

1. Videos

Mobile methods for a mobile world ?

By
Monika Büscher (Sociologue)
02 April 2013

Dr Monika Büscher explains the concept of mobile methods and why they are needed to protect the rights and privacy of the individual in modern society.

So what are mobile methods and why do we need them? I really like this statement by Georg Simmel. He says: "The rainbow persists despite the constantly changing position of its water particles ... Reality, too, is in restless flux, made in and through movement." We might not be able to see that directly, but it's there and it's important. In this video from the BBC series Britain From Above you see daily rhythms made and reflected in taxi runs. Through the night and early in the morning the drivers use the main thoroughfares, but, as the rush hour kicks in, use backstreets, rat runs and fan out. The blocked movements and stillnesses are making the reality; they can be experienced and studied when riding along with the taxi drivers, but they can also be studied by moving yourself away and taking a bird's eye perspective. Both these are mobile methods.

Mobile methods: being close or being far away

Mobile methods and debates about them are not new, and that's important to realise. Here you have Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, two famous anthropologists, arguing in the 1930s. They are gossiping about a colleague and Mead says to Bateson: "You said 'She'll never be a photographer. She keeps using the camera to look at things'. You don't. You always use the camera to take a picture, which is a different thing." Bateson: "Yes. By the way, I don't like cameras on tripods, just grinding." M: "You don't like that?" B: "Disastrous." M: "Why?" B: "Because I think the photographic record should be an art form." Mead says "Why? Because if it's an art form you are actually altering the reality that you document." He says "Undoubtedly it's been altered." She is concerned about that and says, "If you're going to be scientific, the camera, you mustn't do that – you must record the shot far away from what's happening." He says, "No way, you should follow the action as it's happening." And they have this big argument. This should feel quite familiar to people who are thinking about mobile methods, because it's quite a frequently rehearsed dispute. I'm with Bateson. If you move with your object of study, you document the production of social order from within. Talking about Jean Rouch's video ethnographies, Douglas Macbeth, for example, argues that it is possible to capture the making of social order from within, in part through also documenting your own orientation within the field.

A mobile camera reveals roles and responsibilities

I'd like to show you an example from my own fieldwork, where I'm running around and you have to realise that it was quite noisy, a generator is going. It's a surprise exercise – an emergency: a chemical train had collided with a school bus and the on-duty staff are called to this incident. Of course they realise it was not a real incident but they take it very seriously and try to organise an emergency

response. And I was there, following around. How do they organise an emergency response in a field like that? I think that using a mobile camera and moving around with the research subjects actually reveals how roles and responsibilities are actively and reflexively performed. In this case, also in and through embodied interaction in the space, which also broadcasts assessments of risks in a very chaotic environment. So it's quite a powerful method.

A growing range of mobile methods

And mobile video ethnography is one of a whole huge and growing range of mobile methods, reaching from surveys sent to people on their mobile phones related to the locations they're in, to doing interviews on the move, walk-alongs, ride-alongs, also design interventions like the Copenhagen Wheel project, where people put environmental sensors on the bikes that people ride through the city. There are too many methods to go into great detail, trying to summarise them all, and too many researchers to name them all and I don't want to offend anybody. But if you're looking for inspiration, a good starting point is the *Mobilities Journal*, where people document their research and mobile methods. There have also been two edited collections of mobile methods and mobile methodologies so far. This kind of lively innovation in mobile methods is necessary, because the mobilities Simmel revealed as constitutive of social, material, political and economic orders at the turn of the last century have multiplied and intensified. World citizens travel 23 billion kilometres each year, by air, road, rail and our virtual mobilities have increased and are even more staggering. In just one hour Facebook has over 5 million status updates and 10 million tweets are sent around the world. Traditional methods are not enough to adequately study the fleeting, distributed, multiple, complex, the sensory, emotional, spiritual, kinaesthetic aspects of this, which are very important.

Privacy and the handling of personal data

One area where innovative mobile methods and mobilities research are sorely needed is privacy. More than a decade ago, Scott McNealy, then CEO of Cisco said, "You have zero privacy anyway, get over it" – quite flippantly, but he was also serious about it. Yet here we are, more than 10 years later, still trying to amend hopelessly outdated privacy regulations, access rights and data protection laws. This is no match to how thoughtlessly people handle personal data, how they move physically and virtually without concern for leaving traces in databases everywhere, and how sophisticated data-processing tools have become – like face recognition technologies that can recognise people and are now also connected to Facebook; pictures that people upload. And of course, here, too there are historical precedents. Two hundred years ago, people were very worried about electricity and the total surveillance that the nights lit up by electrical light made possible. But today the scale of transformation and the ripple effect of these kinds of transformations and effects on privacy management, that this has on civil liberties, are of a different order.

Our movements leave invisible data shadows

Every move we make, every communication we engage in, has the potential to leave traces, creating not visible shadows but invisible data shadows. And they are invisible, they're distributed, and access is distributed, access is fleeting and invisible. I agree with John Urry when he says that the most important things today are the invisible things. This erosion of privacy and control over personal data is one of those invisible things that I think is very important. You might think, "Oh I don't care, I've got my Facebook profile and my loyalty-card points, it doesn't really have any effects. Zero privacy doesn't feel that bad. Especially when it means more personalised advertising and personalised services and more security." But the consequences can be serious. In Jean Charles de Menezes' case the consequences were fatal. He was wrongly identified as a terrorist, based on personal data being processed and identifying him as a potential culprit. He became a false positive – that is, he was wrongly identified as a suspect. This may seem a remote possibility to you, but the amount of data that is being processed is absolutely staggering. Even if the probability of a false positive is 1%, when you have that much data

being processed, one figure is given that over 18,000 innocent people could be marked as suspects every day.

Doing something about it with mobile methods

Being concerned about this is good. Doing something about it is even better. Mobile methods – mixed methods of following people but also following the information – allow us to study how people are struggling to control personal data, such as their location. This is an example that Christian Licoppe and Yoriko Inada studied. They looked at how Japanese people appropriate a game called Mogi – you hunt treasures in the city and get points for it. But it needs your location to be able to show you the treasures, and it makes your location also available to other players, which then suggests that if you're in the same place then you should perhaps meet, but you don't really know these people; they're also just playing the game. So they show the really awkward negotiations that people get into to avoid physically meeting. So here you've got a conversation where player A sends a message to player B saying "Oh, you're really close." Then she goes – sweat – "Yeah, we really are." Then a few minutes later he says, "Oh, you ran away", and she says "Yes, I had to get onto the Marunouchi line", onto the tube. What you see there is how people are developing a sensitivity to their invisible data shadows, and the broadcasting of personal information, and the effects this can have. They show how intensely emotional and social this is.

Gaining an understanding of zero privacy

Studies of mobile living using mobile methodologies to reveal otherwise quite hard-to-see complexities, opportunities and dangers are critical to stay on top of the transformations that are happening and the consequences that these have for people's lives, of these quite disruptive innovations like personal data-processing. An analytical orientation towards studying mobilities, immobilities, blocked movements, can help us gain an understanding, a deep comprehension, of the practices and implications of zero privacy, through studies like Inada's and Licoppe's. Quoting Hannah Arendt on this, from her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* may seem overly dramatic to some. Maybe. But I do think that the kinds of data processing we are collectively bringing into being, by shopping with credit cards, by moving with GPS, the transformations to what it means to be human that this entails, and the utilisation of such data for security, are a burden that we should shoulder more consciously and carefully. Mobile methods make that possible. So the question that I would raise is, how can you study privacy across different, intersecting mobilities, and how can you make the insights that you're gaining count in innovation and change?

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

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

Associated Thematics :

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.

The same author See all publications



What happens to mobilities in crisis?

Video by Monika Büscher



Mobile publics: encounter of a new kind?

Video by Monika Büscher

To cite this publication :

Monika Büscher (02 April 2013), « Mobile methods for a mobile world ? », Préparer la transition mobilitaire. Consulté le 04 February 2025, URL: <https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/videos/685/mobile-methods-mobile-world>



Videos by Forum Vies Mobiles are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 France License.

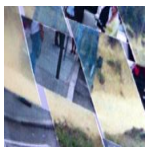
Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at contact.

Other publications



Mobility and job hunting: a digital barrier?

Christian Licoppe, H el ene-Marie Juteau



Narrative game - In 2061, what do young people prefer: physical mobility or virtual mobility?

Elsa Maury, Norbert Truxa, Nicolas Prignot, Pauline Lefebvre



Mobility in China: A Chinese View of 50 Years of Acceleration

J er mie Descamps, Thomas Sauvin, Zhang Chun, Zhou Le, Wang Gongxin, Marie Terrieux, Vincent Kaufmann, St ephanie Vincent, Emmanuel Ravalet, Dominique Desjeux



Texel. Suspending time at the train station.

Ianis Lallemand, Lyes Hammadouche, Francesca Cozzolino, Anne Bationo Tillon , Clara Meyer

1 <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/fr/>

2 <http://forumviesmobiles.org>

3 <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/fr/>

4 http://fr.fvm.localhost/modal_forms/nojs/contact