

# Politics of the Archive: Through Plugs, Publications and the History of Electric Labor

by Jaime Kirtz

At the beginning of the week I began with the question: what are the politics of the archival space? This was driven by my recent work helping with renovations at the Media Archaeology Lab and the frustrations that came with redesigning the space, as well as my exposure and work with the tensions of cultural studies and political economy over the past two years. As I move from my coursework to comprehensive exams and my dissertation, I have questioned my methods, object of study and academic spaces (both physical and intangible), thus having a week to dissect these areas via various methods, discussions and practices, helped immensely. Ultimately I see the work I conducted during the course as providing material for an essay(s?) and a dissertation chapter as well as shaping the underlying structure of my dissertation. Further, it brought forth my interest in the intersections (or lack of) between gender, theory and technology, which have profoundly re-shaped my dissertation over the past week. While I have always been interested in gender and technology, partially from my experiences as a female in a hypermasculine, technologically informed field, the discussions with the professors and other students provided me with new avenues, such as examining electric advertisements in early *Ladies' Home Journal*, which I had not previously considered.

I propose the following sections for an essay or essay

collection, with small excerpts which I have written so far.

**(1) Considering space, neoliberalism, the university and political economy as way to introduce my area of study. This also consists of introducing the changes to the privatization of the public.**

As globalization becomes an omnipresent political force in our society and culture, which results in tensions with democracy and nationalistic discourse, the idea of borders and delineated spaces are bound up in these tensions. Increases in uncertainty regarding identity occur as global citizenship is produced and marketed through international neoliberal interests, thereby enacting a response from communities, i.e. nation-states, to secure their own representation by declaring their position (). Thus, through basic differences in geography via borders nations maintain their distinct identities, even while promoting international open trade agreements and claiming goals of world unity. These irresolvable tensions have been articulated by many political economy theorists such as David Harvey and Andrew Calabrese, and are essential to understanding the assemblages in current contemporary life, specifically life within highly political spaces, such as the university. Throughout the past several centuries, university culture has been influenced by neoliberalism while also supporting it through developing and reflecting the rhetoric of progress as well as through emphasizing rationality and empiricism. At the heart of this shift lies in the slippages, interpenetrations and reconfigurations between the public and private, which ultimately help construct and are constructed by culture. Thus, as the public becomes privatized, seen through the privatization of the universities, the demarcations of space and ownership are less available to the public and public inquiry while the very definition of public is questioned.

Spaces and borders mark areas that designate access and ability between communities, individuals and ideologies. Universities are political spaces that establish various iterations of the inside/outside dialectic: whether through income levels, religious identification or even gender, the university awards and restricts entrance to various type depending upon their foundational ideologies. These constructs, which are perpetuated and created by institutions, illustrate antagonistic relationships that produce forms of power, similar to those throughout society and culture as discussed by theorists from Michel Foucault to Stuart Hall. The history of the politics of space is established in the book, *The Politics of Space and Play*; in the first sentence the authors state: "in a world characterized by deep-seated, growing inequalities and highly asymmetrical concentrations of wealth and power, it hardly seems necessary to insist that the spaces through which we move and the places in which we live are thoroughly political, if not always explicitly politicized" (Clewer et al. 2012). However, the authors make a salient point for continuing this discussion: namely, that while space is always politicized, it is also always in flux (Clewer et al. 2012). Therefore, looking at changing spaces allows a deeper study of these assemblages, while also developing methodologies that combine various techniques and schools of thought, in order to establish suggestions and considerations for new types of research and research locations.

**(2) Discussing specific models of space from the national archives and Smithsonian to non-traditional type archives and why non-traditional archives offer such an illuminating perspective on this problem.**

Accessibility and ownership have become key terms in many socio-cultural-political debates surrounding the privatization of the public, both in government structures and universities. The space of the university itself has changed to models based upon efficiency, progress and notoriety, as Russell Jacoby discusses in *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture In the Age of Academe*. With this shift has come changes to the types of research, the researchers produced by the academy and even the physical spaces in which this research and learning takes place. There are numerous possibilities for discussion regarding the university and accessibility from the open access movement in academic publishing to admission standards and class dynamics; however, what is often overlooked critically are the spaces in which space itself is highly politicized and often at a high premium. Many studies have examined the role of archives in libraries and their efficiency. Archives present an interesting moment in the university, specifically with the digital revolution in libraries that seek to preserve documents by digitizing them in order to save space, among other concerns such as staffing and funding. Library Studies and Digital Humanities have addressed or attempted to address these issues surrounding preservation and accumulation of material in digital format. This multifaceted issue, which has a productive yet tense relationship with the neoliberal interests of the university, is space of creativity, innovation, consumption, exclusivity and power.

But what about the archives that are not official library spaces or are outside the basic digitization model? Archives such as the Residual Media Depot and the Media Archaeology Lab are sites of intersection between public access, collective knowledge, private space and gender constructs that all contribute, are produced by and work against the privatization of the university and its long term effects. Jonathan Sterne

provides an ethnographic account of his encounters with the archives and media history in "Rearranging the Files: On Interpretation in Media History." This article demystifies and argues for interpretation as an active, self-reflexive method for addressing historical artifacts that are in conversation with one another (2010). Sterne notes that historical artifacts, such as the MP3, "are already not the history they described, and so it is up to us to find linkages across documents, registers, genres, and problems to give history meaning and intelligibility for ourselves and our readers," thus providing a model of interpretation that draws on interdisciplinary and non-traditional archival objects in order to produce a deeper meaning (2010). Therefore, in acknowledging the importance presence of the archiver/researcher, and moving with the problem of agency, an examination of the spaces in which researchers, such as Jonathan Sterne, Lori Emerson and Darren Wershler, work and create illustrate the importance of space and its politics. Spaces must exist to foment thinking that creates Sterne's "linkages," and these spaces like the Residual Media Depot are shaped in ways in which political, social, economic and cultural assemblages are both conscious and unconscious with a variety of effects.

Several approaches to beginning to think through space are possible: namely, looking at the purpose of a space and its role in the university or considering the basic material requirements necessary to create these spaces such as electrical outlets, extension cords and shelving/storage units. While the former prompt is an important area to question, a material methodology provides a unique lens through which to view archival space, especially with the requirements of non-traditional archival materials such as computers and typewriters as well as offering an alternative route to exposing the assumptions and erasure to labor that

occurs within these spaces and is perpetuated by institutional ideology. Therefore, this essay examines the politics of the archive through a specific focus on spatial design and materials required to create the physical archival infrastructure. These types of materials include electrical outlets, power cords and lighting configurations as well as the media itself, all of which are matters of practice and aesthetics. Further, each of these items have distinct relationships to immaterial and invisible labor which both reflects and produces the cultural assemblages into which the archive exists. Gendered labor is the most common invisibility that reappears through each object and undermines the practices of the archive, specifically the maker-movement. However, examining forgotten gendered labor also reveals how spatial design and political spaces simultaneously reinforce, perpetuate and subvert the private/public allocations and subsequent scholarship, and display a complex, multifaceted relationship between space, identity and knowledge production.

Still to be added: Traditional Models of Archives; Archives and Library relationships; Knowledge Circulation and Archives; Preservation, Archives, Knowledge and Discourse connections; Graduate Students/Postdocs/Researchers and Archival labor and Space (the last two might be better served at the end)

**(3) A Discussion about the main, physical problems with space via infrastructure, specifically in the MAL and RMD. Introduce electricity, receptacles and cords as central infrastructural components as they are the main elements in providing basic habitable conditions for archives, such as light, electricity, etc.**

As John Durham Peters discusses in *Speaking Into The Air*, “communication” is a concept that serves as “the project of

reconciling self and other” which begins with the twentieth century even though its roots regarding symbolic exchange are traced back throughout human history (1999, p.9). While Peters focuses on the idea of communication, inherent in his discussion is an argument about infrastructure, which is never fully developed though alluded to. Thus in stating that “simultaneity across distances- first in writing, then in speech, sound and image- was made possible by the telegraph, telephone, radio, and facsimile” it infers a relationship to production, consumption and the reconstruction of space (Peters, 1999, p.139). Distance was not merely an obstacle to be conquered but served as resistance which fomented innovation and new technologies. Therefore, distance and space are essential in considering the main physical attributes of archival space, specifically through the history and influence of infrastructural components such as electricity. Electrical wiring often determines whether a light can be installed, which in turns affects the visibility in that space, and visibility, i.e. light, is key to examining media artifacts as sight is the primary human sense relied on for archival work. While communication as an idea has been discussed by many, as witnessed through Peters’ brilliant work, views on material shaping communication were often encapsulated by Augustine’s statement on communication: that interpreters should not “get caught in technical difficulties or interference in transmission. Such is servitude to the letter” (Peters, 1999, p.69). However, as current material media scholars, such as Lori Emerson, Jonathan Sterne, Nicole Starosielski and Lisa Gitelman, have illustrated the technologies and mediums are important to understanding tenants of communication. Beyond investigating the material is the interrogation of infrastructure and its role in shaping the materials and thus communication and space.

Infrastructure has a multifaceted relationship to space, which has been in flux due to the technologies produced by and producing this linkage. For example, “technologies such as the

telegraph and radio refitted the old term 'communication,' once used for any kind of physical transfer or transmission, into a new kind of quasi-physical connection across the obstacles of time and space. Thanks to electricity, communication could now take place regardless of impediments such as distance or embodiment" (Peters, 1999, p.5). In Nicole Starosielski's *The Undersea Network*, she notes the connection between space and electricity/communication through the underwater communication cables as "cable infrastructures remain firmly tethered to the earth, anchored in a grid of material and cultural coordinates" (2015, p.2). Infrastructure in the lab is defined primarily by the building's electrical wiring and architectural design of walls, shelves, outlets, doors and ceilings. These infrastructural components are often installed before the lab or archive, as seen in both the Residual Media Depot and the Media Archaeology Lab. While these structures can change, as is planned for the Residual Media Depot, they are still restricted by the basic design and engineering principles of retaining walls, electrical standards and available cords and material as well as funding, leadership and other academic political forces. Ultimately the available infrastructure, whether installed before or after, shapes the space and the kinds of work conducted within it, especially when considering spaces that archive and use electrically powered technology.

A preliminary search in Google Scholar for the term 'infrastructure' yields results from disciplinary journals in computing, communication, law, history, geography and numerous other fields. As a concept, infrastructure's extensive reach resides in both the intangibility that allows for its flexibility, such as hierarchies of power, and its tangible implementation that quantifies or produces concrete elements like roadways and power lines. As a term, infrastructure originates in militaries and was used to describe the installation of structures, systems and operations (McCormack, 2016). Considering the original use of the term,



infrastructure illustrates active elements of its use in current rhetoric that reinforce and legitimate social norms as well as the connections between these norms, governance and imperialism. Unpacking the term supports these claims; for example, 'installation' implies a previous lack as well as a conscious construction, while 'operations' and 'structures' denote power relationships or hierarchies and their associated action or force. Built into these constructs of power relationships and actions is also the assumption of expansion or governance, particularly in regards to the military and its ties to imperialism. Infrastructure is used to secure dominance, such as the installation of infrastructure in Africa by British and American forces through the past several centuries. Dependency is also an element of infrastructure and its mediates our relationship to the powers that control infrastructure, which has become a relevant topic in the globalized configuration of Western societies.

This idea of dependency and imperialism is made salient in Nicole Starosielski's *The Undersea Network*, reinforced by the interconnectivity, not only between countries or corporations but between moments in time by linking social and political impacts of fiber-optic cables through their physical occupation of locations that also belonged to "earlier telegraph and telephone cables, power systems, lines of cultural migration, and trade routes" (2015, p.2). Thus exploring paths of migration and exchange illustrate shifts in governmental modalities: modern governments now use information instead of militarized bodies in order to assert dominance as intelligence accumulates cultural and economic value. Starosielski notes that undersea cable networks "have the benefit of increased security, a consideration for military and government traffic," thereby reiterating the value of information and its circulation over the traditional means of security via physical violence (2015, p.). The inextricability between occupation and infrastructure results in a reiteration of previous types of geo-political dominance (military bases,

fortresses, etc). The United States is connected to Asia through several cable networks, mainly the China-US Cable Network and the Trans-Pacific Express that lead to not only China but also Japan, Korea and numerous other countries and communities (2016). Although there are still active United States military bases throughout Asia, their occupation of countries is no longer limited to physical presence and embodies an ideological manifestation of siphoned American values reconstructed by capitalist interests. Google, notable for its close relations with the American government and its security data collection forces, has invested in several of the newest trans-pacific cable installations, such as FASTER (which went online in the past month). Likewise, major corporations in China and other US telecom companies, such as AT&T, have become the main financial contributors to these means of communication, while also still maintaining a relationship with national authorities. (<http://www.wired.com/2016/06/google-turns-giant-internet-cable/>) While the authority of governments is in crisis due to increased globalization (see David Harvey's A Brief History of Neoliberalism), corporations have emerged as the power holders, which seek imperialism and occupation of countries, communities and the spaces in between. Infrastructure has always been a means or method of control; however, what Starosielski points to is the problem of ignorance about these mechanisms through their consistent invisibility.

**(4) Plugs/Receptacles as organizing space in archives. An examination of the history of plugs and its assumptions, erasures and historically constructed narratives and how that affects space.**

Thus, if the role of the archive is to educate, engage, and evoke questions about circulation, discourse and communication, it must also address these forgotten or unobtainable pieces. But these objects, such as undersea

fiber-optic cables and the installation machines that help make them, are difficult to archive, being both physically inaccessible and entangled by corporate legality. For archives, space is limited and constrained by university regulations and funding, making it even more difficult to consider larger or less accessible objects. The Residual Media Depot presents an interesting case study as it aims to make available the ephemera, specifically the cords and power adapters, which connect the media to larger networks. When first introduced into residential areas, electricity was primarily used for lighting, but this grew as its usefulness was realized and soon outlets and cords became ubiquitous.

History of receptacles and connecting plugs – use patents found and archives from Smithsonian- see rhetoric of progress/innovation through “inventor” narratives in patents, journal accounts

Receptacles and intellectual property- development of ideas as things- rhetoric of progress- debates about ownership become central (UK vs US vs German patent claims)

Intellectual property, world development and imperialism connection through receptacles and electricity

**(5) Address the connection between history, development and standardization.**

Standardization by the National Electric Lighting Association- connection to institutionalization and rhetoric of progress;

Standardization worldwide- different receptacles for countries- connect to imperialism and neoliberalism. – Myth of standardization

**(6) Gender and Plugs/Receptacles & Electricity through the names (male/female) as well as advertisements and articles in home journals for women.**

While much of the history of electricity and receptacles available focuses on claims of ownership and its role in industrialized labor, there are many instances of hidden or forgotten labor that are a part of the receptacle's history. These consist mainly of instances of women's and minority groups' work. Early outlets had specific uses and the main area in which outlets and cords were used was for manual labor practices, particularly to do with household work. Thus the labor practices of staff and homemakers, particularly women, were a performative action that embodied and drove early technical development. However, domesticity and servant labor are not questioned or made complex in many museums or archives, specifically those on early electric technology. Museums and archives around the world often depict domestic life through dioramas and displays, and attempt to portray the domestic tasks and labor of women in the home via the tools, the clothing and other domestic-type artifacts. Yet in doing so these archives reinforce only a singular narrative, which appears in many of the era's publications: a narrative of a white, middle class, homemaker with the traditional tasks such as nurturing children and commanding the limited sphere of the household (Scanton, 1995, p.7). Items such as irons, washing machines and vacuums determine the depiction of women and the associated labor, but the materials and their impact and production extend beyond the domestic tasks of the white, middle class homemaker. Hardly even witnessed are the various receptacles that fomented the requirement or development of this electric technology and its numerous iterations. The constraints of these items, such as cord length and current, are also often ignored but impacted the directions and growth of electronic technology and the space of the home.

Therefore, an examination of the advertisements and discussions of electricity and corresponding receptacles and technology in early 1900s women's journals such as the *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping*, provides an instance of

tension between women as consumers and women as producers of technology, culture and infrastructure.

Articles on electrical appliances-> use copies from National Archives and support from Scanlon's book on *Ladies' Home Journal*

Advertisements- do close reading of advertisements- connect to consumer culture and women's roles as consumers- also the projections these advertisements had of space

Connect space of home and gender assumptions via outlets- how this is reflected in assumptions about outlets today

Outlets and space in archive- bring it to concrete examples in lab/depot & the gender of space- depot "man cave" – lab, science and narratives of gender

– see imperialism via claims of intellectual dominance via male gender & naming of space in archive

## **(7) Cords**

From plug/outlet to cord and the difference uses of cords (for sending information, for receiving power) and the "ideas" of difference between these (all electrical transmission signals)

Materials of the cord- history of (PVC for example) and its connection to gender (factories, uses), imperialism (factories, patents & intellectual property) and neoliberalism (specific cords for appliances, changes for monetary gain)

Cord lengths and their determination of space-specific examples from lab

Aesthetics of cords- why we hide them, what they illustrate, designs and changes to aesthetics

Aesthetics and blackboxing- connection to blackboxing of labor