A 21st Century Agora?

That was the question posed by a Zocalo forum this evening here in Los Angeles. I wasn’t there — I was actually at my daughter’s school’s ice cream social, talking with other parents about politics, actually. But had I been at the forum, I would have mentioned one partial theory that a friend of mine, a developer in Brooklyn, told me.

If you live in New York City, he said, you probably spend a good bit of time on the subway, which means you spend a good bit of time either waiting around or riding the train. And that means that a tabloid culture surfaces. People don’t subscribe to the *Post* or the *Daily News* (or the late, great, *New York Newsday*), he said: they buy it to read while waiting for the train or riding it.

In Los Angeles, people spend a lot of time commuting, too, and not necessarily longer than in New York City: but they spend it in their cars. If they get any news — and particularly any *local* news — then they get it in 10-second snippets on AM radio in between weather and traffic. That just doesn’t create a culture of local politics. So the built environment and urban form matters not only for the quality of our personal lives: it matters for the quality of our political lives as well.

Does this explain everything? Hardly. After all, lots of people take rail transit in the Bay Area through BART and Muni, and last I checked, San Francisco is hardly a newspaper mecca. (And no, that’s not because suave and intellectual San Franciscans are reading Proust). I suspect it might have something to do with the relative size of city governments within a region: when the Mayor of New York City or Chicago does something, it really affects everyone in the region. That’s hardly true of the City of Los Angeles, which, while the biggest single unit, is only one municipality among 88 in Los Angeles County. Indeed, this would be an interesting way to invert the question: what are those cities and states where people *do* talk about politics? When and how do they do so? What are the contexts?

But the environment, I think, matters a lot here. It’s not just for tree-huggers anymore.