The Threat of Text

Jason Lewis (jason.lewis@concordia.ca), Obx Labs, Concordia University, Montreal QC Canada

The *Cityspeak* public SMS messaging project has been installed in a dozen locations over the last two years. One goal of the project has been to get access to large scale public displays, yet we have found it challenging to be granted such access. As we have conducted discussions with big screen operators we have found that the fact that Cityspeak is text-based presents the biggest obstacle. This is true even for operators which have made time on their screens for public art projects; the difference seems to be that these projects are image-based. It has led us to consider the idea that text is seen as a threat in ways that image is not.

In this paper we will review the results of sixteen *Cityspeak* deployments. These installations include conferences where it was used to collect commentary on the proceedings, at dance clubs to generate conversation between visitors, and in a large outdoor mall to capture general commentary. We will use our experience not only mounting the installations but also in attempting to find large-scale public screens willing to host the project as a basis of a discussion concerning the tension between the explosion in the means by which individuals can communicate via the private space in front of their computer screens and the ever-more tightly controlled means for communicating in the public square.