

John Bingham-Hall

Imagined community and networked hyperlocal publics

**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Bingham-Hall, John (2017) *Imagined community and networked hyperlocal publics*. [Architectural Design](#), 87 (1). pp. 64-71. ISSN 1554-2769

DOI: [10.1002/ad.2133](https://doi.org/10.1002/ad.2133)

© 2017 [John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/69817/>

Available in LSE Research Online: March 2017

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final accepted version of the journal article. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

Imagined community and networked hyperlocal publics

Why should we care about hyperlocal media? Because they will re-invent local democracy, connect citizens directly to one another in networks of cooperation and deliberation, produce data on the sentiments and opinions of constituents for their political representatives? Perhaps, though to attribute these utopian ideals to technology is to deny due credit to the physical labour still invested in the building of effective local publics. Communication technologies, for many designers, are imagined as instrumental: we should care about them because they help people do things.

Whether from the industry “smart city” perspective or the more activist (though increasingly industry co-opted) “smart citizen” framework, design thinking is focused on technology’s ability to do things in new ways – its instrumental value for civic participation, citizen-created data, bottom-up planning and so on. Design is inherently future-focused, encoding assumptions about what communication should be for, assuming that new ways of doing things will result in the disruption of pre-existing ways of sharing information.

Some new platforms have indeed impacted positively on the workings of localized political action. But this goal-oriented mode of technological innovation belies the lived reality of narratives and emotional affect through which people have always imagined their relationship with the spaces they inhabit and the publics they co-habit them with. What we call communication technologies now – whether the hardware of devices, the software of platforms, or the infrastructure of the internet – are of course not the first technologies to encode, store and transmit information. But the particular technologies of the 21st century seem, as they are perceived to take us further from nature, to have amplified this instrumental mindset.

The Medium is the Message

For political philosopher Hannah Arendt, in 1958, publishing, or *making public* through communication, was a way of creating a shared reality out of “uncertain, shadowy” subjectivity (1). In *Media, Modernity and Technology* (2006), sociologist David Morley foregrounds the “phatic” role of communication – the polite greeting that has no instrumental value but establishes public civility, for example (2).

This process should not always be put to *work*. Communicative acts, from writing a letter to sending a tweet, have always had deeply symbolic qualities whose affect can supersede their content. Whether there can be phatic qualities to the masses of communication that now takes place solely between computers remains to be seen, but any transaction between humans, even if mediated, must be recognized as partially symbolic.

So to return the question of why we should care about hyperlocal: it is because, to quote Arendt again, “the presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves” (3). Understood as the adoption of communication technologies for the circulation of texts in and about neighbourhoods, hyperlocal media is a setting to witness and experience the meaningfulness of place alongside others doing the same. Place is not just an inherent feature of space. It is performed through the way spaces, and the people and artifacts wrapped up in them, become shared concerns, get discussed, become chronicled in censuses and names, documented in watercolour, or on Instagram.

These acts of communication are rarely, on the surface of it, useful. They are the public chatter given value by Morley rather than the rational discourse longed for by sociologist and philosopher Jurgen Habermas in his classic analysis of the public sphere published in 1962 (4). Their value is not in content but in the pathways they open up between people and the subtle perceptual reinforcement of the coherence of local identity. We will return to this after asking another question: why “4D” hyperlocal?

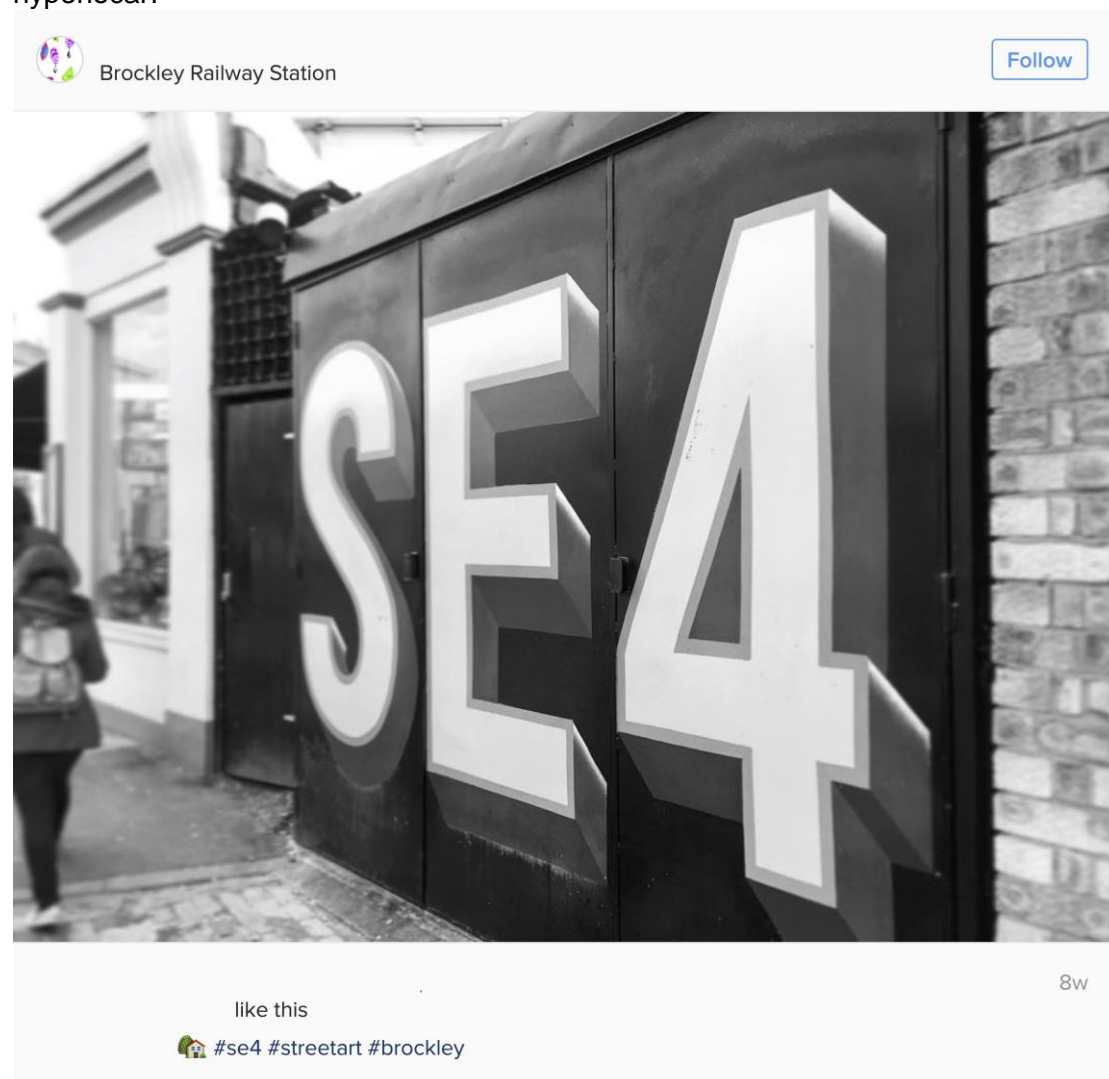


Image 1: Instagram of a mural near the station in the London neighbourhood of Brockley, showing its postcode district SE4. Urban space is and always has been performed as place through multiple layers of mediation: the postcode is a virtual boundary, represented as street art, documented in social media

Historical Time as the Fourth Dimension

In the 1990s internet theory foregrounded the two-dimensional affordances of this new technology: flattening bodies, erasing physical and spatial inequalities, becoming a value-free plane onto which constructed identities could be projected. This new aspatial world seemed an escape from the violence of cities in the late 20th century, to the extent that one commentator gleefully proclaimed: “the solvent of digital information decomposes traditional building types” (5).

In fact, the first time information could be transmitted across space faster than it could be carried by man or beast was with the invention of the semaphore in 1792, which carried informational codes at the speed of light (plus a little time for operating the signals), allowing “symbols to move independently of geography” and producing what felt then like a decoupling of ethereal media and the contingency of the ‘real’ world (6). Communication, though, may traverse but it does not transcend space. It is always reliant on infrastructures, the issues that living together generates, local knowledge and language, even geology. The acknowledgement of this in the early 21st century led to a concern for the way geography shaped communication, moving the discourse into three dimensions. Geographer Matthew Zook in 2008 showed at a global scale the uneven geographies of the production of the web’s content (7). Around the turn of the 20th century sociologists Keith Hampton and Barry Wellman showed that the introduction of the internet into a previously unwired suburb could intensify both local and global awareness (8), leading Wellman to propose the term “glocalism” (9).

Total Number of CONE and Country Code Domains by City, January 1999

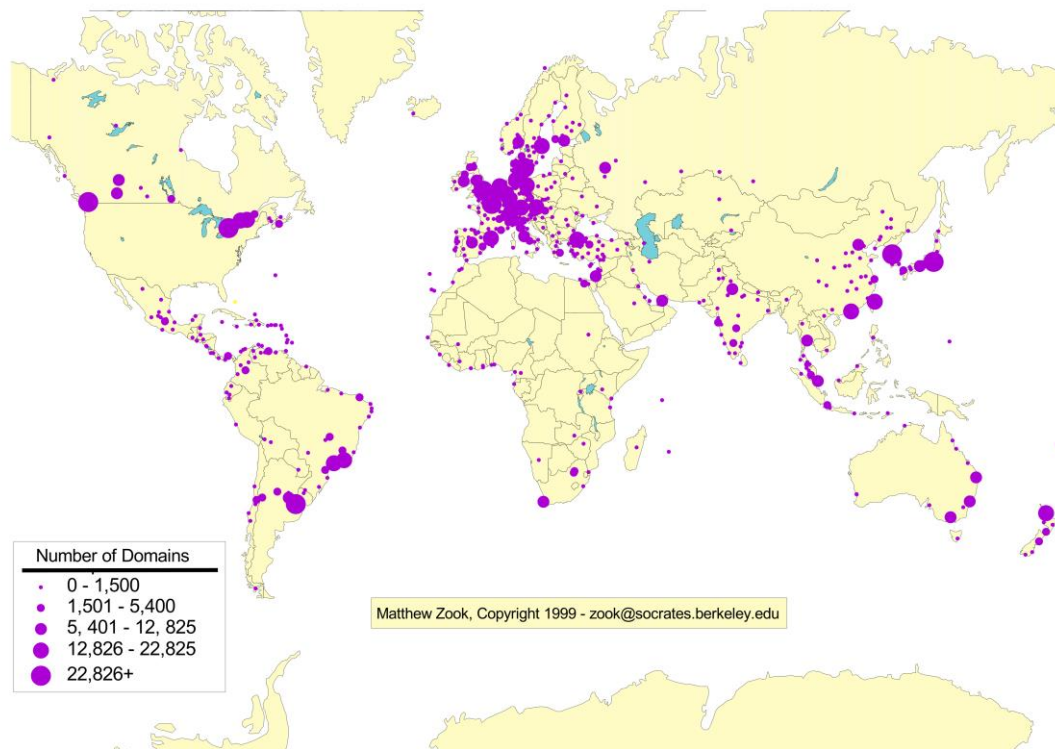


Image 2: Map of global domain registrations by city in 1999. Communication technology does not transcend space but is shaped by patterns of urban concentration and inequality © Matthew Zook

But digital information is just another form of writing. According to foundational media theorist Marshall McLuhan in 1967, “the goose quill” – early communication technology – “gave architecture and towns” (10). Even writing was not the first way in which information was freed from the limitations of bodies together in space. John Durham Peters, in his 2015 history of “elemental media”, traces the writing of culture back to pre-linguistic man: grave markings and cave paintings were a way of encoding and projecting memory through time (11). Processing, storing, and transmitting information, he argues, is the essence of the human, and media are the machines that do this work.

Time, of course, is the 4th dimension. But the historical is a timescale missing from our conception of the use of new communication technologies in cities. Are they

really so new, so 'disruptive' (to use the popular tech industry terminology)? Overemphasizing continuity can be unhelpful – to imagine social media as unproblematically analogous to the Greek agora (12) is to hide so many communicative inequalities and distinct protocols it encodes (even if history has hidden the inequalities of the overly idealized agora itself). But an historical view of the way we communicate in cities *is* important. Futurology is all too easily co-opted as a sales pitch: 'I've seen the future, and my product will take you there'. As UCL Bartlett Professor of Urban Form Laura Vaughan has argued, we will understand the future of cities by looking at their past (13). The same is true of urban communication, and the technologies that facilitate it.

A Historically Grounded Open-Source City

So what do we learn from past communication practices in the city? Habermas linked the emergence of a national social consciousness with the growth of postal systems, carried on horse overland and by trading ships from the Americas and Far East. The burgeoning trade in newspapers, supported by these expanding communication networks (after all, 17th century trading ships carrying printed words across the seas were the trans-oceanic optical cables of their day), was bolstering a new "reading public" of individuals in virtual, imagined communion with fellow readers of current affairs. Benedict Anderson describes the reading of newspapers as a daily "ceremony" through which national societies are imagined through imagined commonality with unknown others (14). Networks of communication have the processing power to transform geographical space into social place, through the circulation of shared texts, language, and issues, that hold discrete individuals together as the continuous form we call society.



Image 3: Nicholas Sanson's map of the national postal system in France in 1632. The development of networks of communication in Europe in the 17th century aided the emergence of the imaginary of the nation as a socio-spatial unit © Princeton University Library

So while 17th century coffee houses are idealized as the sites of critical, unmediated political debate, in contrast to today's rooms of glowing screens, they actually relied on these flows of mediated information. Habermas foregrounds the rational and democratic nature of these gatherings, but they reveal something else: a timeless interflow between mediated and immediate. The public discourse that took place here was based on a shared focus on something external – the framing of issues as causes for public concern. No doubt it was also a pretext for togetherness, gossip, drinking, business deals: side effects of the public sphere that cannot be seen within the content of media.



Image 4: Interior of a London coffee-house, unknown artist, 17th century. Printed news traded across Europe provided the basis for debate - the line between the 'virtual' space of communication and the 'real' space of physical encounter is always blurred

Even in the revered Roman forum, on the basis of which so many urban designers have tried to create public spaces for community encounter, conversation was based on affairs of the city that were documented and distributed by the gazette of the Senate. Media store, frame and transmit ideas giving common ground for face to face talk. We gather around screens, discuss books. All but the most intimate human contact is triangulated via an external reference point on a network of information flows much larger than our immediate experience.

Geographies and Ecologies of Hyperlocal Media

What does all this mean for hyperlocal media? The south-east London neighbourhood of Brockley was an early adopted of hyperlocal media in the form of the blog Brockley Central, which was established in 2007 and which I have been researching since 2012 (15). Traces of all these enduring characteristics of media can be seen in the way Brockley's residents relate to the blog, to one another, and to the the space in which they live.

Many of its readers perform their involvement in local life simply by being informed, valuing the abstract sense of connection this offers over the actual ability to communicate with neighbours. This is borne out in the network of Twitter

relationships in Brockley. Working with Stephen Law at UCL's Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis, we mapped the network of connections between Brockley Central's Twitter followers (16). Highly connected profiles like Brockley Central and other blogs, local businesses, councillors, and a few vocal self-appointed spokespeople, produce a local public sphere of opinion on behalf of an audience of onlookers with few of their own interconnections. This is not a public sphere of direct encounter between people, but of triangulation via well-known local people and issues.

Readers interviewed speak about an abstract "we" and "us", representing an imaginary of social cohesion belonging to a specific space, without the needing or indeed wanting to actually know who it consists of. This assuredness of belonging to a common world is a phatic property of the local public sphere: what matters is not what is being discussed, but the fact that "we" are reading it and have an opinion. The space of that common world is strongly shaped, in the minds of its readers, by the distribution of locations the blog covers. Brockley as a place is performed as something that is not evenly distributed. It is a public realm strongly present along the main road, which is also the location of the most connected businesses on Twitter, and less so in surrounding residential areas. As Matthew Zook showed globally, centralised locations are also more effective at producing the public sphere on a hyperlocal scale.



Image 5: Heatmap of locations that are the topics of posts on the Brockley Central hyperlocal blog over 2 years (2013-2015) collected by the author. As postal networks helped perform the coherence of national territory, the distribution of these locations shapes the perception of hyperlocal place but in uneven ways that are linked to spatial accessibility Overlay Data © Author. Background map: Stamen Design, under CC By 3.0. Background Data by OpenStreetMap, under ODbL. © OpenStreetMap contributors, <http://www.openstreetmap.org/copyright>

Sometimes residents do come into contact, though, in cafés, at events, or by being retweeted by a local business. The abstract is kept alive by materializing as something physical from time to time, but the smoothness of these physical encounters relies on the abstract realm. Talk with strangers and acquaintances is based on the external focus on local issues or goings on. Brockley Central ensures a common awareness of and interest in these issues. Though it is a specific, largely

middle class, public that reads the blog, it is no coincidence that it is the same public that goes to the cafés, shops, restaurants and local events it recommends. There is a feedback loop between mediated and immediate public life.

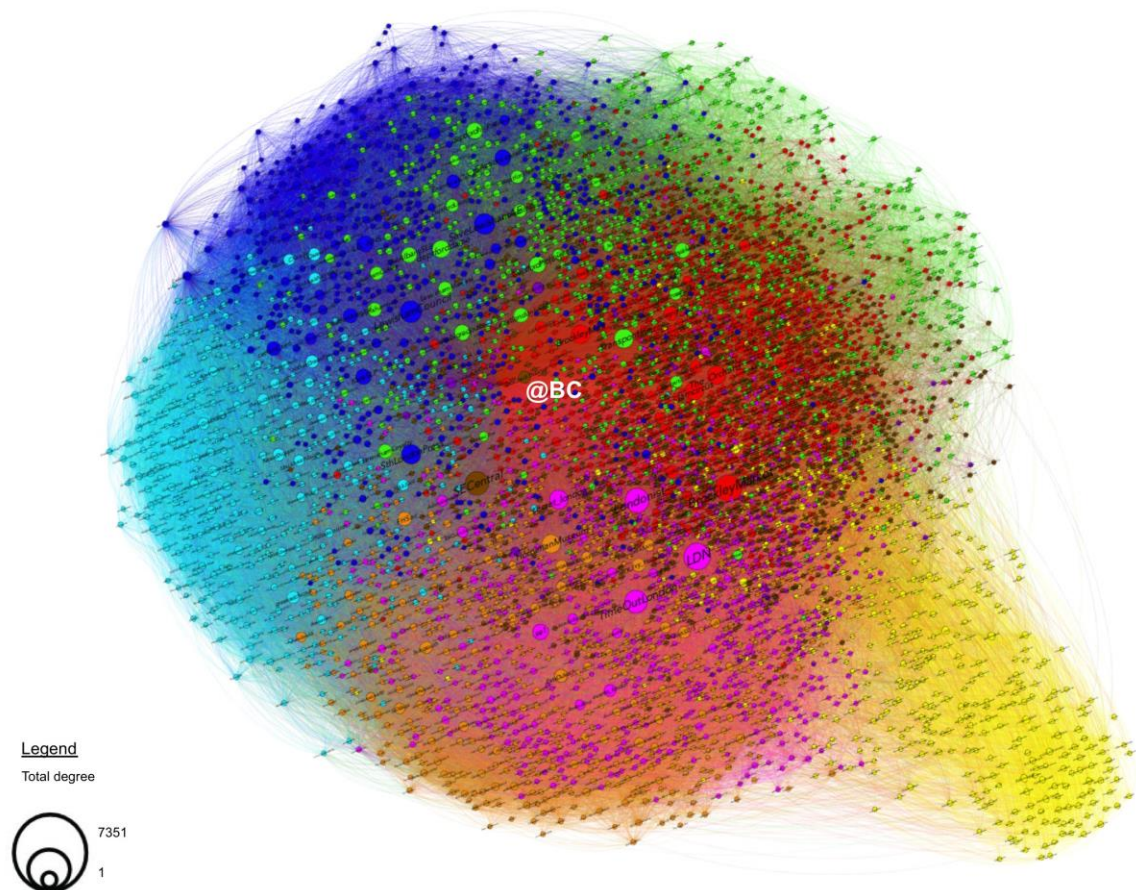


Image 6: Network map of Brockley Central Twitter followers with each is sized by its number of followers and in colour groups of densely connected profiles. The local Twitter-sphere is focused around well-connected businesses and public figures, with individual residents as onlookers mostly disconnected from one another. Reproduced from John Bingham-Hall and Stephen Law, "Connected or Informed?: Local Twitter Networking in a London Neighbourhood," *Big Data & Society* 2, no. 2 (July 1, 2015) under CC By 3.0.



Image 7: Locations of businesses in Brockley Central's Twitter network with size showing number of followers in the network and colour drawn from the network map. The most connected profiles are located along the main road, and businesses that are linked spatially are more likely to follow one another Overlay Data © Author. Background map: Stamen Design, under CC By 3.0. Background Data by OpenStreetMap, under ODbL. © OpenStreetMap contributors, <http://www.openstreetmap.org/copyright>

Anonymity and impersonality endure, though. They have always been a feature of cities, since the idle gossiping and political posturing of the Roman forum, and earlier. They enable urban society to be progressive and liberal as opposed to what Richard Sennett has called the “tyranny” of the community (17). Shared concern for issues form publics (18) – loose, conflictual, constantly changing social constellations in specific but overlapping spaces – rather than communities, which are spatially bounded, static, and in consensus. The hyperlocal public is a subset of the wider public sphere, supported by the circulation of local stories through a multiplex network of blogs, Twitter, face-to-face chat, leaflets, posters on trees, and so on. The value of this network is not necessarily what it can *do*. Instead its symbolic value and its physical layout gives its hyperlocal public, in the words of media scholar Sandra Ball-Rokeach, the “ability to ‘imagine’ an area as a community” through “stories about ‘us’ in this geographical space” (19).

Endnotes

- (1) Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.
- (2) Morley, David. *Media, Modernity & Technology: The Geography of the New*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2007.
- (3) Arendt, 1958, pp. 5-6.
- (4) Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. MIT Press, 1991.
- (5) William J. Mitchell, *City of Bits : Space, Place, and the Infobahn* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1996), p. 47
- (6) James W Carey, "Time, Space, and the Telegraph," in *Communication in History: Technology, Culture, Society*, ed. David J. Crowley and Paul Heyer (Pearson Allyn & Bacon, 2007), 125–31.
- (7) Matthew Zook, *The Geography of the Internet* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).
- (8) Keith Hampton and Barry Wellman, "Neighboring in Netville: How the Internet Supports Community and Social Capital in a Wired Suburb," *City & Community* 2, no. 4 (2003): 277–311.
- (9) Barry Wellman, "Physical Place and Cyberplace: The Rise of Personalized Networking," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25, no. 2 (2001), p. 236.
- (10) Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (London: Penguin, 1967), p. 48.
- (11) John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).
- (12) As is in William J. Mitchell, *City of Bits : Space, Place, and the Infobahn* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1996), p. 8.
- (13) L. S. Vaughan, "Is the Future of Cities the Same as Their Past?," ed. B. Campkin and R. Ross, *Urban Pamphleteer #1: Future and Smart Cities* 1 (April 26, 2013): 20–22.
- (14) Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1983).
- (15) Ongoing PhD research at UCL Bartlett School of Architecture funded in full by the UK Engineering & Physical Sciences Research Council.
<https://www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/space-syntax/people/mphil-phd-students/john-bingham-hall>
- (16) Bingham-Hall, John, and Stephen Law. "Connected or Informed?: Local Twitter Networking in a London Neighbourhood." *Big Data & Society* 2, no. 2 (July 1, 2015): 2053951715597457. doi:10.1177/2053951715597457.
- (17) Sennett, Richard. *The Fall of Public Man*. London: Penguin, 2002, p. 297.
- (18) Law, John, Karel Williams, and Johal Sukhdev. "From Publics to Congregations." CRESC Working Papers. Manchester & Milton Keynes: CRESC, 2014.
- (19) Yong-Chan Kim and Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach, "Civic Engagement From a Communication Infrastructure Perspective," *Communication Theory* 16, no. 2 (2006): 173–97, p. 178.