

1. Videos

Mobile publics: encounter of a new kind?

By
Monika Büscher (Sociologue)
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Attached to our smart phones, we've never been so connected, but what are the implications for traditional social interactions, asks Dr Monika Büscher. And how is it changing our awareness and involvement in politics?

I want to talk about mobile publics. When you think about publics you tend to think about the Greek agora, big political decisions, or also the imagined communities that Benedict Anderson talks about – all the newspaper readers reading the paper at 8 o'clock in the morning and sharing with the imagined community. But as the relationship between physical and virtual spaces is changing, what's possible in terms of forming publics is also changing.

Mimi Sheller is one of the people who first talked about this, how the convergence of physical and virtual spaces is actually making it possible for momentary gelling of publics across different social spaces and scales, even globally. And that's something that's very interesting. And it's important to think about as something that's not so much driven by technology, or some other mysterious mechanism. It's actually something that's being brought into reality through the ways in which increasing numbers of us are living mobile lives. So the way in which we move around actually makes and transforms societies, environments. It also enacts what it means to be human differently, and I'm going to talk about some examples of the implications of that. For example, a move from democracy to demodynamics, possibly. I'm also going to talk about some possibilities that we as scholars are generating from this: what can we do about it? How can we amplify the positive aspects of this and maybe control the less desirable ones?

Pioneering mobile methods to explore public spaces

To get us into the mood of what public space is, I'd like to take us back to the 1970s, when William Whyte, an urban planner and architect, was very concerned about what was happening to public spaces. At the time there was a policy that stipulated that every office building, when they put it up, they also had to build a civic plaza. But when he looked at those open public spaces they were all empty. He was trying to understand why, in comparison, many other spaces actually weren't. So he tried to study what makes a public space successful. He pioneered mobile methods in some respects, putting cameras on top of high-rise buildings, studying how people were moving around in public spaces, also using cameras on the ground, following how people were moving around.

What you see there is socialities being enacted in very mobile ways. People are actually moving around, and this is a very different kind of sociality of how these spaces are inhabited. I'm going to play you a little clip of the kind of things that they observed. [CLIP]What you see there are lots of chance

encounters enacted through the ways in which people are moving around each other, and how they actually stand right in the middle of the flow, and thereby interact with each other.

Erving Goffman, in his studies of behaviour in public spaces, makes a very good analysis of how this happens and also what this does to the social order that's being enacted there. So if you are copresent and people are moving around and you actually look each other in the eye potentially, you have what he calls involvement obligations. You might escape these by using a book on the Tube, but there are very strong obligations to, at least on a minimum level, engage with other people. And this has an effect on what kinds of social order are being produced.

Co-mobilities, absent presences, present absences

If you compare that with today you see that people are not just copresent but also enacting what scholars like Christian Licoppe and Jen Southern, Ole Jensen, talk about in terms of co-mobilities, mobile with, absent presences, present absences. And the question is, what kind of publics are being enacted when people are hiding behind their mobile technologies? That's quite an important question because if you have involvement obligations and people engage with each other at this minimal level you create societies that have a human dimension and arrange themselves around diversity, and interact with each other.

People need copresence to know what's really going on. What's happening when we are connected through absent presences, copresences, creating all these different layers of connectivity? People talk about negative implications, like very shallow, intimate communities, people connected through a sort of constant ticking over of "Are you all right?" "I'm all right." "Are you OK?" "Hello", "Good morning", and things like that. Very shallow, full-time intimate communities, but what is the intimacy there, and what is the connection?

Other people like Bauman talk about the actual erosion of the possibility for (capital P) Politics because the everyday politics of engaging with each other doesn't really connect people anymore and doesn't allow them to connect to big political themes.

Data stores that track our every movement

Another dimension, or complication, implication, of mobile publics is how we are connected through all those mobile technologies means that we are also connected to huge data stores that map and track every movement, every communication. It could be that we are actually trading the ability to connect with others through a Faustian bargain where we actually lose the ability to negotiate privacy and the sophisticated ways that we are able to do now, and that has implications for the civil liberties and the freedoms that we have enjoyed over the last 100 years or so.

Mobile publics, altruistic publics?

One of the things that we are particularly interested in here in the Mobilities Lab is the question of whether the new mobile publics are inherently more altruistic, cosmopolitan, than the kind of traditional publics that we think about. I'm going to give you several examples now, of what mobile publics might be. This is the story of the Copenhagen wheel, where designers created a bicycle that actually collects environmental data about air pollution, about the quality of the cycle paths and the level of traffic. And people, as they cycle, collect this data, so they become, in a way, citizen sensors for environmental monitoring. The kind of data that they generate actually can inform political decisions about how to route the traffic, how to perhaps introduce congestion charges or where to put cycle paths, and things like that. So what you've got there is an example of collective intelligence, both in the sense of people generating insight and understanding of the traffic network, transport network, in their city Copenhagen,

and a gathering of collective intelligence, sensor data, real data, about these issues, and you see some visualizations of how that data can be brought together to inform political decisions – quite an interesting example. People talk about this in terms of smart mobs, and it's quite a positive development.

From informed citizens to monitorial citizens

You can have these kind of publics not just using sensors but also just using Twitter or Facebook to come around political issues and generate force that can influence policy making. Axel Bruns talks about this in terms of “demodynamics” – that we're actually moving from democratic deliberation towards people monitoring the information field, and noticing when something relevant to their community comes up, and then getting behind the cause and being quite fluid about this. In some respects this kind of dynamic formation of mobile publics is very powerful, but Michael Schudson talks about it in terms of “monitorial citizenship”. So rather than the informed citizen you have the monitorial citizen who monitors the information field and then gets behind experts and behind particular issues, which can actually be more demanding than the more informed citizenship that we had before. So the kind of monitorial citizenship can be more demanding than the more informed citizenship of Ben Anderson's “imagined communities”.

Communicative capitalism

So there's another dimension to this which is potentially quite problematic because, with all the dynamism and the fluidity of people getting behind a cause, Jodie Dean, a journalist and scholar, argues that it's actually much more about putting out messages, circulating messages, forwarding messages, especially from celebrities and powerful people, to enhance your own social network capital. I was looking for an example of that and I don't know if you know the story behind this picture? In 2006 in Belarus, flashmobs of young people formed, protesting against the oppressive, dictatorial regime. They were very careful, and just organised around eating ice cream in a public square. They did that in large numbers and they were arrested for eating ice cream in a sunny public square. And the pictures of that went all around the world and generated a huge amount of interest and outrage in relation to this oppressive regime. That was in 2006.

Well on the 23rd of September Lukashenko was reelected, and that message was retweeted twice, once by TheLawMap and once by myself. So obviously the public, the crowd, has moved on – they've lost interest in this cause. So it seems to me that there's something quite interesting going on around the notion of communicative capitalism, and it being more about the circulation of messages than actual engagement, actual action.

The rise of the puppet master

To draw things together, I'd like to go a bit deeper into that, actually, by drawing a comparison with alternate reality games, where masses – thousands, hundreds of thousands – of people mobilise to solve puzzles, complicated things. It's a very interesting example of collective intelligence. Jane McGonigal, one of the designers of a very famous alternate reality game called I Love Bees, reflects on the experience, and she says: “Free will has long been assumed to be a core and constant experiential aspect of the gaming experience, but the rise of the puppet master in pervasive gaming suggests that in the new computing landscape many gamers want to experience precisely the opposite”, namely to be orchestrated and to be guided.

And I think that the way in which publics gather around issues, there is a lot of this kind of orchestration going on. We really don't quite understand how people lead in these debates, and that's a very

important issue to study. Mark Deuze says it very well that it is a mess at the moment, and we need to study the practices of how these mobile publics gather and disperse in more detail. And that's where I would like to finish.

Mobile methods

Mobile methods produce insight by moving physically, virtually or analytically with research subjects. They involve qualitative, quantitative, visual and experimental forms of inquiry, and follow material and social phenomena.

En savoir plus x

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

En savoir plus x

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Diversity of lifestyles
- Digital technologies

Theories

- Methods



Monika Büscher

Sociologue

Professor Monika Büscher is director of the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University. Her research connects different fields: Mobilities Research, Design, Ethnomethodology, Science and Technology Studies, Participatory Design.

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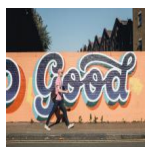
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