The Appropriation of a Digitally-Augmented Agora: Field Study of the Structuration and Spatialization of an Issue Public in Urban Space

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ABSTRACT In 2013, we conducted a ten-week qualitative field evaluation of an interactive public space art installation. During these three months, we observed a vast array of examples of how the general public appropriated this technological artifact and the public space in which it was deployed. This article draws on Mosco’s political economy of communication framework to examine how one specific issue public—composed of several different groups actively engaged against police misconduct and brutality—creatively made use of Mégaphone in conjunction with online media to self-report, self-represent, and self-publish alternative and oppositional views around incidents of police abuses of power. In doing so, we explore how structuration, spatialization, and commodification might offer critical perspectives on interactive urban technologies.

KEYWORDS Ethnographic field study; Interactive digital technology; Appropriation; Public space; Critical theory

RÉSUMÉ Nous avons effectué en 2013 une étude de terrain pendant dix semaines dans le but d'évaluer une installation numérique interactive déployée en espace public. Lors de cette étude qualitative, nous avons pu observer comment les passants s'appropriaient à la fois la technologie et l'espace. En s'inspirant du cadre théorique de Mosco sur l'économie politique de la communication, cet article analyse comment certains membres d'un public constitué autour du problème de la brutalité policière ont utilisé Mégaphone en relai avec l'Internet pour mettre en exergue, présenter et auto-publier leurs témoignages livrés en opposition et en marge des idées reçues. Ce faisant, cette étude vise à soutenir une réflexion sur l'application empirique de la structuration, la spatialisation et la marchandisation en rapport avec les technologies urbaines interactives.

MOTS CLÉS Étude ethnographique de terrain; Technologies numériques interactives; Appropriation; Espace public, Théorie critique

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Introduction
Suggesting that the hermeneutics of technology go hand in hand with how social beings choose to make use of tools, devices, and systems, Feenberg (2000) has argued for the importance of developing new theoretical approaches that could support nonessentialist conceptions of science and technology. By calling upon scholars to imagine, recognize, and remain critical of the unexplored possibilities of technological innovations, his work has sought to revitalize the philosophy of technology with some of the basic precepts of critical theory to refocus its lens around issues of power and agency (Wyn Jones, 1999). Feenberg (1999) attempts this by bringing to bear the “social and historical specificity of technological systems, the relativity of technical design and use to the culture and strategies of a variety of technical actors,” thus privileging a constructivist approach over a substantivist or essentialist one (p. x).

To illustrate what form this can take in social life, Feenberg (1995) discusses how 1980s “Minitel” subscribers appropriated a computer-mediated communication technology—namely, the French Teletel system—to serve their own means and ends. In 1982, communities of users began to hack this service to create personal messaging sex lines, a use of the system that later came to be referred to as the “pink Minitel” (Feenberg, 1995). A few years later, in 1986, French students used these same Minitel terminals to organize a national strike. In this sense, the Minitel may have been one of the first interactive online technologies to be appropriated for political purposes as a means to organize resistance (Kahn & Kellner, 2008).

Such examples suggest that creative appropriation is a practice that allows people—across categories of class, gender, and race—to socially recontextualize technological commodities in order to better meet their everyday needs and support civic agency. Feenberg (2000) describes this as secondary instrumentalization, a process that makes it possible for people to recover technological artifacts to construct alternative hegemonies.

Since the Minitel, much has been written on how publics have formed and come to mobilize by subverting widely available online technology-mediated social environments. Today, however, we see computing systems increasingly being designed to support digitally-augmented social interactions in real public space. Using an ethnographic approach, which includes participant observation and in-depth interviewing, as well as qualitative analyses drawn from photographs, videos, and field notes, this empirical field study looks at the creative appropriation of such an onsite platform deployed in homage to, and in the aftermath of, the Québec Maple Spring.

In early 2012, Montréal became the theatre of the political and social awakening of its millennial generation and hundreds of thousands of citizens during months of unrelenting street protests, which will be historically remembered as the Maple Spring. By examining the emancipatory potential of interactive communication technologies in the wake of this social movement, our study grapples with similar issues as extant works in the Arab Spring corpus: state violence, political discrimination, the use of media for purposes of resistance, the occupation of space, and the interdependency of multiple online and offline sites of actions. Insofar as it describes acts of political resistance set in a Western democracy rather than in an authoritarian regime, the study
aims to offer an original perspective on the implications of creative appropriation in a political tradition that upholds the classical liberal principles of free speech, right of assembly, and the rule of law.

Mégaphone: An interactive public art installation created in response to the Maple Spring

In April 2012, in the midst of the Maple Spring uprisings, artists and production companies from diverse fields were invited to submit their concept for an interactive installation that would invite people to reflect on what it could mean to be an engaged citizen within the larger fabric of Québec society. In September 2012, the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) and the Quartier des Spectacles Partnership announced that Mégaphone, a project proposed by Montréal-based multimedia design firm, Moment Factory, had been selected as the finalist in this juried public art competition (National Film Board of Canada & Quartier des Spectacles Partnership, 2012).

Produced with public funds pooled from different sources, a technology design team at Moment Factory was then commissioned to transform a small downtown plaza into a digitally-augmented agora. Mégaphone is a site-specific architectural-scale public art installation designed with numerous input/output interfaces and system components: a microphone, an audio patch, French and English speech recognition software, eight voice amplification loudspeaker units, two media façades, and responsive stage lighting. Étienne Paquette, the conceptual mind behind this interactive technology, drew inspiration from the “Speakers’ Corner” platforms in Hyde Park, London, and in Sydney, Australia (see Figure 1), and from the traditional soapbox, to imagine an environment in the city where people could freely express their views and listen to their fellow citizens (É. Paquette, personal interview, August 26, 2013).

Figure 1: Photograph of memorial plaque of “Speakers’ Corner” in the Domain (Sydney, Australia). June 17, 2013.

Although there are several skill thresholds involved in using the installation, it was designed with multiple entry points and minimal barriers (Hornecker, Marshall, & Rogers, 2007). For instance, in its most basic use, people would simply speak into a microphone at the “Speakers’ Corner” set up on the well-delineated plaza of the Promenade des artistes. The Mégaphone would then amplify their spoken words throughout the plaza and project a selection of them in giant characters on the monumental façade of the Université du Québec à Montréal’s President Kennedy building, while the bilingual speech recognition system transcribed them in real time.

The background of the large media façade was also programmed to change color in response to fine modulations in the speaker’s voice. This design feature flooded the agora space with ambient light made up of dancing hues. As a result, listening to a speaker’s live intervention would also translate into an immersive, embodied experience for the audience in the installation space. It is noteworthy that human-computer interactivity was triggered solely by the speaker’s voice. This unique audio input-activated digital signal processing module affected the sound, the stage lighting, and what appeared on the small and monumental media façades.

Field evaluation and research methods

This study’s investigators are affiliated with the Making Culture Lab, an applied design research lab where researchers are poised to initiate and develop epistemic relationships with the different stakeholders involved in the design of interactive systems. To study the creative appropriation of Mégaphone, a multi-sited design approach was adopted. This emergent methodology consists in making observations and conducting semi-structured interviews in the multiple sites where people play a role in the creation, production, distribution, and reception of a socio-technical structure. Accordingly, investigators construct “the field-site as a network that incorporates physical, virtual, and imagined spaces” in order to get a sense of how the overall structure is crafted (Williams, Lindtner, Anderson, & Dourish, 2014, p. 84). Field observations typically describe how different stakeholders make and use artifacts, and how they dynamically influence one another in doing so. The objective is to show that local, situated phenomena may be the product of complex relationships that extend well beyond the confined location of a single site.

Previous research on the design of interactive digital urban technologies emphasizes the importance of identifying and aligning the interests of the diverse stakeholders involved in large-scale public installations (Dalsgaard & Halskov, 2010). However, during the three-month field evaluation, the investigators placed a deeper focus on end users. The principal investigator (PI) was immersed within the installation space every night, at times participating in the interventions, and at other times, adopting the ethnographer’s “fly on the wall” approach to note observations about how people appropriated the installation for their own purposes.

Over a total of 37 days during a period of ten consecutive weeks from 7 pm to 11 pm, on Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and one Monday, the PI observed more than one thousand participants actively interacting with the system and at least 4,800 audience members in the agora space. She took detailed field notes, photographs, and videos of the interventions and made observations about how people invested
the space. At the end of every night, the PI would debrief the onsite staff for a few minutes to note their own personal observations.

Prior to and after the deployment, the PI conducted interviews with the designers, the producers, the technical maintenance staff, and the computer scientists who developed the voice recognition system. During the deployment, the PI conducted short ad hoc unstructured interviews with people onsite. After the deployment, the PI conducted 60 to 90-minute post hoc interviews with 21 participants, of which 16 had interacted with the system, while 5 had remained passive observers. The analysis in this study was triangulated to find recurrent patterns between the field notes, the audio-visual recordings, and the interview data. It then probed deeper by examining related online activity that occurred prior and subsequent to the interventions under study. To further validate this external data, the informants who had posted them were asked for feedback.

Concepts to explain communication processes in real, virtual, and imagined public space

While this study’s main objective was to make in situ observations about how people creatively appropriated Mégaphone and its units of analysis consisted of individual participants and groups of users, its actual object of research was not only multi-sited, it was also multidimensional in that it consisted of physical, virtual, and imagined phenomena that were often interconnected. Moreover, field observations showed that we could not analyze how people appropriated Mégaphone to communicate without also taking into account how they physically invested the plaza space; people typically tended to appropriate both at the same time. As a result, the data analysis called for a robust set of concepts that could speak to the dual character of public space in the context of communication theory: its discursive aspects and its physical aspects.

To address this, we engaged in a transdisciplinary dialectical process, which forced us to stand back and interrogate the phenomena we had observed under a new critical lens. We drew from Mosco’s (2009) political economy of communication by mapping his theoretical framework onto data we had already collected using the multi-sited ethnographic approach. Mosco proposes three core concepts—structuration, spatialization, and commodification—that can be applied to effectively analyze the discursive (conceptual) dimension and the physical (material) dimension of technology-mediated communication in real and virtual public space.

First introduced by Henri Lefebvre in 1979, the notion of spatialization denotes “the process of overcoming the constraints of space and time in social life” (Mosco, 2009, p. 157), while structuration describes a “process by which structures are constituted out of human agency, even as they provide the very ‘medium’ of that constitution” (p. 187). The third concept in Mosco’s framework is the notion of commodification, which he defines as “the process of transforming things valued for their use into marketable products that are valued for what they can bring in exchange” (p. 127).

Mosco’s definition of commodification is most germane to this empirical study because creative appropriation can be construed as a social practice that can recontextualize a “commodified” technological artifact—or even the physical space it is embedded in—back into a form that may have some social “use value”. In other words,
one can imagine the appropriative process as an oppositional force that might reverse
the process of commodification by transforming exchange value into use-value, or
into labour-value, if we frame activism or cultural practices as forms of labour, the way,
for instance, Smythe (1977) did with audience reception. This idea has also been sug-
gested by Warner (2002), who applied it to audience reception of content when he
wrote, “appropriation of mass culture is the opposite of commodification of mass cul-
ure” (p. 102).

Another advantage in using Mosco’s entry processes to explain our field data is
that all three concepts can be used to analyze a process that comprises opposing, di-
alectical forces. Just as appropriation might be understood as a force that reverses the
process of commodification, so too can spatialization and structuration be construed
as means that can be used to opposite ends. For instance, Mosco mostly discusses spa-
tialization in terms of how a dominant class has used transportation and communica-
tion technologies to restructure space to its advantage. However, he also points out
that a number of studies have found that political organizations and social movements
tactically used the same tools to fight back, overcome geographic barriers, and reclaim
physical spaces. Similarly, from a relational and formational perspective, his concept
of structuration offers an entry point to conceptualize how social movements have
made use of communication resources to constitute themselves and organize their re-
sistance against the dominant class, while transcending traditional categories of class,
gender, and race.

The individuals and groups of resistance under study in this analysis did not con-
stitute a social movement per se because their initiatives remained local, relatively un-
structured, and far too inconsistent in their actions to follow Tilly’s (1999) definition.
However, if one follows Mosco’s (2009) concept of structuration, which describes how
people constitute their identity as a group through the very process of social action by
uniting around a specific interest or cause, one could say that they already formed an
issue public before this study.

All the activists we observed and interviewed had either met each other at events
organized around their own initiatives, or else loosely had come to know of one an-
other through social media networks and online activism between 2012 and 2013. More
importantly, they shared a single common claim: that of demanding transparency, ac-
countability, and due process in the face of acts of police brutality and misconduct
committed by the Service de police de la Ville de Montréal (SPVM). Their claim had
historical precedents that long predated 2012, but the heavy-handed policing of Maple
Spring demonstrators that has since become the enduring image of the protests has
served to raise public awareness of this problem in the city in alternative media chan-
nels. They took advantage of this momentum to increase their calls to action through
initiatives such as online activism, fundraising events, vigils, and street protests.

It is in this context that the issue public under study came to structure itself in in-
creasingly organized hyperlocal and national networks. Using Mosco’s (2009) three-
prong approach, the following analysis describes how three distinct groups of activists
that identify with this issue public leveraged the Mégaphone installation to publicize
and advance their cause.
First Mégaphone intervention: Eulogizing through a live commemorative media façade

On Wednesday, October 2, 2013, at 9:30 pm, three Montréal artists, Serge Lavoie, Rudi Ochietti, and Didier Berry, stepped up to Mégaphone’s “Speakers’ Corner” to conduct a joint action during an open mic session. Although they deliberately staged their intervention with an artistic edge, its purpose was manifestly political. What brought them together that night were two distinct incidents of discriminatory misconduct by police officers that took place in the aftermath of the Maple Spring in October 2012 and had almost cost them their lives.

They have since been actively engaged in community initiatives that seek to keep the general public informed of hard facts around the growing number of cases of police misconduct and misdemeanor in Montréal. In the year that followed their respective incidents with police officers, they came to meet many other victims of police abuses of power who engage in similar initiatives and openly exchange information with them. Thus, our research showed that there exists in Montréal a significant cluster of individuals and groups that have been actively engaged in pursuing justice in cases of police brutality and misconduct. Because they now form a critical mass, they have come to constitute robust networks both online and offline.

Like Ochietti and Berry, who use their personal website to disseminate their news and views on this problem, most of these groups utilize dedicated websites to publish their accounts of police misconduct cases, to keep a public logbook of how the judicial system has followed up on these cases, to offer commentary on relevant news articles, to raise funds for legal fees they or other victims are obliged to pay to defend themselves, to reach out to other possible victims of police abuse of powers, and finally, to list web links on existing activist groups and related resources.

Almost all these groups have a well-defined and visible identity, which they manifest through a sustained online presence. For instance, the Collective Opposed to Police Brutality (COPB) has a website that comprises over seventy French-language and English-language Web pages providing a wide range of information, including informational resources such as legal counsels, D.I.Y. legal kits, relevant statutes, lists of “bad cops” with several charges against them, as well as links to blogs, social media groups, news feeds or Web pages of other similar organizations. Perhaps more importantly, COPB maintains an archive of cases documented in various media by independent media journalists that have provided alternative coverage of misreported cases. It is noteworthy that we found COPB documents cited as primary sources.

Most of the groups that identify with this issue often refer to one another by publicizing each other’s Web pages or events, they sometimes repost one another’s content, and they even collaborate on research. For instance, not only does the COPB, the Coalition contre la Répression et les Abus Policiers (CRAP) and the Justice for the Victims of Police Killings Coalition publish links to one another’s websites, but members from these groups have also exchanged information in order to produce comprehensive lists of victims. Each of their respective websites publishes the full names of victims, the date of their decease as a result of police misconduct, and their age at the time of death. When we asked them where they had obtained these lists, they ex-
explained that they had to conduct this research themselves by sitting in the coroner’s office or police precincts leafing through reports one at a time, or else by searching newspaper archives online or in public libraries. It is noteworthy that these lists did not exist as a public body of knowledge before these activists produced them. How important is it for such lists to exist and to be made public? Does it only help advance this issue public’s cause or does it also serve the general public’s interest?7

Lavoie, Ochietti, and Berry’s Mégaphone intervention provides some insight on these questions:

We had access to this list of victims who died as a result of police brutality and I was thinking that it would be great to read the names of these victims and have them displayed on Mégaphone’s large media façade. Furthermore, I knew the police headquarter was just a few blocks away and that the police officials on the upper floor would be able to see the names of the victims appearing on the façade from their window … you know, these young men should not have died and they did … and that’s a big thing that no one ever talks about … (S. Lavoie, personal interview, January 20, 2014)

Lavoie, Ochietti, and Berry decided to use the list of names compiled by the collaborative efforts of the well-established copwatch groups to stage an intervention that transformed the Mégaphone agora into a nocturnal vigil and the imposing media façade into a commemorative monument. In front of twenty of their friends who had showed up in support of their action, the three of them took turns reading the list of the names of the seventy young men who had died as a result of police brutality by SPVM officers between 1987 and 2013 in Montréal (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Field photo of Mégaphone installation in live (performance) mode. October 2, 2013.

Source: Mégaphone created by Moment Factory. © 2013 by Claude Fortin.
As the speech recognition software processed their voice input with a 30-second delay, observers and passersby could see some of these names appear across Mégaphone’s monumental media façade (see Figure 3). Given that the voice recognition system can only transcribe the speaker’s speech at a 70 percent to 80 percent efficiency rate, some names were either misspelled or not published at all. In addition, when the system processed the words for display, it separated them and placed them randomly on what looks like, for all intent and purposes, a giant computer screen elevated on the face of a big building. The result was that the transcriptions were unreliable and visually unpredictable. When asked if they saw this as a problem, the interactants explained,

I noticed this problem right away, but I didn’t mind it because it made me feel that the mere act of reading these names had a ceremonial quality to it that was, in and of itself, very powerful ... these names had weight because they evoked real lives ... to imagine the reality of what these men experienced before their death is absolutely horrifying and it makes no sense in a society like ours. (S. Lavoie, personal interview, January 20, 2014)

I didn’t mind the informal quality of the graphics and the fact that the speech recognition system was not particularly accurate, because I saw our intervention as a spiritual and artistic gesture. We showed up after dark that evening and there we were splashing these words and these names on a huge media façade in the middle of the city. I felt that the abstract character of the transcription was thought-provoking ... it even made me wonder, what do these words and names mean? Because we were uttering these names to bring them back into memory but they were
being misinterpreted or dispersed by the Mégaphone just as the victims had been mistreated, dismissed, and forgotten by society and the news ... so I found it almost symbolic that they were like souls still suspended in mid-air ... for those of us who were there, we were able to share this moment of remembering these forgotten souls ... (D. Berry, personal interview, January 20, 2014)

Lavoie and Berry’s responses suggest that a technological platform such as the Mégaphone could be appropriated as a means to publicly conduct a eulogizing ceremony. Indeed, the artists artfully used the plaza space, the microphone, the loudspeaker units, and especially the large media façade, to turn the urban setting around Mégaphone into a memorial space as they paid homage to the victims and made their public plea for peace. Asked what they understood of what the Mégaphone could do, Lavoie and Berry said that all they knew was that its software would analyze the words captured by the voice recognition system and then display some of those words on the two media façades (S. Lavoie & D. Berry, personal interview, January 20, 2014).

Unbeknownst to them, their intervention transformed the architectural-scale media façade into a commemorative monument in two substantially different ways, which both supported the stated intentions behind their intervention. First, the names of the deceased were temporarily written in real time onto the monumental media façade until the giant interface was wiped clean a few minutes after the last speaker hung up the microphone. Second, these names became permanently inscribed into
the system’s archival database, which was designed to keep a record of all the words transcribed by the speech recognition software throughout the full ten weeks of the Mégaphone deployment. When the installation was in sleep mode, in a five-minute cycle, the system constantly updated to select and display only the words that had been “most recently spoken” in alternance with the words that had been “most frequently spoken” (see Figure 4).

In live mode, the use of the façade explicitly laid claim to both a physical space (the material appropriation of a giant screen on the plaza) and a symbolic space (evoked by the meaning of the words represented onto this screen). In sleep mode, participants were confronted with a far more complex situation: whether the names appeared or not was decided, on the one hand, by how accurately the speech recognition software processed them, and on the other hand, by an algorithm that selected which words would effectively be published. Thus, if the names were not repeated during the ten-week deployment, they might never again appear on the façade, while remaining forever inscribed in the database. In such a scenario, the database became an implicit symbolic space, a digital mausoleum in which the deceased invisibly rested in peace.

Made possible by Mégaphone’s design affordances, these dual skins of the façade—the physical vs. the symbolic, and the explicit vs. the implicit—came to define how other activists later used the installation. In order for the names of the victims to appear over and over again in sleep mode, they soon figured out that they had to keep them in priority in the system’s database. To achieve this, other groups belonging to the same issue public performed similar interventions in the weeks that followed Lavoie, Ochietti, and Berry’s intervention. As a result, the monumental façade became a giant palimpsest honouring the victims until the last day of the deployment.

Here, theories on territoriality might provide a useful frame to reflect on the possibilities that implicit and explicit spatialization can open up when interactive technology is deployed in public space. Researchers generally agree that territories serve to help people mediate their social interaction through laying claim to a space or through a person’s association with a space as a result of repeated use (Scott, Carpendale & Inkpen, 2004). The next intervention takes this intention to the next level by speaking to the specific emplacement Mégaphone was deployed in. As Basso (1996) argues, place-making can function as a spatializing practice in that it foregrounds what happened here instead of elsewhere. It does so by creating physical and symbolic associations through the narrative act of remembering and imagining.

Second Mégaphone intervention: Place-making in a live emerging digital hybrid space

Lavoie, Ochietti, and Berry were not the only activists who came up with the idea of using the Mégaphone to take a public stand against police brutality. As Steve (pseudonym) told us, the COPB also made sophisticated plans to stage their own artistic intervention:

Three of us were supposed to present ourselves at the Mégaphone on October 31, 2013 and because this was Halloween night, we had thought we might make it a costumed masquerade performance event during
which we would also read our texts ... unfortunately, we were not able to
do the intervention because there were torrential rains and the weather
was quite cold that evening. This forced us to cancel at the last minute.
(Steve, personal interview, January 16, 2014).

As we have previously mentioned, the list of names that Lavoie, Ochietti, and Berry
read at the Mégaphone was collectively produced by several groups of activists from
a research initiative originally instigated by the COPB, which publishes its own version
of the list on its Web page titled “Remember!”8 Preceding the long list of names on
this Web page is this short copy that was written in preparation for the COPB’s aborted
intervention:

Welcome to Kanien’kehá:ka (Mohawk) territory. Today, we commemorate
the dead. This mégaphone belongs to the dead, to those who have disap-
peared too early and too tragically. My voice is their voices, the voice of
those who have been unjustly murdered by the police, those unjustly mur-
dered by the SPVM. I am the voice of...[sic]. (n.d.)

Although they do not self-identify as Aboriginal, the COPB activists wanted to
make sure that those present at their intervention knew that Mégaphone was being
deployed on First Nations territory. While the colonial appropriation of Aboriginal
lands in North America stands as a stark example of the power that can be gained
through the occupation of physical and symbolic spaces, the public appropriation of
a digital technology such as Mégaphone can arguably speak to this process by provid-
ing opportunities to physically and symbolically reinvest digitally-enhanced public
sites with new meaning. As Basso (1996) writes, place-making is not only a way of con-
structing the past, it is also a way of constructing social traditions and identities, “a
venerable means of doing human history” (p. 7). In this sense, the first line of the
COPB manifesto that was to be read on Halloween night underscores how the symbolic
and the implicit character of space can be used to reclaim the power that has been lost
over its physical and explicit dimensions.

Furthermore, the COPB intended to deploy their place-making tactics by extend-
ing this occupation to online environments. As Steve explains:

The way we had organized our intervention was that we had planned for
some of our friends to come and film us with a video camera so that we
could then upload those videos on our COPB website ... we wanted to use
the Mégaphone, not only to transmit our ideas but also to publicize the
COPB: to show that we exist. Our collective is not well known and still
very much in the shadows. We do want people to know we exist so that
they know that there are activists such as us out there that are engaged in
defending the rights of all citizens when it comes to cases of injustices that
involve the police ... Mégaphone seemed to us like a tool that could give
us the possibility of doing this in a format that seemed rather user-friendly.
(Steve, personal interview, January 16, 2014)

Monday, November 4, 2013, was the last evening that Mégaphone was deployed.
There were no scheduled interventions that evening. It was open mic all night long.
Yet we saw many regular participants drop by to make their last short intervention and to say goodbye. In impromptu manner, one of the members of COPB showed up and read a eulogizing text that he had himself written, which seemed like an extended and modified version of the collective’s manifesto, except that it included the full list of names of those who had died as a result of police brutality. One of the citizen journalists who operates the alternative online media collective, 99%media, filmed the live intervention, edited the footage adding additional visual content and effects, and posted it four months later on YouTube™ under the name 89 silences (Lussier, 2014).

To trace such interventions across multiple physical, virtual, and imagined sites and to explain how virtual spaces of representation and real world places can be interconnected through digital practices, we used the emerging digital hybrid spaces framework (Fortin, Hennessy, & Sweeney, 2014). This analytical strategy proved to be a valuable tool in the context of our multi-sited fieldwork, because filming interventions and reposting them online was a practice that those who appropriated Mégaphone engaged in on a regular basis. In fact, as we will see in our next example, this process became the defining feature of one activist’s intervention on an evening organized around the theme of police brutality and judicial harassment during the Maple Spring.

Third Mégaphone intervention: Self-reporting with a live news feed in public space

During the ten-week deployment of Mégaphone, the Montréal daily newspaper, Le Devoir, had reserved and organized a total of five one-hour interventions on Wednesdays evenings from week #5 to week #9, inclusively. Each of these interventions saw the daily’s journalists use the “Speakers’ Corner” to present their editorial comments on a wide range of topics, which included local arts and culture; economic and political paradigms of the twenty-first century; cycling and urban planning for human scale; and the historical roots of political corruption in the city.

Le Devoir decided to try out a different formula for their last session, which was dedicated to the topic of public order policing during protests in Montréal. On the evening of October 30, 2013, instead of having their own journalists editorialize on this subject, the managing editor of the newspaper invited citizens that had been unfairly arrested during the Maple Spring protests to give a detailed testimony at the Mégaphone of how they had been charged and treated by the judicial system, and later profiled and discriminated against during demonstrations. Serving as an intermediary, the Maple Spring mascot and social activist famously known as Anarchopanda (see CTVnews, 2013) was asked to help identify and recruit speakers who would tell stories that had not been heard in any mainstream media channel and were compelling enough to bring injustices to light. During our interview with Anarchopanda, he explained that he contacted Cécile Riel and David Sanschagrin because theirs were the most noteworthy examples of the arbitrary, unwarranted, and unlawful arrests resulting from police actions perpetrated against citizens during Maple Spring protests; their stories left no one indifferent.9

When people hear these false stories reported on mainstream news channels, they don’t question whether it’s true or not, and therefore they don’t seek to find out what really happened. … when Le Devoir approached me
about organizing an evening on the subject of police presence on the streets, my first idea was to have victims of obvious policing and prosecutorial misconduct publicly testify ... I wanted to bring their stories out in the open because I knew that if people heard their version, they would get it ... in fact, we had been looking for ways to out these stories ...

(Anarchopanda, personal interview, January 9, 2014)

Asked if he thought that the Mégaphone had helped them achieve this, he comments:

One of the problems I see with Mégaphone is that it tends to attract people who are already well informed or actively engaged ... in the end, our interventions that night were worth the effort mainly because of the media coverage it received the next day in an article run by the daily.

(Anarchopanda, personal interview, January 9, 2014)

Anarchopanda explained that he had been routinely publishing every fact and event related to these injustices on his own Facebook™ and Twitter™ news feeds, which together are followed by over 18,000 people worldwide (21,000 at the time of writing). However, the fact that Le Devoir published an article on this particular intervention at Mégaphone the next day allowed him to republish the piece by posting its link on his news feed, thus creating a greater buzz around these testimonials and giving them a new journalistic legitimacy by virtue of the fact that they were now being covered in a highly respectable news outlet: “people tend to believe the version they hear in ‘official’ news sources” (Anarchopanda, personal interview, January 9, 2014).

His observation suggests that this form of offline/onsite digitally-augmented citizen journalism has its strongest impact when it is documented and republished in paper-based or online newspapers, or else broadcast in mainstream media channels to be later reposted online as “official” news. 10

Jean-François Nadeau is a mainstream media worker, historian, journalist, and the associate news editor at Le Devoir. Responsible for organizing some of the five Mégaphone sessions, he explained that, in fact, the main objective of the daily throughout had been to use the digital “Speakers’ Corner” and agora as a physical stage in public space to perform a mise-en-scène of the news that journalists would either tweet about live, capture in images or else write full articles about in the next day’s edition: “the Mégaphone was an opportunity for Le Devoir to stage its news” (J.-F. Nadeau, personal interview, January 15, 2014).

This intervention illustrates how the Mégaphone can be used as a digital technology that offers a publicly visible platform where the telling of a news event can be staged live, documented in different media, and later garner attention from a real critical mass audience when it is given a second life online. In other words, the Mégaphone provides a context that might help citizen journalists make news more “official.” Further, in this process, the news itself came to be appropriated and subjected to the kind of secondary instrumentalization described by Feenberg earlier in this article: Anarchopanda arguably reversed its commodification by mass media.

Asked to comment on how he measured the impact of the Mégaphone that night, Anarchopanda expressed that although using it was a positive experience, “it was really the media coverage that followed our intervention that made it worthwhile.” He
added, “The Mégaphone is not a space for formal presentations or conferences. It’s a space that lends itself to telling stories, giving personal accounts, and sharing experiences because its theatricality spurs the curiosity of passersby” (Anarchopanda, personal interview, January 9, 2014).

Of particular interest was one of the two photos that Le Devoir published with the article (see Tremblay, 2013). It shows Anarchopanda with the two key speakers standing in front of the small media façade that displays the word “Mégaphone” over the black and white projection of a crowd. The setting and the panda costume give this photo an unmistakable iconic quality, a sort of branding of the space and of the figure that has served as an emblem for the Maple Spring protests. Anarchopanda is well aware of the symbolic value of his panda suit. He admits that the donning of his costume is a tactic he deliberately uses “because it allows me to reach publics that I would not otherwise have access to” (Anarchopanda, personal interview, January 9, 2014).

Several audience members and participants corroborated these findings about the Mégaphone space during interviews. For instance, one local artist felt that it allowed her to address new audiences that she would otherwise not be able to reach online: “The problem with social media is that it only goes to your networks and your networks are limited … taking the mike at Mégaphone allowed me to reach a new audience in real public space” (B. Dajczer, personal interview, December 27, 2013). Many others remarked that even on evenings when there were not that many people, their experience of Mégaphone met a need that other digital tools could not fulfill.

According to these publics, the most appreciated affordances were: first, being able to see and hear real people talk about themselves and their opinions first-hand and in the flesh, which lent greater authenticity to their speech claims; second, being able to meet strangers and new sources of information, an affordance that may be more difficult to support with online platforms because of its “echo chamber” effect (Wallsten, 2005); third, having direct access to voices that tend to be stereotyped and marginalized in most platforms (i.e., the homeless, First Nations) and are able to self-represent at the Mégaphone; fourth, having the possibility of interacting with people in real time by asking questions from the agora; and fifth, having the possibility to network with people to form new issue publics and groups of interest around live interventions.

By allowing people to self-represent their stories and by offering a public stage for first-person news reporting, the Mégaphone arguably helped create the conditions for the emergence of digital hybrid spaces that support a new form of live citizen journalism that can be extended in time and space through sustained online presence. Our field data suggests that the iconic character of the space and of the “performances” it inspired may offer issue publics a means to produce and legitimize alternative news forms that trace the contours of their own experience.

Conclusion
This article has presented empirical data around three of the interventions we documented during our ten-week field evaluation of the Mégaphone installation. It aimed to show how interactive urban technology holds the potential to support new forms of social and political participation in public space. Drawing on Mosco (2009), we have suggested that applying a political economic lens to our field data could provide new
ways of analyzing the role and impact that digital technologies can have when deployed in public space. Specifically, we argued that Mosco’s three-prong conceptual approach—which emphasizes the processes of structuration, spatialization, and commodification—might help better explain how an interactive digital “Speakers’ Corner” could open up new possibilities to forge an alternative hegemony.

During his interview, Le Devoir’s Jean-François Nadeau pointed out that, contrary to popular belief, it was not social media, but rather the concerted actions of well-organized offline issue publics that were instrumental in structuring the revolutions of the Arab Spring. This aligns with Tufekci and Wilson’s (2012) findings; although their analysis of survey data supports the idea that the Internet and social media played a crucial role in Egypt’s Tahrir Square protests, their broader analysis argues that it is the interplay between social media, mobile devices, and satellite TV and the “complex intertwining of multiple online and offline spheres” (p. 376) that contributed to the formation of a new system of political communication in the Middle East and Africa.

Indeed, as a journalist and associate editor, Nadeau warns against the “colonialism of online media,” which tends to create ghettos of reading publics and of information resources (J.-F. Nadeau, personal interview, January 15, 2014). Our study supports this view that online digital technologies alone are unlikely to leverage social change or support the need for a robust press. Our field findings suggest that the key to empowerment lies in creating a synergy between sustained online and offline digital practices. Used together, they offer a wider range of communication tactics that support appropriation, structuration, and spatialization as constitutive processes. It is in this sense that the framework we have developed around emerging digital hybrid spaces might prove useful in explaining the communication processes that shape and structure social groups today: digital practices need to be traced both online and offline.

We believe that one of the main limitations of our study, however, is that its analysis describes practices of resistance without contextualizing them within broader political economic issues. It would be legitimate to ask questions such as: What was this issue public’s relationship with the stakeholders who manage the public space in which Mégaphones was deployed? With its co-producers, considering one of them is a federal government agency (i.e., NFB)? With its designers who are a private company? Given that it is produced with public monies, is a public art installation like Mégaphone institutional art? How does the creative appropriation of a commissioned public art installation tie in with the role of artists in gentrification debates? Are the subversive cultures that use it co-opted into dominant power structures? We reflected on these questions because it became obvious to us that the appropriation of Mégaphone was not performed outside of these power structures but within them. We did not engage further on this path of inquiry because its scope seemed to call for a whole new inquiry altogether.

Indeed, during our field study, we chose to focus our lens mostly on participants to narrow in on the emancipatory potential of creative appropriation. Illustrating this allowed us to show that emerging digital hybrid spaces can be produced through live ceremony and performances augmented by a giant digital façade, live place-making that interweaves real and virtual spaces, and live news-reporting that announces and
relays news in different media forms through online and paper-based media after having been staged at the Mégaphone installation.

Our findings suggest that publicly accessible digital tools such as Mégaphone might offer diverse publics alternative possibilities for appropriating new media technologies while reclaiming public space. We believe this provides an interesting counterpoint to handheld devices that tend to promote social cocooning and the atomization of publics and thus confine voices to discursive online spaces of representation. While the power of critical theory lies in combining theory and praxis in order to bring about positive social change, our study suggests that when discursive space and physical space are appropriated together, voices can lay claim to the real spaces we inhabit, body and mind. For if history has shown that power can be negotiated in the act of communication, it is our material conditions of existence that we seek to change.

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Notes

1. Mosco (2009) explains spatialization in chapter eight by extensively discussing processes such as vertical and horizontal integration; media concentration and convergence; transnational media ownership; product placement; and spatial agglomeration (as a form of ownership of, or claim on, public space) by corporate entities, to name a few.

2. Some of the content in the section describing the first Mégaphone intervention was first published in Fortin & Hennessy (2015).

3. Detailed accounts, interviews, and video evidence of both these cases are presented in Abel and Fournier (2013).

4. Many of these websites include published or downloadable copies of relevant legal statutes, such as, for instance, the Code of Ethics of Québec Police Officers, the Montreal Bylaw P-6, the Québec Bill 78, and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms—sometimes with user-friendly cheat sheets that summarize or explain them.

5. COPB is cited by the Ligue des droits et libertés, l’Association des juristes progressistes, and l’Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante (2013) as a primary source of information. Québec social movements expert, Francis Dupuis-Déri, has also often used them as a primary source in his works. In addition, we found many provincial organizations that make COPB publications available on their website as Web pages or as downloadable documents.

6. The Justice for the Victims of Police Killings Coalition is also known under the French name, Coalition justice pour les victimes de bavures policières.

7. Fortin (2014) offers a more in-depth discussion of these questions supported by empirical data and analyses conducted with members of these groups.
8. Because, at the time of writing, this Web page is only published in French, we have used our own creative licence to loosely translate into English the headline “Souvenez-vous!” as well as the copy on that particular Web page: http://cobp.resist.ca/en/documentation/souvenez-vous.

9. According to Anarchopanda, the most reliable article that has since been published on their respective stories by the mainstream press is Rettino-Parazelli (2013).

10. For instance, one of the top search results we obtained during our online research for articles and media on Lavoie, Ochietti, and Berry’s stories, was, in fact, a YouTube™ link that reposted the Radio-Canada investigative newsmagazine episode in which their stories are featured. It is noteworthy that the YouTube™ link of the reposted video appears high up in the results of a Google™ search, whereas the original Radio-Canada archive of the programme (Radio-Canada, 2012) required considerable effort to find, even when we looked for it directly on the public broadcaster’s website. This speaks to the fact that footage reposted on YouTube™ is generally easier to find than on the original “official” source site, and more importantly to the idea that a document often appears higher up in Google™ search results when it has been reposted on YouTube™ because of its prominence, and more particularly, because of the platform’s SEO strategies. We thank Jennifer Nine for her discussion on this point.

Interviews

Anarchopanda (pseudonym), 2014 January 9, Montréal, Québec.

Didier Berry, 2014 January 20, Montréal, Québec.

Brigitte Dajczer, 2013 December 27, Montréal, Québec.

Serge Lavoie, 2014 January 20, Montréal, Québec.

Jean-François Nadeau, 2014 January 15, Montréal, Québec.

Étienne Paquette, 2013 August 26, Montréal, Québec.

Steve (pseudonym), 2014 January 16, Montréal, Québec.

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Fortin, Claude. (2014). The Maple Spring as the background for the flourishing of the Fifth Estate in Québec or how the Millennials appropriated interactive digital technologies to rise up and politically engage. Stream, 6(1), 23–52.


