1.

Powering Down Through Sharing Economy

Submitted by Forum Vies Mobiles on Tue, 04/29/2014 - 10:42

Mots clés

Mobilités virtuelles

Modes de vie

Train

Réseaux

Transports collectifs

Usagers

Discipline

Sciences sociales

Mode de transport

Train

Visuel

Powering Down Through Sharing Economy

Auteur

Paula Bialski (Sociologue)

Fichier vidéo

Transcription écrite

Today I'm going to be talking about everyday practices in cities and how people are really changing their lives because of different issues: austerity issues because they can't really survive in cities any more, or because they have lost their jobs, or because they just financially cannot survive in a city. Also, another reason is because of the fact that they want to 'power down': so let's say if we're looking at John Urry's text on societies beyond oil; he looks at low-carbon futures and how people are really sharing resources, figuring out other ways to live in order to 'power down', not to use as much energy as they do in order to ensure that their future is actually going to be

better for their children, etc. So what I want to show today is a few of these examples about how people are doing this. What we study in Hamburg is not only the low-carbon city and how people are gardening, sharing resources and participating in this collaborative consumption in order to really 'power down'; people are also doing this because they need to live in a more low-budget lifestyle and don't have enough money to, say, travel from Hamburg to Berlin, and they need to somehow figure out another way of doing so.

'Airbnb' for more sustainable urban lives

I'm going to show this relationship between these collective mobile practices and urban and digital infrastructure. My first example is 'Airbnb'. What is 'Airbnb'? It's a short-term rental website, which is an example of various different short-term rental websites that are online, and allows you to share your room – let's say, your tent in your backyard – provide accommodation for somebody else, but you do it for a certain fee so you become essentially a hotel. This is becoming very, very popular: there are really millions of people who share their space in Berlin and large cities like New York and Hamburg. They're doing so not only because they want to earn a little bit of money, but often times they need to stay in their home and they're thinking, "How can I do so? Okay, well, I could rent out a room in my house for two days, two weeks, and then actually stay in the home that I have been living in because my husband has lost his job because of cuts last year, etc."
So this is one example, and I'm looking at why people are doing this. But also how does this change human interaction? How is it changing interaction between strangers who are coming into your home? You're doing this because you want to live a more sustainable life in your city, so for me what's really interesting are these reconfigurations of how we are social with one another, because we need to actually survive in our place that we're living in.

Ticket-sharing on the German railways

My second example is about the train system in Germany, and that's where I did my main ethnography for the past year. What my methods were: I was following travellers and seeing what their problems were with the main train system. What I've actually heard and have found out is that the German train system is very expensive for the average traveller. Let's say a trip between Berlin and Hamburg cost €70; that's way too expensive not only for students or somebody who doesn't have a job,

but for anybody, really, that has an average job in Germany.

So really what is happening is something that is called 'ticket-sharing'. What ticket-sharing is, is actually a great example of people reconfiguring themselves in order to somehow survive with the regular infrastructure that is the rail system in Germany. What they're doing is they're taking a ticket that is, let's say, for the same journey from Berlin to Hamburg, and there's an offer from the German rail to travel with five people for €50 on a bit of a longer train, but that journey of course will cost you €10 instead of €70, and then you're going to be able to get to your destination. But then you're not always travelling with five people, right? Families don't always just travel together and you're not always travelling with your best friends, so what people are doing is they're standing at train stations and they're looking for people to share the ticket with. But there's also another thing: they're using an online platform (one called carpooling.com is the main one they're using, or the German offshoot of that) and they're finding people who actually take this journey.

Special ways of interacting with strangers

So on, let's say, carpooling.com, you go online and you check out who's going at what time from Berlin to Hamburg, and you say, "This journey is perfect!" It's not only a carpool it's also a train ticket-share, and it says, "I have four spots on my train ticket, do you want to meet me at this-and-this platform, at this-and-this time?" People are doing this on a really massive scale. They're using an online platform, but also people who aren't as online-savvy or digitally literate are actually standing at the train station. They have special places that they stand at these train stations, and special ways of interacting with strangers.

People on their daily routine are now regularly interacting with strangers – and they have to trust these strangers and they have to figure out certain ways of actually interacting with them. It's not every day that you just go up to somebody and say, "Hey, can I travel with you for the next two hours?" right?

But this is something people are doing to survive. And why? People aren't doing this only because they're thinking, "I want to stop using my car, use the train system, and share this travel." They're doing this because they have no other way of really sustainably, financially, getting to work, let's say. Or they want to go to their girlfriend every weekend to Berlin, but how do you do this? You have to actually cut down on travel costs because travel is so expensive.

Waving tickets at the train station

So this is one example of this, and what I've also really noticed is that, first of all, the train station is very, very important. Where people stand is so important: you have to stand next to a train ticket machine. There are specific ticket machines where you have to catch somebody before they buy their ticket in order to share this ticket with them.

This is another thing: the ticket is actually very, very important. People who are trying to share their ticket, they're often having their ticket out, waving it around, and trying to find others to approach them. So often the ticket is out being waved around. What that means is that actually these material objects are so important in your daily mobile life: they actually are somehow actors in this entire configuration, in this assemblage that is happening that is called the, let's say, 'low-budget travel'.

Another thing that's very important is, of course, the inter-human aspect, and what for me is important. I'm also really inspired by someone named Erving Goffman, who talks a lot about interpersonal interaction in public space; how we really gesture to each other, how people are looking at each other, how they're looking down if they don't want to talk to one another. In this configuration we're constantly observing who's going under what platform: where are they leaving? Are we smiling at them? Are we not? This is very interesting for me, too.

Between collective mobile practice and urban digital infrastructure

So what is happening here? There's a very lovely example of something that's called the 'sharing economy', or 'collaborative consumption', where people are using online technologies, also, in order to share their resources offline. So there are few actors: there's the German train system, the Deutsche Bahn, who's making these train tickets—and it's not illegal to do this of course but it's a fine line. You're constantly also thinking, "Is this train ticket going to be offered for another half a year?" It's the offer of the train system so you're always reliant on the main infrastructure. And then of course you have the other very important actor, which is the actual person who buys the main train ticket and actually tries to find others and provides this. They're called the 'managers', in the colloquial term. Another thing that was very important was the actual place that people are configuring themselves, so it's not just completely arbitrary; the main station is like a stage where people are assembling themselves. So this is really what I wanted to explain for this example: how these kinds of configurations are coming into being, and what the relationship is between this collective mobile practice and urban digital infrastructure.

Another important thing I also wanted to talk about here is how infrastructure can

implement changes that instantly reconfigure this assemblage. People have been taking advantage of this system now: there's people who are called the 'mafia', colloquially, who buy this ticket and ride around the trains all day. Let's say they buy a ticket between Berlin and Hamburg, and they ride back and forth because you can find five people in Hamburg, then you find five people in Berlin, and you're constantly pocketing that money. So people are taking advantage of the 'sharing economy'. And then of course when people are configuring themselves and helping share the resources, there's also people taking advantage of this system.

Practitionners should take into account grassroots practices

But I think that in order to sustain a future of such practices, it's very imperative that those who create this infrastructure observe what grassroots practices are happening, and saying, "These are the needs of the people right now in cities to travel more cheaply. What can we do? What can we think about in order to change our infrastructure?" This is the question—and I'm not criticising, of course, the German train system—I think that any infrastructure needs to think about: "What are the needs of the people that are living in this city? And what are the changing needs?" We have to think of that imperative as really of needs.

So today, really, I wanted to summarise: I talked about how people are reconfiguring their cities in order to survive: how also they're thinking about others in public space; how trust and 'strangerhood' is being reconfigured; and also what is the role of infrastructure in our public space, in our cities. These are three questions, and I don't have answers to them but I think it's important for us to pose these questions and constantly try to find answers to what's really happening between infrastructure and humans.

Activer
Désactivé
Ajouter le trianglesi ce contenu est affiché dans la quinzaine
Désactivé
Chapô

Faced with economic hardship, people are developing new strategies for survival by collaborating with strangers to obtain cheaper travel and a place to sleep.

Envoyer une notification
Désactivé

Thématique
Alternative mobilities
Diversity of lifestyles
Digital technologies
Civic Action