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## **Pioneering mobilities - Work in the Mobile Risk Society**



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Mots clés

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[Visuel](#)

[Pioneering mobilities - Work in the Mobile Risk Society](#)

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[Fichier vidéo](#)

[Transcription écrite](#)

In the late 1990s we started a project in Munich in the Research Centre on Reflexive Modernization (funded by the German Research Society) which had this fancy title - Mobility Pioneers - and what I'm trying to figure out in these few minutes is that I think there is a kind of development from these pioneering mobilities to new things and the opening up of different forms of mobilities into a sort of normalisation of that. In the 1990s, in some ways in business life something spectacular or extraordinary became something more and more something essential, normal part of our lives. When I was making interviews in the industry in the 1990s and early 2000s, people

were talking about how they went to China and their colleagues said 'Wow, you went to China?' But today one (person) says he is going to China and the other one is telling a story about India and Australia. So I think a lot of these things have changed in business life. But it's not only on spatial mobility and travelling, it's also about virtual mobilities. When we started the project of the Mobility Pioneers in the late 1990s, we were harshly criticised for using that term 'virtual mobilities'. People said 'You're totally crazy, that doesn't make any sense'. Actually in the same way, a little bit different - but with the same message - when we started working on aeromobilities, a colleague said 'What's this about aeromobilities? When I go to an airport I check in, I fly out. So where is the research programme?' He argued this is kind of a minority of people. I'm not saying that everybody today is using the internet; not everybody is using mobile phones, not everybody is always accessible somewhere else than where he is and not everybody is using planes and airports. But nobody is living a life without depending upon the internet, airports, flight connections and so forth.

### ### Organizing mobility imperative

So our life has changed in that way - in a very rapid, very fast way. This picture that I brought, we call it the Social Spatial Pattern of Virtual Mobility Management. The background of the Mobility Pioneers project has always been that we've been asking 'How do people actually organise, how do they manage what we call the mobility imperative?' - the need to be mobile or to present oneself as a mobile person. And that's the reason why we talk about mobility management. It's not management on the corporate level or on the institutional level, it's about how people organise and manage their lives. And this picture I brought you is a pattern from a journalist, where we made interviews in the early 2000s with her, and I asked her 'What are the important places in your life? Please type in the important places in the centre of that picture - those places which are important but less important on the boundaries of the picture'. The first things that she wrote in was 'My email', 'My PC', 'My house' and 'My desk'. At this time - you need to consider it was in the early 2000s - we were really surprised what she kind of added as the important places in her life; an email program is not a place in our understanding, but in her understanding it was a place. The second things she added were three websites and then she wrote in the university, her birthplace and the residence where she is; but actually the residence and the birthplace don't play a very important role in that pattern. And this was an interview with a very successful journalist at this time. And it was pioneering in that

understanding, of finding a pattern like this in the empirical research. But you might say 'that's quite normal, I know a lot of people like this' - but this is what I'm saying: this is the development from pioneering mobility into a normalisation of mobility. We've entered a time or a situation where we all live in some senses digital lifestyles and what I like is this quotation from Aharon Kellerman in 2006 where he says "New, sophisticated virtual mobilities permit us to be in touch without any regard to the location of the cities or countries from which communication comes nor with regard to the internal spatial structures of the cities from which we call".

### ### A constellation of spaces

I think this is a sort of placelessness in some sense, but it indicates a cultural change in the sense that we are kind of layering different spaces - social spaces, virtual spaces, geographical spaces, technological spaces - into each other and each of us, every person, has a specific constellation of these different spaces. I'm reading quotations, but one of my favourite quotations on that is indicating that there is a significant cultural change - which is where we don't know yet how this is going to transform our life in this modern world. And it comes from John Tomlinson and he says: "Mechanical velocity is still with us in abundance, the night mail still runs distance and the physical effort to overcome it still stubbornly persists. But now we have something else. Now we have the phenomenon of immediacy which in its light, effortless, easy ubiquity has more or less displaced the cultural attachments of an earlier speed. And with this displacement comes a shift in cultural assumptions, expectations, attitudes and values."

What he describes there - mentioning cultural assumptions, expectations, attitudes and values - is actually a new way of thinking about life: we have a mobile life, but also a new way of thinking about how interaction has come into the world. This is probably going to change our world and the big question today is 'Has this a kind of potential to develop, this sort of sustainable mobility, or is this a kind of a withering process?'

### ### A world in motion

In their book, "Mobile Lives" from (Anthony) Elliott and (John) Urry, they describe the significance of what they call 'miniaturised mobility'. That means we are carrying all these technological devices with us, which enable us to be in contact and to be kind of stable in relation to other people and to other places - to colleagues, to business, to other websites and so forth while we are travelling somewhere. What they actually

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decisions against travelling, to slow down our mobility and to reduce the amount of mobility. And on a corporate level, I definitely don't want to make any kind of promotion for any companies but IKEA's concept of 'meet more, travel less' - using more virtual mobility instead of travelling - I think it's a very interesting case study; to understand actually how the normalisation enters companies, how it is organised and what policies can be developed to reduce the amount of travelling.

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