

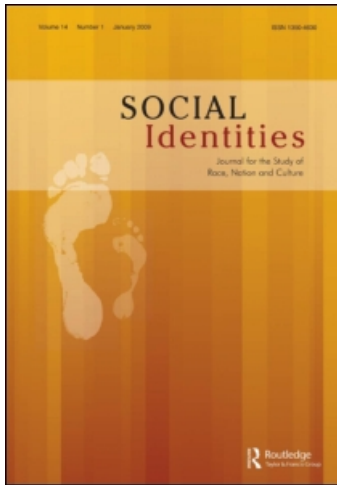
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Publisher Routledge

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Social Identities

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713445719>

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Online Publication Date: 01 July 2008

To cite this Article Sharma, Sarah(2008)'Taxis as media: a temporal materialist reading of the taxi-cab',*Social Identities*,14:4,457 — 464

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/13504630802211910

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13504630802211910>

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Taxis as media: a temporal materialist reading of the taxi-cab

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(Received 7 June 2007; final version received 10 March 2008)

Through interviews with Toronto city taxi drivers and frequent business travelers this paper explores how the taxi might be understood as a medium – one that cannot be disarticulated from a particular temporal politics. To understand the taxi as a medium is also to insist that labor, social difference, and the cultural politics of space and time are not external effects or byproducts of media, but rather quite central to how media mediates.

Keywords: politics of time; air travel; taxis; medium theory; mediated space

In the opening scenes of *Collateral* (2005), a busy corporate lawyer adorned in a power suit, armed with her cell phone and laptop, and heading for the financial district in LA, hails a cab. In between the small talk regarding the weather and the traffic she asks her driver, Max Durocher, ‘Do you ever take a vacation?’ Max nods and pulls down his visor revealing a picture of a sandy beach and crystal clear ocean and replies, ‘Oh yes, I go away three times a day.’ The visor blocks the glaring sun from his traffic jammed days and offers a time machine that he enters into through meditation. It is an attempt to escape his life on the road. It is a practice of time, a temporal strategy of survival, and a technology of the self (Foucault). The visor vacation is one small example of the world of interdependent temporal differences that constitutes the social fabric – a world of temporal difference which in this case the taxi-cab plays a central mediating role.

The taxi is a mobile space of human labor, an intimate zone of human encounter, and increasingly a site of multi-media convergence that motors between the circuits of capitalist production. The taxi is also a communicative space between driver and fare for politicized discursive exchange, confession, and the sharing of knowledge about the local and the global. The vibrant and expanding work on media and spaces of transit provides a potential place to park the taxi *as a medium* of interest to contemporary cultural studies (Bolter & Grusin, 2000; Hay & Packer, 2004; Fuller & Harley, 2004; Govil, 2004; Sharma, 2009). But in proclaiming the taxi as a medium, it isn’t so much the taxi’s relationship to space that I want to invoke, instead it is the taxi’s relationship to time.

I hail the taxi as a medium to accomplish two tasks. First, to broaden what I consider politically restrictive notions of what constitutes *media* and secondly, to explore how the taxi’s mediation of time might contribute to wider discussions over the materiality of media-technologies. Arguments advanced for the necessity of unearthing the materiality of media are common in media studies as a means to counter the rather dominating approach to media as singular objects or ‘neutral’ forms understood as mere ‘tools’ for

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communication (Bolter & Grusin, 2000; Poster, 2006). But too often this turn to materiality attaches itself to ‘new media’ and the instances when new media ‘arrives’ on the scene and transforms/produces space. When temporality is taken into consideration what tends to predominate is similar. There is usually an apocalyptic reaction over the changing experience of time ushered in by new sped-up technologies (Virilio). This type of analysis occurs at the expense of recognizing the enduring and persistent cultural politics of time that are implicated in all media – whether of old or new. How media are conceptualized needs to be broadened to include not just the changing dynamics of space and time but also the cultural politics that different media are implicated in. In a few propositional notes I explore how the taxi might be understood as a medium – one that cannot be disarticulated from a particular politics of time.

I am inspired here by Marshall McLuhan who maintained that the message of the medium is located in how it alters the pace, scale, and pattern of social life (1964). I am also motivated by John Durham Peters’ provocative suggestion, ‘To study the media one cannot just study the media’ and warns ‘the point is not to conceive media in the way that they have been pre-defined by power’ (2006, p. 19). He maintains that we look elsewhere – to the institutions of medicine, the state, the family, the corporation, and even pharmaceutical companies (p. 19). In what follows, I explore how the taxi is a medium that both alters and is implicated in the ‘pace, pattern, and scale of social life’ while it operates as a raced and classed form of affective labor under contemporary capital. I focus on two major interlocutors within the cab – the taxi driver and the frequent business traveler. The taxi driver and the business traveler represent two different axes of investment by institutions of modern power that Peters gestures to – medicine, the state, the corporation, and pharmaceutical companies. These exploratory notes are based on interviews conducted with Toronto taxi drivers and frequent business travelers during 2004–2006 regarding their experiences of time.

Materiality of mobile media

To claim the taxi as a medium I am not concerned at the moment with the representation of the taxi or how it fits within regimes of spectatorship/consumption, encoding/decoding, or the media saturation of space. While these are important areas analysis, I want to bracket for the moment the privileged site of audiences or consumers and instead focus on the labor that is implicit in a media culture. I am interested in how the taxi as a labor intensive medium *mediates* the relationship between culture and power, specifically in terms of time. I take a ‘medium theory’ inspired approach to the taxi guided by the works of Harold Adam Innis and Marshall McLuhan. Their theories of media maintain that the content is secondary to the spatial and temporal effects that are produced at the level of culture. It is in ‘medium theory’ where questions of space, time, and the cultural and political effects of transportation media are central. In ‘medium theory’ media are understood as environments in which social life unfolds.

In an extension of the medium theory approach Sut Jhally contends, ‘Communication technologies act as a landscape that frames monopolies of knowledge and exercising of spatial and temporal biases which in turn creates limits and boundaries within which social power (as well as modes of cognition) operate’ (1993, p. 45). To argue then that a taxi is a medium necessitates a consideration of *how* the taxi incorporates specific social practices, relations of power and forms of social difference. Ian Angus, for example, argues:

It is not only a material resource and a technology (oriented to dealing with a particular object), but also a social relation between a plurality of identities that is constructed co-extensively with this technology. A medium of communication thus incorporates both a technology and a series of related social identities (or subject-positions). (1998, p. 8)

As the taxi moves individuals and information back and forth between the circuits of global production – hotels, conference centers, financial districts, airports, train stations, and shopping corridors – it has a seemingly indirect and immaterial relationship to the flows of global capital. Yet, the taxi is not an ephemeral space of transit but rooted in the attendant architecture of these global flows. The taxi is maintained and serviced by a specifically classed, gendered, and raced labor force. In most North American urban centers, taxis are driven by male drivers who are immigrants and working between 10–16 hours just to scrape by. In Toronto and New York City, 70% of the drivers identify as South Asian (Mathew, 2005). The taxi industry has become dependent on certain geopolitical and economic variables such as the need for immigrant labor on the one hand, but strict labor laws that impede immigrants' ability to receive accreditation for previous education and employment, on the other.

Within the political economic context, which structures the relationship between driver and fare, one of the formal properties of the taxi is the very fact of human labor. Angus suggests, 'it is through human labor that communication media constitute the limits of what is experiencable and the manner in which it is experienced in a social formation' (1998, p. 8). All media are tied to human labor, but in the taxi the presence of labor is immediate and visible. In other words, the fact of human labor, unlike other media is not easily elided in the taxi. While the taxi moves bodies, capital, and information, it is the driver who must constantly negotiate his/her own place within the spatial and temporal flows of power linked to this motoring.

In the past decade the roads of Toronto and New York have become flooded with an excessive number of taxis. In the case of Toronto the amount of taxi-cabs has doubled. This excess assumes that there is a surplus labor force always-already willing to take a stab at the industry. Very rarely are drivers independent of fleet owners, therefore the rent for the vehicle remains the same regardless of a busy or slow shift. With a saturated market the competition increases and the hours spent driving the taxi trying to make a sustainable wage also increase.

It is within these classed, raced, and at times gendered forms (as I will elaborate below) of social difference wherein time emerges as an inequitable relation of power within the taxi-cab. It is not merely the amount of time spent driving, the fact that it is a 24 hour business, or the saving, passing, and losing of time that defines the taxi as mediating time. It is the fact that taxis mediate time through synchronizing to external forces beyond the driver's control. The space of the cab is layered with multiple and competing temporal demands that the driver has no choice but to negotiate. The taxi driver is subject to the tempo of the fares, airline schedules, the time-management demands of the dispatchers, and the multiple rhythms of the spaces they traverse. The taxi driver's labor, livelihood, and wellbeing are dependent on a constant synchronization to the temporal demands of others – other technologies, social processes, and passengers.

The politics of taxi time: Synchronization

The relationship between technology and temporal synchronization has been a key thematic in media theory and labor studies specifically in the cultural histories of factory floors and world standard time, and more recently critical works on the rise of cultures of

speed (Thompson, 1967; Innis, 1972; Schivelbusch, 1987; Virilio, 1986; Carey, 1989). Here, one finds ruminations on the world of clocks, trains, the temporal grids of empires and the macroeconomic processes related to major technological transformations. In reference to world standard time, James Carey locates England's coordinating of social time for the purpose of empire. The control of time makes possible the coordination of activity and ultimately effective social control:

In navigation, time was clearly fixed on English ships according to the clock of the Greenwich observatory; and no matter where a ship might be in the Atlantic, its chronometer always registered Greenwich Time. Similarly, Irish time was regulated by a clock set each morning at Big Ben, carried by rail to Holyhead, ferried across the Irish Sea to Kingstown and then carried again by rail to Dublin, where Irish clocks were coordinated by English Time. (Carey, 1989, pp. 224–225)

These processes have been attributed to changing experiences of private and public time and the loss of local time and autonomy (Kern, 1983). But there is also a micropolitical dimension to synchronization. There is another form of coordination and social control that occurs, not between a clock and a ship, but between individuals in the institutional relations they inhabit. While the clocks, trains, and other time-keeping devices hold significant power in determining the pace and scale of social life, these devices are also embedded within larger technologies of self and technologies of power (Foucault, 1978).

The image of an observatory keeping the time of the ships as they move at different speeds, at various distances, scattered across the ocean, gives way instead to a more commonplace scenario within the urban fabric. Imagine instead taxi-cabs scattered across the city like the ships and the slave clocks (sic) of Big Ben and the Greenwich observatory. The cabs are like broken clocks, constantly re-set not when they cross time zones, like local ships, but for every fare they pick up. The meter is set with each new fare, yet the real power of synchronization is not this re-setting of the meter, but the synchronization that occurs between the temporality of the driver and their fare. Unlike other transportation technologies the taxi doesn't operate on standardized schedules such as buses, trains, and airplanes. The taxi operates by synchronizing to the individuated labor/leisure demands of their fares. In effect, the driver works to keep the fare in time and on time. Over the course of their day, as part of their livelihood, the driver's technologies of the self include synchronizing, sometimes quite strategically, to the time of others. Eventually it is not just the quantity of time but the driver's qualitative *experience of time* that is in large part structured and controlled by the time of others.

Shirali, a father of three who moved to Toronto from Tehran 20 years ago, deliberately drives from 7am–9pm daily so that he can service business people. Shirali, once a professional engineer, identifies with this crowd as opposed to the night revelers. He carries itinerant business people who travel between hotels, airports, conference centers, and head offices in downtown Toronto. Not only does Shirali synchronize to 'business hours' but he also takes on the anxiety of his fares when they are in a hurry. In other words, their temporal problems are his to solve.

They think the taxi is going to make magic, like a magic carpet flying over the city, they have a job interview, a business meeting to close a million dollar deal, a flight. Friday I had a customer at six at Yonge and Bloor and his flight was at seven. So the time he gets in my cab is the time he should have been going through security at the airport. He says he has a security pass but that doesn't do anything for me! It is a forty-five minute drive. He is transferring his stress to me immediately. The minute he gets in the cab. That is the service you are doing for this customer. You're a doctor and he has a pain and you want to help him because this is your job – you have to do something.

From Shirali's perspective synchronization to the time of the passenger might be understood as part of providing 'good' customer service. However, as Judy, the only woman taxi driver I interviewed and one of ten known women drivers in Toronto, synchronization goes beyond class relations. It links here to gendered forms of social difference.

Because I am a woman driver, men get scared of women drivers. Do you know what, almost every day I have had to hear a man tell me to 'slow down'? They say 'I'm in no hurry SLOW DOWN.' And I'm not even going fast, but they don't feel comfortable because I'm a woman – this has to be why.

Her tempo, like Shirali, is dictated by her fares and the rhythms of the fares lives'. But with Judy this synchronization cannot be disarticulated from male dominance and the fare's gendered understanding of speed and mechanical competence.

These examples point to interdependent temporal relations that revolve around the taxi. Beyond this, there is also an affective dimension to synchronization that has to do with keeping *certain* bodies productive under contemporary capital. This speaks further to how intricately time is linked to social power. The taxi not only moves capital but becomes a site at which bodies are made productive for these processes. So in looking elsewhere under the suggestion of Peters, I turn to how the taxi figures as part of a larger media-complex where temporal differences emerge in the form of 'jet lag' and what I have come to call 'cab lag.'

Media maladies: Jet lag and cab lag

Both taxi drivers and business travelers are mobile yet plugged into a command center that could be a radio dispatcher or a head office. They check in and check out, but the presence of the firm or leasing company is hardly non-existent. It is hardwired into their labor via the tele-presence of surveillance cameras, GPS systems, the meter, and increasingly the cell-phone. In other words, taxi drivers and business travelers are not virtual particles floating ephemerally without consequence but merchants of neoliberal competition (Mathew, 2005). Every choice they make is based on competition and expanding time, whether it is closing the deal or catching enough fares to meet their lease agreements. Significantly, how they manage and negotiate their time and the meaning of this time cannot be disarticulated from competition and productivity. In the neoliberal competitive ethos they are forced to be particularly individualistic for different ends and through different means. They are entrepreneurs of their own time as they manage their days, trips, shifts and plan their futures that are consolidated in retirement funds or in a license plate that they can eventually sell for retirement.¹ Taxi drivers and business travelers both attest to falling asleep on the job, feeling out of time, literally and figuratively. Both driver and fare are caught in capital's tighter structuring of control over their bodies and their time in general – although with different outcomes for their material and physical wellbeing.

Business travelers suffer from a well known ailment called jet lag. However, since the early 1990s this ailment is now commonly referred to as frequent flyer fatigue.² This change in terminology reveals a body no longer treated as limited in its ability to adapt to change, but rather something that can be adorned and maintained by a host of time control devices. These include special jet lag hotel rooms, melatonin pills to regulate the body's response to sunlight, jet lag diets 'from the world's leading nutritionists', pillow menus to accommodate different sleeping styles, and in-flight massages. It would appear that these responses and temporal maintenance devices have linked a perceived inefficiency, weakness

or fragility of the body, to a lifestyle choice. Frequent flyer fatigue refers less and less to the overall health of the body and is more concerned with maintaining a lifestyle and physiology that responds to productivity in an era of high flying capital.

Cab drivers also struggle to keep their bodies in time. The temporal requirements of their own labor include the long hours, minimal breaks, rush hour traffic, and the time demands of others. Heart attacks, back problems, and chronic neck pain are commonly referred to ailments associated with sitting in a cab for 10–14 hours day. Judy tells me ‘being on the road all day is just bad for your heart, all the near misses, my heart is skipping beats all day.’ Abraham, a thirty six year old driver who moved from Eritrea to Toronto compares driving the day shift to ‘smoking ten packs of cigarettes a day’ because of the exhaust he breathes in. Coughing up black phlegm is a malady of the day shift along with its excessive traffic, while the night shift seems to induce a form of bodily and life lag – perhaps worthy of the name ‘cab lag.’ Abraham explains,

You know your mind is set for nights, if you sleep day and work nights, time is different. You wouldn’t believe me. When I see the sun come out, I feel like I’m a hyena. I run to my house because when you see the light and you are used to the dark, you don’t feel too comfortable. I can’t explain how it feels, but I feel like I’m stuck and I can’t do anything about it.

Like the business traveler who wakes up in the middle of the night unaware of what city he or she is in and wanders the corridors of hotel lobbies late at night, cab drivers who work the night shift have a similar sense of disjuncture with life off the road.

I know it is really bad, but I can’t change it. I’ve lived in this building for four years and I don’t even know my next door neighbor because of my night shifts. I come home, they’re gone to work, while they’re gone I’m going to leave for work – when you do this six days a week you just won’t know a lot of people.

As they negotiate the structures of capital and time, the frequent business traveler suffering from frequent flier fatigue finds a world of devices from pillow menus in Hiltons to cab drivers who are trained to be more affective in their labor by providing an enjoyable, silent, and relaxing ride. In a sense, the taxi becomes yet another commodity or lifestyle option to keep the itinerant traveler in time. The taxi driver is left to his/her own devices, and employs a range of temporal strategies – from chewing on Qut³ to stay awake, sleeping in the cab to make it through double shifts, to not drinking too much water or coffee because of the inability to park legally for bathroom breaks.

Jet lag and cab lag can be read as interdependent maladies and material consequences of a capitalist system that thrives on the movement of bodies and capital. But what must be kept in mind is that cab lag is not induced solely by the conditions of the driver’s labor, but by the demands of another’s labor. And more to the point, these are physical conditions directly related to two different technologies of transport that are not neutral technologies but a media complex that operates together exacerbating forms of social difference. This difference is evidenced by two very different biopolitical investments, optimizations of life, by diffuse industries of modern power (medicine, the tourist industry, architects, the state, the corporation, and pharmaceutical companies) into the individuated bodies and in the cultivation of the quality of the time of business travelers and taxi drivers. One is defined by lack and the other by excess.

To conclude, jet lag, cab lag, and the politics of synchronization are examples of the temporal politics of the taxi. What I have examined above is how the taxi is both implicated within and *mediates* contemporary social relations of power. Learning from a temporal materialist reading of the taxi we might think further about the scope of

social difference and relations of power that could be written into how media are conceptualized – whether of old media or even older media still. Media operate, not as singular objects, but part of media complexes that organize the field of power and forms of social difference. Taxis are media because they mediate the space/time between culture and power. In this vein, to understand taxis as media is to insist that labor, social difference, and the cultural politics of space and time are not external effects or byproducts of media, but rather quite central to how media mediates. That is, how media works to bridge the space and time between culture and power.

Notes

1. Currently in Toronto, each plate is worth approximately \$80,000 dollars which is often triple the amount of the actual taxi. Plate owners are not limited by the amount of plates they can own. Some own two to three and others own sixty. Moreover, plate owners do not always own the car, thus the owning cabs becomes another potential industry. The cars and plates are then rented out to the drivers. The drivers that do not own their own plates make anywhere from thirty to a hundred dollars a night after gassing up, paying the car rent, and getting something to eat. The average cost of rent for a plate is \$1000 a month which is usually 30–50 percent of a driver's income. For the drivers, there is a direct correlation between government licensing initiatives and their temporality, in terms of the slower pace of their labor, longer hours, and the lack of time to take care of their bodies.
2. In the first public pronouncements in the 1970s, jet lag was seen as a health hazard. The body was positioned as fragile and weak due to the conditions of the environment of air travel. Doctors began prescribing lithium and imipramine to pilots and business people making the trip from New York to Tokyo (Brody, 1979). Frequent fliers meet a host of 'jet lag' devices that still use the terminology of 'jet lag', however this seems to operate as a form of branding and advertising for holistic healing rather than a medical condition.
3. Qut is a bitter green leaf that is chewed on but not swallowed. Qut leaves produces cathine as a stimulant. It has been banned in the city in the past ten years. Chewing Qut 'makes you stay awake and stay full of energy – it is good for a Friday or Saturday', explains Abraham. He goes on to say that 'some drivers can work 24 hours on it and I would take it more often if it wasn't so expensive.'

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