored and extended through academic analysis. This is not to ignore the complexities of society and space; the many different theoretical approaches in the field of communications identify multiple ways in which we understand society. Massey’s thinking on space takes one significant step back, to the foundations for our understanding. If society is seen as made up of bounded entities, our opportunities for addressing their internal and external relations – for understanding how societal interactions really take place – are based on a false premise of constancy and stability.

Other theorists have, of course, tackled these themes: most notable has been Lefebvre (1991), who brought the importance of space in social and political realms to prominence in academia; Soja (1989, 1996), who has had a long-term interest in this area and has expanded upon the work of Lefebvre in recent years; and, significantly for scholars of transnational communications, Walker (1993), who challenged conventional interpretations that view ‘international’ relations as the interactions of bounded entities. Each of these authors
has argued that the ways we understand space have an impact on the ways that we can use it and the ways it can position us. Massey, though, has perhaps been most pro-active in pushing ideas beyond a straightforward critique of the logic of bounded rationality – the discursive enclosure of space – towards an interpretation of the tangible impact of this way of thinking.

Every scholar working on the concept of spatiality tends first to look back to the apparently common-sense logic of space – the notion of space as taken for granted, as fixed and ‘real’ (see Rodgers 2003). A theme running through the work of most scholars in this area is the dominance of a particular worldview and, in particular, its impact on the ways social and political relations are understood:

There has been a growing insistence that the story of the world cannot be told (nor its geography elaborated) through the eyes of ‘The West’ alone, as had so long been the case nor from the viewpoint of, for instance, that classic figure . . . the white, heterosexual male.

(Massey 1999a, p. 29)

For Massey and others working in this area, the conceptual maps we hold frame our interpretations of the world around us; they are constructed as ‘culturally specific ideas’ (Massey 1994, p. 2) which relate to ‘the establishment and universalization of particular theoretical/conceptual frames’ (Massey 1999b, p. 30). Critiques of universalized frameworks based on male norms have been common among feminist scholars and Massey works with this literature and ethos. However, her criticisms expand beyond the ‘universal male’ and the ‘invisible female’, the generic and ostensibly gender-neutral foundation of much academic research. The very invisibility of space – the lack of recognition of spatial formations and discourse and, more importantly perhaps, their impact – is seen as problematic.

Deconstructing these conceptual maps to make them more reflective of and relevant to the socio-political spheres in which we actually reside is at the heart of analysis of the ways space can be understood. Massey’s (1999a, p. 29) approach ‘insists upon a recognition that these understandings . . . are themselves specific, quite particular local viewpoints, and not the universals which they have for so long proposed themselves to be’. Acknowledging the historical roots underpinning the dominant understanding of space, Massey (1999a, p. 29) notes: ‘It is through that Eurocentric discourse of the history of modernity that the (in fact particular and highly political) project of the generalization across the globe of the nation-state form could be legitimated as progress, as “natural”.

The ‘naturalness’ of this conceptualization of space has a framing impact on our interpretations of the world around us. In international relations, for example, states and the governments that run them are seen as powerful entities
and the *category*, rather than the relationships a particular state has with, say, its citizens or with other states, dominates the discourse of politics. For Massey, the state itself is a produced 'thing', created by and evolving through multiple relations. As such, it is not an entity that exists separately from its citizens, its immigrants or from other states.

Massey identifies two problems with the traditional approach to understanding space. One is that it is not possible to understand complex interactions by using simplistic determinations of the relationships between actors and practices. By seeing units as fixed – as states, as multinational organizations, as supranational institutions – we strip them of the nuances of power that would aid our understanding of them; subtle power shifts and contingencies are not recognized by this kind of unifying categorization. She suggests instead that it is the *relations* between actors that matter, as these have the most impact on outcomes and possibilities. These relations are not fixed by category but are subject to variation and *continue to be* subject to change. Massey argues that the lack of acknowledgement of the relations within and between actors misrepresents their multiple characteristics. So, for example:

> Usually, perhaps, we think of ‘countries’ ... in relation to space-time, as areas on a flat map. Yet think of Hungary, or Montenegro, or the USA. They are not areas on maps. They are socially-constructed and labelled envelopes of space-time, which once did not exist (there was no such bounding and labelling), which have changed in spatial shape along the time dimension, which have always existed in relation to elsewhere (there are no pure identities, no internal histories of uniqueness; those boundaries have always been holding operations), and which maybe one day will cease to exist. The nation-state (like any society or culture) is a spatio-temporal event.

(Massey 1999b, p. 42, emphasis in original)

The second problem with the dominant conventional understanding of space relates to the imperfect nature of the categorization. When asked what she felt the key limitations of this way of thinking are, she responded that:

> Intellectually it’s untenable, unless you’re very specific about the things that are bounded. Even a state boundary doesn’t contain certain types of things. Also they are fragile boundaries that are put up to contain certain types of things. Also they only *intend* to control certain types of things. ... These things are being renegotiated all the time – going into the Euro, for example, is precisely a renegotiation of that type of boundary. One thing is being absolutely clear about what the boundary is supposed to do – even in those things ... it may be partly porous.

(interview)
Doreen Massey highlights here a concern of particular relevance to communications researchers. All of the factors contributing to both the trans-nationalization and intensification of communications – technological developments, policy changes, mergers and synergies in media industries – warrant analysis through the lens of relationality. Attempting to analyse the complexities of contemporary communications by role or category makes little sense. Massey sidesteps structure/agency and macro/micro debates by positioning interactions, rather than real or perceived roles, as the key to understanding how and why actors behave in the ways that they do.

**Relational thinking**

Massey’s thinking on the relations between actors follows two, related strands. On the one hand, there are the relations embedded in the spatial structuring of society. On the other, there is the impact that these relations actually have, resulting in her work on an emphasis on these relations rather than on the structures. She suggests that ‘since social relations are bearers of power what is at issue is a geography of power relations in which spatial form is an important element in the constitution of power itself’ (Massey 1994, p. 22). It is necessary then to recognize the spatial structuring of society in order to understand the ways relations between actors are facilitated or constrained.

At issue here are both the real and imagined spatial structuring of society. Assigning a role, a type or a set of characteristics to a given actor, usually by opposition to or hierarchically situated against another, generates a set of assumptions about their relationship and their potential impact upon each other. Thus a state is generally perceived to be more powerful than an NGO, which is more important than a political activist. Much depends, of course, on whether the state is the USA or Chad, whether the NGO is Greenpeace or a local campaigning group, and whether the activist is Martin Luther King or someone holding a collecting tin for children with leukaemia. In this sense, it is not the roles that are significant but the relations that the people within them have with the people that they interact with. To reiterate, for Massey these roles are not independent of or separable from the social relations that serve to constitute them.

Massey is not talking here about ‘a kind of relationality which is all about the abjection of the other’ (interview). This is not an oppositional or dichotomous form of relationality, the definition of self through otherness. She says that she is:

trying to talk about a much more ordinary, positive multiplicity of relations. . . To see space as a simultaneity of stories so far and the construction of a place, a nation etc. is just a meeting point of all these ongoing stories. . . Relationality is a positive relationality, rather than an excluding one. (interview)
This positive – or, perhaps more accurately, not negative – relationality is designed to acknowledge the multiplicity of relations that operate simultaneously. This is not merely a critique of discourse, however. Although acknowledging that discourse is ‘massively important’, Massey says that she has ‘always struggled a lot with the notion of discursive constructions of everything’ (interview). Discourse in this sense is only one element of the constitution of the spatial realm.

Massey argues that spatial – and therefore social – relations have become increasingly ‘stretched out’ in recent years, resulting in a relationality that extends far beyond the confines of our day-to-day experiences. She uses the example of changes in industry to support her claims:

The proliferation of branch plants of various types, the separation-off of headquarters, the burgeoning of separate locations for research and development and a host of production-related professional services, all of these pointed to a notion of the spatial organization of economic functions and thus of the spatial stretching out of the social relations which connected them.

(Massey 1994, p. 22)

The communications industries have, of course, adopted this style of economic structuring with a vengeance, adopting the most cost-efficient means of developing and delivering cultural products. If the receiver of communications (him/herself often working within a similar structure) is added into the mix of call centres in developing countries, production facilities based in the most cost-efficient environments, joint ventures between media companies and the host of other practices that serve to undermine the notion of bounded entities, the value of Massey’s call for relational thinking is evident. To view these facets of the communications industries at either structure or agency level denies their complexity; to view them relationally acknowledges both the multiple dimensions of their engagement and their potential for shifts and changes.

Massey proposes three principles through which space can be conceptualized – for want of a better word – ‘realistically’, that is acknowledging space as constantly changing and, therefore, having differing impacts on different actors at different times. The three-part conceptualization goes thus: space is a product of interrelations; it is the sphere of the possibility for the existence of multiplicity; it is always in the process of becoming, is always being made (Massey 1999b, p. 28). So, ‘in this way of imagining it, space can never be that completed simultaneity in which all interconnections have been established, and in which everywhere is already linked with everywhere else’ (Massey 1999b, p. 28). In this sense, individuals, NGOs, governments and multinational corporations are all engaged in processes of reshaping each other and of making
Moreover, ‘people are everywhere conceptualizing and acting on different spatialities’ (Massey 1994, p. 4). From this, it is possible to conclude that:

The ‘spatial’ then . . . can be seen as constructed out of the multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales, from the global reach of finance and telecommunications, through the geography of the tentacles of national political power, to the social relations within the town, the settlement, the household and the workplace.

(Massey 1994, p. 4)

These stretched-out spatial relations are also in a constant state of flux. Roles are not fixed, nor entities bounded, in the ways that more traditional interpretations would suggest: ‘The fact is . . . social relations are never still; they are inherently dynamic. Thus even to understand space as a simultaneity is, in these terms, not to evacuate it of its inherent dynamism’ (Massey 1994, p. 2).

These terms – multiplicities, dynamism, simultaneity – are at odds with more conventional interpretations of the social and political realms and introduce a sense of change, or the possibility of recognizing its potentiality, into the heart of research and analysis. The dimensions of communication and media practice, at all levels from economics through policy to reception, do not operate in a void, but are relational, being influenced by and at the same time influencing social relations. For Massey (1999a, p. 30), ‘the argument here is that the very possibility of any serious recognition of multiplicity and difference itself depends on a recognition of spatiality’.

Power-geometries

To this point, we have seen how the multi-dimensional nature of space and the notion of multiple and shifting relations inform Massey’s work. The concept of power has been mentioned several times in passing but her perspective on how this can be understood and exercised has not yet been considered. She highlights the importance of always being aware of power relations, both in the sense of power relations in the social spheres we are examining and those embedded in the power-knowledge system that our conceptualizations are constructing (Massey 1999b, p. 27). Massey’s interpretation of power does not view it as simply negative:

I would be Foucauldian to that extent – I would certainly see power as enabling as well. . . . And it can take lots of different forms. It could be flows of cultural influence, it could be authority structures in a very formal sense, it could be the seductive power of Hollywood etc.

(interview)
Power in this sense is about ‘the social form of the relations’ and what goes on in those relations: ‘Since social relations are bearers of power what is at issue is a geography of power relations in which spatial form is an important element in the constitution of power itself’ (Massey 1994, p. 22). Rather than taking either of the conventional themes of ‘power over’ or ‘power to’, then, she looks to the notion of ‘power-geometries’.

These power-geometries can be conceived of in a literal sense; power is not necessarily bounded within particular kinds of entity (although some entities may hold a high degree of power, this is related more to their position within power-geometries, rather than to the nature of the institution they represent). In visualizing power-geometries, it is possible to see the intersections, cross-border activities and concentrations of communication that enhance or reduce power. Power-geometries are linked with the themes of the dynamism and multiplicity of space and serve to identify the real significance of such concepts in Massey’s work. She (Massey 1994, p. 3) notes that ‘since social relations are inevitably and everywhere imbued with power and meaning and symbolism, this view of the spatial is as an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification’. This ever-shifting geometry positions power as contingent and connects with Massey’s desire to avoid the de-politicization of space that she sees in much of the work in this area (Massey 1994, p. 250). The work Massey critiques sees space as a backdrop to social relations and not as an inherent feature of them, and which, as a consequence, ignores the power relations intrinsic in the realm of the social.

Massey sees in this a denial of the significance of space:

All social (and indeed physical) phenomena/activities/relations have a spatial form and a relative spatial location. The relations which bind communities, whether they be ‘local’ societies or worldwide organizations; the relations within an industrial corporation; the debt relations between the South and the North; the relations which result in the current popularity in European cities of music from Mali. The spatial spread of social relations can be intimately local or expansively global, or anything in between. . . . There is no getting away from the fact that the social is inexorably also spatial.

(Massey 1994, p. 265)

To view space as merely a backdrop to the temporal – providing, as Soja (1989, p. 14) would have it, ‘an already made geography [which] sets the stage while the wilful making of history dictates the action and the storyline’ – strips the power, and consequently the politics, from the spatial. Massey (1994, p. 4) argues that, on the contrary, ‘the spatial is both open to, and a necessary element in, politics in the broadest sense of the word’.

In addressing the impact of the blurring of boundaries – social, racial and class, as well as national and international – that media and communications
technologies contribute to in contemporary society, Massey’s notion of the separation of the spatial from the social and political is significant: ‘The spatial organization of society . . . is integral to the production of the social, and not merely its result. It is fully implicated in both history and politics’ (Massey 1999a, p. 4). The spatial forms of communications – those crisscrossing maps of Internet use, the footprints of satellites, industry conglomerations, etc – have real-world implications and tell us more than de-politicized notions of space would or could recognize. Or, as Massey puts it, ‘we are not doing things across space so much as we’re making it, constructing new power-geometries as we go along’ (interview).

Space, globalization and communications

The various facets of Massey’s research over the past decade or so are perhaps best exemplified by her work on globalization, which draws together some of the longer-running trajectories of her writings over the years. This is also the area of her work that best demonstrates how her thinking on space can be applied to analysis of contemporary communications. Massey does not deny the realities of interconnectivity through travel, migration, financial transactions and transnational communications. Nor does she make explicit criticism of the exchange of ideas, goods and services. What she, like many others, sees as problematic is the dominance of a particular form of globalization – a neo-liberal, capitalist form – and its hierarchical spatialization as the new international social and political realm. In this, Massey sees a retelling of the story of modernity, the universalization of a particular discourse and the practices associated with it.

While critiques of the dominant spatialization of modernity are now widespread, explicit attention to the spatialization of globalization is less common. On modernity’s view of space, for example, Agnew (1999, p. 499) has suggested that:

trajectories of economic and social change [were] increasingly characterized in terms of the experiences of the bits of space delimited by the geographical boundaries of states. Businesses and trade unions, representative politics, and social life were increasingly organized on a state-by-state basis.

Massey’s work suggests that, while this spatial interpretation is now less tenable, little regard is paid to the impressions of space that have superseded it. As noted earlier, Massey has argued that the previous way of understanding modernity enabled the establishment of particular conceptual frameworks and that these enabled and justified the material organization of society and space. She sees this happening too with the dominant discourse and the associated material practices of neo-liberal globalization. This form of globalization, bizarrely
perhaps in a purportedly postmodern, post-industrial age, takes on ‘almost the inevitability of a grand narrative’ (Massey 1999a, p. 44), a normative rather than descriptive version of social and political configurations.

Massey (1999a, p. 14) argues that the word ‘globalization’ is one of ‘the most powerful terms in our geographical and social imaginations’, which at times has a mantra-like quality:

Characteristic words and phrases make an obligatory appearance: instantaneous; Internet; financial trading; the margins invading the centre; the annihilation of space by time. In these texts, the emerging world economy will be captured by an iconic economics: reference to CNN, McDonald’s, Sony.

(Massey 1999a, p. 14)

Communications technologies and their use clearly play a central role in this process of imagining and perpetuating a particular conceptualization of globalization. There is a ‘vision of an immense, unstructured, free, unbounded space and of a glorious, complex mixity’ (Massey 1999a, p. 14). Massey suggests that this evocation, whilst appealing, is a wholly inaccurate representation of the nature of globalization as it is currently imagined. Massey (1999a, p. 50) encapsulates her key criticism of this conceptualization in saying:

Globalization doesn’t float above the earth, it is operated by the same material, social, embedded processes of people in branch plants, in production factories, in research organizations, making decisions which may or may not work out all around the world, just in the same way as the devastation of local economies happens at local level. The global is only something constructed out of very precariously constituted socially constructed networks of local connections

Communications technologies play a key role in the function of connecting across space, on the one hand providing spatial compression while on the other stretching out social relations across vast distances.

Instead of viewing globalization as a breaking down of boundaries, Massey (1999a, p. 35) sees a situation where: ‘When we use terms such as “advanced”, “backward”, “developing”, “modern” in reference to different regions of the planet what is happening is that spatial difference are being imagined as temporal.’ This generates an a-spatial view of globalization, where difference is viewed only in respect of which point on the (socially constructed) scale of development countries stand. In this situation: ‘The implication is that places are not genuinely different; rather they are just ahead or behind in the same story: their “difference” consists only in their place in the historical queue’ (Massey 1999a, p. 35).
This denial of space, for Massey, positions it within a temporal sequence, rather than conceiving it to be a dynamic, socially constructed phenomenon. The temporal, as in modernity, is used to signify progress and development and defines the trajectory along which we are 'supposed' to travel. Massey’s argument here is that it is necessary to recognize the stories that are filtered out by this temporalization of space:

A real ‘political’ recognition of difference would understand it as more than a place in a sequence; that a fuller recognition of difference would acknowledge the contemporaneity of difference; would acknowledge that actually-existing ‘others’ might not just be following us, but might have their own stories to tell.

(Massey 1999a, p. 35)

The editor of this series has argued that new technologies are a ‘manifestation of the historically specific social systems in which they have emerged’ (May 2003: 2). For Massey, the social system in which contemporary communications operate is one in which our understanding of space has become dominated by these temporal impressions. Moreover, this discourse of temporality is underpinned by the discourse of ‘the information society’, a temporal vision of the role of communications technologies, within both the present and future of a developed, connected, global society. In addition, this temporalization of space is driven in large measure by the organs of the communications industries, through the ‘get connected’ advertisements and business features of the mass media, cross-ownership of industries used for the cross-promotion of information products, and the sales of communications services.

The more stretched-out social relations become through globalizing processes, the more important it is to focus on the power-geometries that evolve from them. Massey believes that, at present, there is a failure to acknowledge the many different forms of global relations and an underplaying of the many ways in which these are constructed. The many ways of spatializing global practices, and of understanding their impact, require a more comprehensive conceptual schema than the commonly used framings of globalization provide. Thus Massey (1999a, p. 42) suggests that ‘if there is only one narrative, one future towards which we are all marching (in the ways we imagine the world) then we have suppressed the genuine and potential multiplicities of the spatial’.

These multiplicities – which, it can be argued, communications technologies can play an important role in supporting and expanding – are important for two reasons. First, in our failure to acknowledge them fully within a universalizing discourse, difference is conceived through dichotomy, taking analysis back to online/offline, connected/disconnected. This approach, problematized by feminists decades ago, is less tenable than ever, given the multi-layering of connections across space that communications technologies now
permit. Second, and of course related, these multiplicities represent many different ways of conceiving, experiencing and constructing space. In the case of the Internet, for example, all actors online (plus those who do not use or do not have access to the technology) construct space in different ways. There is no such place as ‘cyberspace’. Rather, there are millions of on- and offline spaces, frequently intersecting and each having an impact on both the user and non-user in how space is constructed and how it evolves. This is the kind of multiplicity that Massey seeks greater recognition of, the intersecting, dissecting, crosscutting relations that are constitutive of space.

Underpinning the emergence of new and shifting power-geometries through the use of communications technologies in the global arena, Massey perceives both positive and negative changes. On the one hand, the potential for social and political organizing among like-minded groups is seen as a valuable feature of network communications. As most communications scholars now recognize, information technologies in the form of email, the Internet, mobile telephones and, increasingly, instant messaging provide new mechanisms for networking. In the terms of Massey’s work, these forms of connectivity not only contribute to new forms of inter-relations but are also party to new power-geometries. The connections between people through communications technologies – interactive technologies in particular – enhance the possibilities of often-marginalized actors of being perceived as powerful actors. The interactive forms of transnational organizing that contribute to debate, discussion and protest create visibility for actors that is based on the possibilities for inter-relations that these technologies permit. While the actors are not directly comparable – the World Trade Organization is not equivalent to an NGO, which is not the same as a political activist – the construction of their relations is influenced by the availability of new technologies.

Despite these apparent benefits, new technologies contribute too to the rupturing of relations, in spatial terms. In particular, Massey sees a restructuring of space that has the potential to produce new dislocations. While it is well documented that the norm is, where possible, to self-select our neighbours in the ‘real’ world, our potential to do this increases greatly in our online existence. In this, Massey sees political questions raised by the funnelling of our interactions and the increased selectivity of our relations with others. At its most basic, this contributes to a situation where ‘everyone is on the Internet but no-one knows their neighbours’ (interview). Emanating from this are important questions relating to the way we form groups (how does the offline world relate to and influence our actions in the online, for example?) and to the ways we negotiate difference. On this latter point, Massey argues that in our offline existence, we are constantly forced to negotiate difference – through the different ethnic groups we encounter, the age groups we mix with, the languages we hear – the necessity to do this is reduced, if not eliminated, online. Massey sees in this not just a case for addressing how contemporary communications are spatialized for us (through,
for example, the information society discourse), but also how we spatialize them for ourselves (by, for example, linking with distant social and political groups but not with local communities) (interview).

Conclusion

Massey expands upon already-existing debates in academia by developing upon concepts of space and spatialization, shifting consideration from the abstract to the material. A particular contribution is to suggest that the impact of spatialization is real and has a concrete impact on our lives and the possibilities open to us. Her challenge to the dominant spatialization of politics – which conceives of fixed, bounded categories of agents imbued with certain characteristics – provides a tool for addressing some of the complexities of contemporary communications. The concept of relationality shifts discourse beyond structures and hierarchies towards a conceptualization of the social and political realm that recognizes the multiplicities of relations between actors.

Massey makes an important contribution to the broad field of academic analysis by introducing a sense of dynamism, simultaneity and multiplicity into research frameworks. For analysts of contemporary communications, their rapid evolution and uptake suggests that, although much work in this area is now multidisciplinary, it would be valuable to develop this sense of multiplicity within research agendas. Although there is a vast and growing body of literature on the global media industries, internet activism and audience reception, conceptual maps have not yet fully evolved to accommodate the many and complex relations that the development of such phenomena have an impact upon. Massey’s work on spatialization offers a conceptual tool for developing research rooted and grounded in the multiple dimensions of reception, polity and production. This is not to suggest that all research could or should incorporate all of these dimensions, but that gaining a sense of the spatialization – and of the politicization of spatial relations – helps to provide a framework for more comprehensive analysis. As Massey points out, ‘thinking relationally would force [you] to look at where the power lies between entities in communication’ (interview).

In her work on globalization, Massey identifies how complex and variable relations can be over-simplified by the lack of acknowledgement of space. Her work in this area operationalizes both the concepts of relationality and power-geometries, to demonstrate how space can be de-politicized. Spatial difference – and the acknowledgement of such difference – is, for Massey, denied by the dominant narrative of globalization; relations between actors are again positioned within a framework that denies relationality. For communications scholars, the role of media technologies in providing mechanisms for interconnectivity on one hand and a device for propagating pro- and anti-globalization messages on the other become worthy of attention. The power-geometries at the heart of, and
emerging from, the g/localizing practices of global media organizations are also worth reappraisal. Massey suggests that there is a massive reorganization of power-geometries occurring as the use of communications technologies expands. While she views the information economy as only one element of shifting geopolitics (interview), its spatialization as the dominant framework for positioning communications within contemporary societies is a topic due consideration too.

Massey’s work on space is ongoing and she continues to develop upon the themes that have been central to her work in recent years. Her newest work promotes the idea that space is a simultaneity of stories so far and that, consequently, places and nations are the meeting points of these ongoing stories (interview). Communications technologies have always, of course, been involved in the telling of these stories and the evolution of their narratives. The intensification of communications in recent decades suggests that an awareness of Massey’s work on space, relationality and power-geometries would provide a valuable conceptual tool for addressing the complex relations to which they are party.

Notes

1 This first interview took place in the British Library, London on 6 June 2003. A second interview on 20 December 2003 followed through on the first draft of this article. Quotes from and references to these meetings are simply labelled ‘interview’.
2 It should be noted that this article represents an analysis of Professor Massey’s work and not a summary thereof. Any misrepresentation or misinterpretation is the author’s own.

References


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