

LARGE SCREENS AND THE TRANSNATIONAL PUBLIC SPHERE

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Abstract

This paper is based on an ARC Linkage grant on the use of large screens as communication platform for an experimental transnational public sphere. The project involves linking large screens in Melbourne and Seoul for three 'urban media events' - 'SMS_Origin' and '<Value>'; 'Hello' and 'Dance Battle'. We argue through these experiments that large screens situated in public space in metropolitan centres offer strategic leverage for understanding the potential for networked media to form public sphere.

Keywords: large screens, transnational communication, cultural public sphere, media space, public space, Federation Square.

This paper is based on an ARC Linkage grant that explores the use of large screens as a communication platform for an experimental transnational public sphere. The project involves linking large screens in Melbourne and Seoul for three 'urban media events' - 'SMS_Origin' and '<Value>', 'Hello' and 'Dance Battle'.

In this paper, we explore how the commissioning of artists to make artwork that appears on these screens worked. The key to our exploration was the idea that art and the technologies of representation are in fact instrumental in creating public spheres, public engagements and public communication. And this research is based on an understanding of the impact that large screens have, not only with regards to civic participation and the public dissemination of information, but also in relation to the opportunity for them to be used as platforms for cultural, artistic and aesthetic practices, and the fact that they provide not only a new kind of screen, but also a new mode of interaction and engagement in public life. Methodologically, the project is about facilitating the creation of an activity and a process, rather than just simply investigating its effects after it had been initiated.

Background

Large screens are not traditionally seen as a promising space for rich forms of public interaction. They are often associated with highly over-determined excessive spaces such as the Times Square in Manhattan or Hachikō Crossing in Shinjuku where the screens are high up and dominated by advertising.

The project grew out of existing research looking at a number of large screens, particularly Federation Square in Melbourne, the *Public Space Broadcasting Project* which is run by the UK in partnership with the BBC, and a screen in Amsterdam, the contemporary art screen CASZuidas. In these projects, we identified 'a second generation' of urban screens that share a number of characteristics. One was their location: they were not in high traffic locations; they were in more traditional public spaces, such as public squares. Second, they tended to be positioned differently: they were not up high, which is characteristic in many Asian cities, but were much lower to the ground and tended to be more integrated with the architecture. Third, in terms of content, they had a more civic rather than a commercial orientation, so they were not primarily showing advertising; thus they were open to other forms of content [1]. The key question that arose from the existing research on large screens was: what kind of new partnerships are able to support content in this domain? Because large screens are a very particular type of platform, there is very little content that is produced specifically for them. The common practice has been to take content produced for cinema or for video and to transfer it onto large screens. Thinking about original content for large screens was tricky, partly because people who operate them have limited background in or budget for producing content [2]. In this project, we linked Federation Square in Melbourne to media facilities in Seoul, to test the technical, cultural, social and managerial challenges the programmers of any large screen might have to face in order to succeed in generating a new form of public sphere [3].

Federation Square is a good example of a screen integrated with the surrounding architecture. It faces back onto a gently rising plaza like a classic amphitheatre with a range of formal and informal seating, and a reasonable crowd can gather around it. The presumption is that as soon as there is capacity for

people to stop, there can be different kinds of content. One of the key events for such thinking was the national apology to the Stolen Generations that took place in February 2008 [4]. Although people could watch at home very easily, many people wanted to watch it in public. It was a very significant day and demonstrated how staging an event in a public space not only gives it a symbolic priority but also allows it to intervene in the news cycle. It allows the public to become actors by providing them with a form of agency in ways that didn't exist before. When Brendan Nelson, who was then Leader of the Opposition, made his response to Kevin Rudd's apology, a significant number of the crowd turned their backs at the screen. This very dramatic demonstration of people's disapproval of his response was taken up into the news cycle.

Spectatorship is not only about looking at the screen, it is also about the embodied experiences. In this instance, the bodily gesture not only mimics the act of defiance against Brendan Nelson but also demonstrates cultural solidarity and social connection with the Aboriginal community. It showed us a way these screens could actually enable publics to become active in different ways.

A couple of other factors drove the thinking of the possibility for large screens to be a new form of public sphere. One was the widespread availability of mobile devices – an easy mechanism for people to be able to interact with a screen. The possibility is real for large screens to become something other than a read-only device, something that could enable public communication. A further factor was the growth of broadband capacity in Australia. Because most large screens are built as stand-alone installations and they have their own dimensions and operating systems, it is difficult to link screens in different locations. But with improved Internet connectivity, we were no longer constrained by the need to purchase a satellite link in order to do a live event. We could actually link up screens in different cities and potentially in different countries. And it is certainly more affordable to run these kinds of events across the net instead of using satellite. The final frame for the project was the question of how we relate to other people in public in the context of more mediated environments in urban space.

Studies have documented the problem of modern living characterised by new forms of mobility, and global digital networks that have become such a strong part of our everyday experience. However, little attention has been paid to large screens. The fact that large screens are treated as billboards in all Australian planning jurisdictions demonstrates the status of media communication platform. This presumes that they are for static, one-way content and advertising, with no consideration of the other possibilities. We argue that large screens have a huge potential to become local nodes in these global digital networks, whilst facilitating the formation of a new form of public sphere.

In order to do so, our research project positions the large screen at the junction of two conceptions of the public sphere. One is the traditional conception of people meeting face to face in a public space. The other is the idea of a mediated public sphere that increasingly took over the kind of political and social roles that someone like Habermas associates with the public sphere [5]. However this project is really interested in a 'third' space, that is, it is interested in the way in which this form of face-to-face interaction and mediated interaction might come together. The research is also interested in affectivity and the way in which people could express themselves in more embodied ways. A key aim of the project in this regard was to think about how we understand urban public space in a context in which it is local and global, physical and immaterial, through its being connected in real time to other spaces. However, our project tries to move beyond this idea of media space or cyberspace as an abstract, global space [6] and think about how it might work if it is actually instantiated as a connection between particular groups of people in particular spaces.

SMS_Origins and <Value>

The first experiment of the project was translated into two urban events that happened simultaneously in Melbourne and Seoul. *SMS_Origins* and *<Value>* (August 7, 2009) could be described as accidental interactivities where audiences have a random encounter with the making of art through large screens. They both relied on audience familiarity with the mobile phone to encourage their participation in their telematic transfer of



Figure 1. SMS_Origins, Leon Cmielewski, Josephine Starrs and Adam Hinshaw, 2009. (© the artists, Image courtesy the artists).

data. Hence the intention of both projects was very democratic in the sense that they wanted to develop user-friendly interfaces through which anyone could easily participate in constructing the resulting artwork. These are works that expand from the individual out, gathering that information and presenting it in a new form of art every time someone makes a change to the content.

SMS_Origins is an adaptation of a segment of a larger gallery installation; it evolved from an earlier project called *Seeker* (2006). Conceptualized and designed by artists Leon Cmielewski and Josephine Starrs and programmed by Adam Hinshaw, *Seeker* asked people to map their family migration history by dragging nodes around on a touchscreen. The potential for this to work outside a gallery, using phone-based public interaction, presented an ideal opportunity to test the role large screens can play in facilitating such interaction. The work itself has a very simple premise. Visitors are invited to text the birthplace of their parents and their own birthplace to a large screen, which would then map those generational vectors with either Melbourne or Incheon being mapped as the origin point.

Running this in Incheon as well as in Melbourne allowed audiences to see the generational migration make-up of the two audiences connected by the screens. It was decided that the easiest way to make this happen was through SMS. The map on the screen grows as it accumulates all the migration vectors of people that have been participating, to become a collective map of the different crowds' family origins. This idea had previously been tested as an ambient art making exercise (within small spaces) but not applied to a large screen context. The potential for the interface to be used as some kind of interactive filler for

those really large events, for example, the Eurovision Song Contest and the AFL – those kind of tribal events where people are, in a way, barracking for their nation – was really attractive both to Federation Square and to Incheon.

There were a few technical issues because of the interface that the team was using. For example, it was very difficult to 'guess' what words people were going to text to the screen, so the team had to compile a massive dictionary of allowable words, and in this case, it was decided to select place names. This meant there a significant amount of work in terms of compiling lots and lots of place names and mapping them onto the map.

These two SMS-based interactive projects were launched in a very public and high profile event in Korea: the launch of 'Tomorrow City', a major new centre in Incheon, outside Seoul. The development of a large screen seems natural for Incheon whose ambition is to become Korea's future city – a 'smart city' based on sustainable energy and mobile technologies [7]. As a result the project received high-production values quite quickly. The project team was involved in high-level political protocols between the two spaces followed by high-level technical discussions between Melbourne and Incheon. It was a global event whose success relied on maintaining a constant level of scrutiny – checking out protocols and very specific details that in a way would be not what the team would have anticipated initially.

<Value>, which was designed by artist Seung Joon Choi, looked at the complexity within networks by using mobile technology to attain a public sense of values at any given time. This was another SMS-based interactive screen work that focussed on capturing people's values around urban space, social systems, technology and art. It

linked Federation Square in Melbourne with a large screen in Incheon. A word sent via SMS responding to the question “what is valuable to you?” generates a text and data flow. The word cloud expands depending on how much people value each word. The words may be ‘love’/‘networking’/ ‘home’/ ‘joy’. <Value> expresses what any particular group, in that time and across space, wishes to emphasize. When people both in Seoul and in Melbourne SMSed their particular term to the screens, what they simultaneously saw on the screen was a slight tectonic ripple as the data expanded according to the importance of that value. The process generates a piece of art that is very much about social and political engagement by particular groups of people.

The underlying importance of <Value> is that it is really asking people to stop and consider what they do value at any given time. As we are bombarded with information we often find that decision-making power is taken away from us, and thus it is crucial to stop and consider what is important, and to see how one’s sense of what is important is reflected in a relationship to groups of people around us. This then becomes a fairly potent public space engagement that results in very rich social and demographic content.

What is also observed in this event is the relationship between the new media architecture and the traditional urban space. The ambition of any city to become a ‘future’ city is demonstrated well in the development of large screens in new urban squares (as in the case of Incheon), but as our project discovered, such underlying ‘politics’ of large screen might not necessarily be supported or compatible with either the architecture, the technology or the community that it was meant to serve [8].

Hello

The second event the research team facilitated was *Hello*, an interactive screen-based dance work conceived by Australian artist Rebecca Hilton in collaboration with Korean choreographer Soonho Park. The idea was to test a more embodied form of interactivity, a person to person exchange instead of a text-based or phone-based interaction. The aim was not to mobilise a mass group of people but to create real transnational connections between individuals on a meaningful level. By mobilising dance as performative element within the

large screen context, we wanted to make the technology fade into the background, allowing the screen to become a conduit for physical exchanges. The result resembled a dance-based version of exquisite corpse - the surrealist game where people collaboratively construct a text or image. In the *Hello* Project, this collaborative exchange was gestural. One participant would throw out a gesture, another participant on the other side of the world would have to learn it, and then throw it back to the next person. The dance sequence itself was choreographed by Hilton and Park from movements that were donated to the project from community groups in Melbourne and in Seoul. Those short, 30-second choreographed sequences were then passed onto audiences in the two cities.

There are many technical challenges involved in realising a project like this. The first was finding a suitable screen in Seoul. Although there are thousands of large screens in Seoul, they are not exactly right for encouraging person-to-person interactivity over distant locations. This is mainly because they’re just too far from the ground, on top of tall skyscrapers. As a result, the team had to build a screen in Seoul for *Hello*. It was also difficult to find an environment that had the same kind of ambient traffic in Seoul as in Melbourne where Federation Square is. *Hello* is designed for an ambient level of people-screen interaction where audiences were not ‘captured’ but ‘allured’ to the aesthetic and social interaction projected by the screen. The district we chose in Seoul is a university district; it has a lot of theatres, and attracts a lot of people going to cultural events.

There are new challenges presented by

this event because of its embodied approach to mediated communication. *Hello* was made with two choreographers, between two cities, with two tech teams (one that spoke English and one that spoke Korean), using one screen that was built specifically for this event and one existing screen with its own infrastructure with two very different groups of audiences. The entire project was like a massive exercise in ‘translation’. Although there were new challenges presented because of these technological elements and because of the event’s embodied approach to mediated communication, one of the successful things about using dance was that it enabled us to sidestep the linguistic barriers that we had previously experienced in linking audiences in Korea and in Melbourne. This also facilitated the formation of that ‘third space’ [9], through both a direct face-to-face communication and an indirect communication based on cultural identity, self-affirmation and customs, as the following audience research exemplifies.

Dance Battle

Dance Battle is a transnational live dance event that was staged simultaneously in Melbourne, Perth and Seoul. The dance event used the standard hip-hop format of ‘the battle’ to display and examine the affordances of large screens as communicative and aesthetic devices.

Applying knowledge learnt from the previous two large screen experiments, this event expanded the project’s focus on the communicative systems and modes of management associated with improvised, real-time use of large public screens for the purposes of vernacular,

Fig. 2. Hello, Melbourne (Photograph © Scott Mcquire).



minimally governed interaction amongst people of different geographical, linguistic and cultural placements.

The project had moved from the personal sharing of private information via mobile devices (as shown in *SMS_Origins* and <Value>) to a very public participatory experience. The *Dance Battle* event drew performers from the hip-hop communities in all three cities and engaged a participant audience of several hundred over a three-hour period in each of its three networked locations.

This event was designed to be a 'quasi' competition, one that emerged in part from an understanding of how 'competitive' elements work in engaging transnational audience. People came at a certain time and danced with each other freestyle in the public space – a bit like a hip-hop street battle. Participants would be able to see themselves on the big screens, and their partners in the other city. Invitations were extended to a mix of people who know how to dance and people who would like to join in. Aside from hip-hop battles, the live link-up included special performances and free public hip-hop workshops. Each screen in the three cities had a warm up period of one-hour public hip-hop workshops. Some routines were taught to the general public during this time. Then the 12 sets of 2-minute dance 'set' battles began: first Seoul vs Melbourne; then Melbourne vs Perth; and last Perth vs Seoul. There was a break of 15 minutes for free style dance to give time for the special performances by dancers in the three cities. The dancers performed for 10 minutes each and the event finished with public dancing followed by a finale of everyone on stage and screens. Participants danced either alone or in groups. Melbourne, Perth and Seoul dancers took turns presenting short dances and each had a turn at the 'dance-off' between the cities.

The event relied on broadband network to connect screens in each location. This made the image quality better, thus encouraged better personal identification and connectivity. Through its selection of popular cultural expressions, *Dance Battle* was a successful example of working with the general public via large screens. The vast majority of audiences comprehend the difference between their experience with *Dance Battle* and that of general broadcast. The performers were really keen to show what they could do to audiences in other locations. Many said

that this event made them feel personally connected to the people in the other cities.

The performances have been treated as generators and communicators of insight and enhanced, embodied understanding about the personal, communal and social uses of large public screens. In addition to engaging its participant audiences in three cities at the time of its enactment, the dance project also generated audio-visual data and ethnographic evidences for future analysis and knowledge transfer.

Audience research

We conducted audience surveys and participation observation at each event and collected a total of about 330 surveys across the three big artworks, *SMS_origins* and <Value> (2009), *Hello* (2011) and *Dance Battle* (2012). The survey questions revolved around a series of themes, including questions about the participant's relationship to the artwork, the degree and quality of interactivity with the artwork, and the different experiences of this particular kind of artwork to other kinds of digital media experiences. We also asked a series of questions around participants' connection to place and people in order for us to think about transnational connections and identity: the experiences of their relationship to other people in the square, in the same space. What the audiences saw differently on the screen in Korea than those in Australia point to broader, transnational, cross-cultural issues. For the *Hello* dance project additional questions were asked about their experiences of learning or teaching the dance, and with *Dance Battle*, questions comparing the kind of competitive nature of the hip hop dance battle to previous kind of experiences of online gaming, for example. In this way, each event tried to test the conceptual frameworks of the project, but demonstrated at the level of audience participation, the quality of cultural participation and cross-cultural engagement [10].

The whole project in terms of audience participation can be summarized in terms of two trajectories. The first reflects new kinds of embodied experiences or 'cultural semantics', which take into account cultural specificity and context in relation to corporeal reality – the changes in semantics in relation to technologies in use. In short one can think of this as a hybrid framework that tries to combine

technology, body, community and place – the body experience of cultural participation. The other level of audience engagement and cultural participation we tried to test and demonstrate is cross-cultural audience engagement. The screen is viewed as the contact zone – a space where two cultures come together – a space of hybridity and a space of translation.

The first event *SMS_origins* and <Value> used the mechanism of texting. Texting is where you see cultural semantics at work – how working with mobile technologies has the capacity to transform the place and community. Quotes from interviews during the event demonstrated how the artwork has transformed audience experience from that of a personal to a public experience, and indicate that a transformation of place has also occurred.

The second event, the *Hello* event, took place in Federation Square and in Seoul. There were many different environmental factors between the two cities and the two events. The key difference was that two audiences perceive distance and proximity very differently. The Australian respondents perceive the event as evidence of the physical distance that separates the two countries - the ideas of globalisation and transnationalism were motifs of space and time distancing. In contrast, the Korean respondents said, "It was really amazing, we felt so close, like we were really physically together." Here their understanding of globalisation and transnationality is really about time and space compression, coming together in one world. Their practices of connectivity are differently perceived as well. The Australian respondents talked about the dance in the following terms: "Before we dance, we talk, but after we were dancing, you know, I felt that there was no more connection." The Korean respondents on the other hand said, "Wow, it was through dancing that we built this connection." To the Australian audiences, dance appears to be public but anonymous - there's a sense of alienation and depersonalisation in the dancing, whereas the Korean response tells us that dance is a form of shared consciousness that will help to build connection. The event also had a very different transformative impact on the two audiences. In Australia it was more about cultural differences: "It's useful, finding out about culture coming together as one." It is really about, "I want to find out about the other culture

and learn about the cultural differences”. In Korea there was no desire for the search of cultural differences at all, it was instead about personal similarity: “I felt like we became good friends, I wanted to be friends with them more.”

The last event – the *Dance Battle* in Melbourne, Perth and Seoul, brought new revelations about the use of large screens in public space. Overall, respondents found the event very different to other kinds of dance battles, especially given that the mediation of technology complicated the relationship between the self and others. As one opponent noted, there was no eye contact with the other person, and thus “It was very hard, you know, I couldn’t even visualise them, I didn’t know who my opponent was, I couldn’t do the moves, I couldn’t visualise my movement at all.” Participants also said that there was a lack of local space because of the lack of corporeal co-presence. This seems to suggest that engagement was very much at the level of spectatorship, rather than communication. People had to look at the screen to see what the opponent was doing in order to top the move. Experience of connectivity was characterised very much in terms of reciprocal interaction, ‘you have a move and I will try to top your move and back and forth’. It’s very much like co-creation or telling of stories, ‘you tell one part, I add on’. In the experience of sociality, participants felt that there was a sense of community based on the sharing of geographical space. The following quote from the Perth event shows the sense of sociality and geography of place is very much intra-local rather than transnational: “It was a good opportunity for me to interact with other Perth people,” and “this was really good because it was an opportunity for us to take over the Northbridge area”. On the contrary, the Korean quotes highlighted the transnational experience of the event, but their affirmation of the transnationality was very much couched in terms of national identity: “It was very lively, but you know, I cheered a lot for our Korean dancers.” One can start to see this kind of transnational sharing of a common culture coming together as a result of sociality and co-creation.

Conclusion

How to make sense of the cognitive scramble this project has generated? It is interesting to look back at the list of all of the moments where protocol is

required, such as where some alienated device needs to signal to another alienated device and say, “Are you here? Are you hearing me? What do you need and what can I give you?” “Now are you hearing me? What did you just give me?” These are all moments of negotiation, which you would imagine the technicians would have worked out by now, but of course when two national cultures and two different subsets of venture capitalism and entrepreneurial technology-driven profit enterprise are brought together there are thousands of different protocols possible. This project started from that taken-for-granted attitude towards the use of large screen, in particular the thought that it will be so simple to just get people to communicate (talking, or not even that, gesturing) to each other by linking them together on large screens. It’s so simple!

The project has created a multitude of scenarios and geo-political contexts in order to test the above presumption. These iterative dynamics happen often simultaneously in the course of the project – from very personal responses to the screen to a kind of protected environment where people can perform in the open. There has been a learning process throughout and the feedback from the first project, the *SMS_Origins* and *<Value>*, fed into the idea of thinking outside the linguistic paradigm in the *Hello* and *Dance Battle* projects.

What we’ve learnt from all of these events is that what may be referred to as a set of second-generation screen practices involve not only technical protocols but also political, cultural and social ones. The challenges and protocols we’ve described above are just a fraction of what we had to negotiate. For example, in the *Hello* project, it turns out that in Korea, “People won’t dance out in open space,” whereas semi-intoxicated Melbourne people - try and stop them. So how do you negotiate that kind of psychologically set of precepts that everyone has? And then of course there are large legal and public infrastructural protocols as well.

There is no simple answer to each question when we try to get the technological, psychological, sociological, legal, national, cultural protocols aligned, except this idea that we all exist inside ideological state apparatuses that structure us. Our journey started from this taken-for-granted notion that an apparatus is a kind of configuration of a tool that allows us to work with the rest of the world and

each other, but of course the tools shape us as well. Some of the great apparatus theories were applied to cinema, especially studio-based cinema, such as Tino Balio’s studies of American film studio systems [11] and Jay Leyda’s studies of Soviet cinema in the 1930s [12]. That kind of apparatus theory is very relevant to the intensely complicated, quick-feedback systems that digital and interactive network configurations produce. There is no simple way to come out of applying that kind of apparatus thinking, but we have attempted to go beyond these ideas based on what we learned from these projects and we know now that it is possible to work with alternatives.

This project is structured around the concept of community involvement, but it demonstrates that there is no easy or natural way for large urban screens to be used by the public. In fact, according to Federation Square, this curated content for community engagement accounts for only five to ten per cent of the lived time in the square. How to fill the cracks, the gaps, the lived moments of day and night in the public precinct, is an opportunity but also a daunting task for programmers of large screens. The reason this project has been of particular significance may be because the unexpected outcome of public interactivity due to Federation Square’s commitment to curating original aesthetic content. It is a grand experiment, at least for Melbourne, as a large screen in a very significant public place privileged by its geography. To have such a toy, to have such an asset with such potency, with such power, is an irresistible opportunity.

But what can happen to screens in less privileged locations? What do these sorts of projects do to provoke person to person connection in public spaces in different ways? Our project has provided us with an opportunity to test such inter-screen connections underlying the above questions. We discovered among many other things that it is not just about programming, the anticipated and the expected contents. We discovered that experimentation is at the heart of public engagement. Such an organic process demands operators of urban screens to try to capture a little bit of inspiration, or hijack a little bit of attention in unexpected ways. Being able to do interesting, different, engaging and interactive things on a big old screen is certainly fuel for that agenda.

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