

Myke Dodge Weiskopf

Incidents in the ether



On station scales, mental maps, and imagined topographies *Andreas Fickers* (1)

In *Mapping Cyberspace*, Myke Dodge and Rob Kitchin assert that the geographical space is superposed by an imagined space that allows people and organizations to react in a flexible way to the changes in real spatial geographies (2001, 14). Since the publication of *Maps in Mind: Reflections on Cognitive Mapping* by geographer Roger Downs and psychologist David Stea in 1977, the concept of "mental maps" has been widely discussed (Schenk 2000). According to Downs and Stea, a mental map is a structured image of a part of a person's spatial environment. This map does not have to be correct in a geographical sense. It is mirroring the world as the person

envisions the world. As Janet Vertesi argues, the iconic image of the London tube map has been incorporated into users' cognitive mapping of London despite the obvious divergence between the real topography of the city and its idealized representation on the map. Subscribing to Vertesi's plea not to separate the analysis of representations of technological systems from a community's interaction with them (Vertesi 2008, 26), I argue that the interaction with the radio station scale can be interpreted as an active process of mental mapping on the part of the users.

The dial can be read as an invitation to an imagined ether voyage, where London, Paris, Oslo, or Hilversum were just one turn away from each other. They evoked in the radio listener -who is a radio watcher, too- a mental map whose fault line could be decoded only by the listener. Station scales, then, served as early atlases of globalization, and one may interpret the use of radio in the 1920s and 1930s as a symbolic appropriation of the European broadcasting landscape. In the words of Paddy Scannell, "It is not just that radio and television compress time and space. They create new possibilities of being: of being in two places at once or two times at once" (Scannell 1996, 91). In his inspiring essay *Asthetik der drahtlosen Telegrafie (Aesthetic of Wireless Telegraphy)*, design historian Chup Friemert reinforces this thesis and links it to the functionality of the radio station scale: "The lust for the scale is the lust for the transportability of world events, as well as the lust for their disposability" (Friemert 1996, 49).

As Uta Schmidt has shown in her study on the appropriation of radio in the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich, the sense of seeing occupied a central position in the "economy of pleasure" (Norbert Elias). Listening to the radio especially when considering the effect of illuminated station scales and "magic eyes" in the dark-evoked feelings of intimacy and aesthetic delight:

The illuminated station scale has deeply engraved itself into the memory of many generations of radio listeners. Although many of the stations could be captured only with considerable effort on a good antenna, the stations promised a world outside the possibilities of bodily experiences and invited the listener to make fantastic imaginary travels. (Schmidt 1998, 317)

In that way, the radio dial became a virtual roadmap for the journey through the ether, the radio station mutated into a station, inviting the listener to remain there for a while. Many ego documents (e.g., novels, poems, song lyrics) describe the aesthetic fascination, juvenile excitement, and the stimulation of imaginary thought travels experienced while interacting with the radio dial with all of one's senses. In the Dutch book for young people *De radio-detective: draadloze ogen* (*The Radio Detective: Wireless Eyes*) by Leonard Roggeveen (1930), Hans, the book's fifteen-year-old protagonist, experiences the "wonder" of traveling through Europe by simply turning the dial of his self-constructed receiver:

Hilversum 2 was precisely in the right place. The red calibration indicator stood right in the middle of the 298-meter wavelength panel. ... He moved along the whole dial, and most of the stations came in very clearly. Luxemburg and Rijssel played dance music, a man in Munich said, "Achtung, meine Damen und Herren." A symphony orchestra was performing in Strasbourg, "here national program," said a lady in Droitwich Brussels followed, 1 and 2, and London, Paris, Rome-yes, Rome! Hilversum 1, Vienna, Stuttgart, Beromiinster! Hans listened to an opera in Paris, to gramophone music from Rome, lovely violin music from Stuttgart. All Europe was present: He traveled in one turn on the dial from Hilversum to Vienna, from Rome to London; the countries lost their borders. The most alien peoples stood next to him-next to him in his little chamber. He heard voices from strangers hundreds of kilometers away as if they were standing next to him, and he immediately understood the meaning of what he had read in so many radio advertisements: Make the world your neighbor." (Roggeveen 1930, 24)

The new broadcasting space was not only shaped by the technological infrastructure of sender networks around the world; it was also actively co-constructed by radio listeners, who became individual actors in the spatialization of their world (Geppert, Jensen, and Weinhold 2005). While turning the dial and tuning in a station (city name), the vast broadcast space was transformed into a specific, meaningful place. In this sense, we should interpret the acts of radio listening, viewing, and tuning as acts of symbolic appropriation of the world. To stylize the radio as the "monosensual stepchild of the century of audiovisual attractions" (Maase 2004, 47) misjudges both the aesthetic attraction and playful usages of wireless technology in a technical culture (Haring 2007) and the multisensorial experience of radio as a cultural practice.

(1) This is an excerpt of the article *Visibly audible. Mediating as the radio dial interface* (2012) published in Trevor Pinch / Karin Bijsterveld (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies* (pp. 411-439). Oxford University Press: Oxford. Available online at: <http://www.academia.edu/1468660/Vis...>

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