Part III Mobile Media and Space – Local, Public, and Global

7 Networking Mobility as Urban Counter Power

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This essay advances the ongoing debate surrounding the civic and political implications of emerging urban mobility afforded by proliferating mobile media and data technologies. It offers a critical interrogation of the articulation of (counter-)public and (contentious) politics in the increasingly networked, mobile and datafied settings of cities. Situated at the intersection of Foucauldian studies and sociological research on digitally enabled mobility, a nuanced approach is put forth to conceptualise the (trans)formation of networked mobile activism among tech savvy urban dwellers in contesting and challenging the hegemonic power manifested in institutionalized mobility. The concept of mobile otherness is invoked to offer a useful conceptual lens in exploring the contours and consequences of networked mobile activism with reference to its real-world exemplifiers, implications, and limitations. In this renewed understanding, networked mobile activism is reconceptualized as a practice of counter power by perpetually creating and modifying itself to counter a normalizing power in motion. The chapter thus highlights the new ways in which grassroots urban mobility emerges in resisting and intervening in the initiatives of institutionalized mobility that subjugate citizens, particularly amidst times of urban policing, state repression, and datafied surveillance.

Introduction

What are the latest implications of proliferating mobile media and data technologies for the political and public life of digitally savvy urban dwellers? What are their new possibility for civic and political participation in cities, especially amidst times of urban policing, state repression, and datafied surveillance? This chapter serves as a critical and conceptual reflection of these ongoing debates in the scholarship. Specifically, it proposes an alternative approach to (re)interpret networked mobile activism as a practice of counter power by perpetually creating and modifying itself to counter a normalizing power in motion. Toward this end, it advances the concept of mobile otherness to conceptualize about the contours and consequences of the understudied type of networked mobile activism. In this anew understanding, networking mobility means exploring new ways to resist and intervene the initiatives of institutionalized mobility that subjugate citizens by turning them into normalized subjects of capitalist production and state surveillance. It is contended that networked mobile activism does not work outside of the system that it opposes. Rather, as a type of mobile otherness, it works in constantly inventing new ways of moving in order to disrupt and circumvent the prescribed mobility or spatial fixity in attempts to enable and sustain counter-hegemonic engagement. This chapter thus seeks to refresh the scholarly debate by suggesting a nuanced understanding of the civic and political potentials of digitally enabled mobility. The rest of the chapter will be

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devoted to further the debate by illustrating the contention of mobile otherness with reference to its real-world exemplifiers, implications, and limitations.

The claim: Mobility as the locus of articulation and contestation of power in cities

Digitally enabled mobility has been increasingly implemented and promoted in urban governance and planning within the broader context of 'smart city' policies. At the vanguard of innovation, datafication, and platform urbanism, relevant apparatus and discourses have guided current and future projects of social and economic development in the city (Barns, 2020; Leszczynski, 2020). These range from connected autonomous automobilities, mobile data infrastructures, to platforms and apps that support multiple navigation and transportation services. They regulate and condition the ways in which we organize, plan, and map our urban daily lives. From a more critical perspective, such 'institutionalized mobility' (Juschten et al., 2020, p. 7646) that attempts to discipline and routinize urban dwellers' bodily movements and mundane activities from above supports a series of dominant institutions and power relations. In some instances, the prescribed mobility, or regulated immobility that arises particularly amidst the time of global pandemic, may in turn serve to legitimize excessive platform capitalism, state surveillance, and travel inequality (Latonero & Kift, 2018; Pelizza et al., 2021; Rekhviashvili et al., 2022).

Whereas emerging institutionalized mobility may be embedded within projects of (bio)power that are shaped by goals set out by local governments, networked mobile activism may arise to negotiate its effects upon us as a connective type of resistance and intervention while on the move. I recognize that there can be a multiplicity of digitally enabled mobility afforded by various uses of mobile social media and smartphone devices, and that depending upon specific geopolitical, economic, socio-cultural, historical, and technological contexts, networked mobile activism may entail diverse citizen agendas, moral principles, modes of coordination, and courses of action. Mindful of such diversity and complexity, in this chapter, I intend to further the debate by supplementing existing frameworks with a particular disposition, that is, mobile otherness. Specifically, I will discuss how digitally enabled mobility can enable practices of counter power via othering the city's repressive normality. Central to my contention is that networked mobile activism needs not to be thought of through the conventional notion of 'flash mob' that escapes the power it opposes (Gore, 2010; Molnár, 2013). Rather, it can be understood alternatively as a revamped type of 'out of place' practice

(Beckett et al., 2017, p. 171; Johnson, 2013, p. 797; cf. Cresswell, 1996) to strategically contest the controlling power in an agile fashion.

Indeed, when considering networked mobile activism as an instrumental, one-off protest event, political campaign, or citizen action, it is hard to imagine how its ad hoc, transient contour may produce a meaningful project of urban counter power that is able to go against or beyond institutionalized mobility. To contextualize this renewed disposition, in the following sections, I will reflect on the manifestations of power and counter power in relation to digitally enabled mobility seeking to complicate the scholarly debate. Then, I will engage the proposed disposition of mobile otherness, in which networked mobile activism is seen neither exclusively as an instrument for achieving a designated goal, nor as expressive performances of urban pranksterism (Gyimesi, 2020), but rather in itself assumes a rationale of resistance and intervention in ways that simultaneously expose and invert existing power structures.

The debate: Urban mobility, (contentious) politics, and (counter-)public life in an age of mobile media and communication

Studies of digitally enabled mobility span a range of academic disciplines that draw on various bodies of knowledge to locate mobile media and data technologies at their centres. If a common theme can be used to group together some of these inquiries, it would be their joint orientation toward contesting the seemingly apolitical nature of urban mobility. In discussing the scholarly debate that disentangles from the conventional presumption, which tends to understand urban mobility merely as a technical phenomenon, I will focus on several strands of interrelated work in conceptualizing the (contentious) politics and (counter-)public life of urban mobility in the tradition of political geography, social movement research, and media culture studies.

Whereas there have been popular discourses, which hail the digitalization of urban mobility as a means to achieve a more efficient, interconnected, environmentally friendly ecosystem, much is revealed in the extant literature about how it may have ignored or even augmented inherent tensions and contradictions in the city. Through a critical lens of political geography, state surveillance is said to be largely strengthened by the use of new digital and AI algorithm-enhanced technologies in the ‘‘militarization’ of urban space’ (Filipcevic Cordes, 2017, e22), as urban environments are increasingly saturated by military technologies and datafied surveillance systems to manage and control urban spaces and flows for crime and security purposes. This recent development thus results in what Haggerty and Ericson call a ‘surveillant assemblage’ in which digital and automated infrastructures abstract ‘human bodies from their territorial settings, and separat[e] them into a series of discrete flows’ (Haggerty & Ericson,

2000, p. 51) in order to assume greater capacities to govern and to ensure the safety of citizens. More recently, amidst the spread of Covid-19, anti-pandemic measures have also turned into a powerful regime underpinning projects of state surveillance and mobility management in the name of public health. With the use of digital identification and contact tracking apparatuses, the effects have been particularly several on urban residents and populations on the move (Pelizza et al., 2021).

On another front, research has demonstrated that datafication of urban mobility has brought new ways in which 'venture capitalism and 'big tech' companies subject urban life in general, and transport in particular' (Rekhviashvili et al., 2022, p. 2). This process has rendered mobility a potent entry point to more broadly reorganize urban services and extract new sources of value from their intermediation, and, as a result, benefited digitalized mobility providers over dispersed actors like taxi drivers. In addition, digital travel permits and apps are increasingly promoted by local governments to facilitate tourism and attract inbound shoppers in order to create market niches in the host society. In some instance, however, these arrangements have resulted in an 'enclave' consumptionscape in the city (Chen & Ting, 2019), while the massive influx of tourists and shoppers pose challenges to the everyday lives of local residents, for example, by causing shortages in some commodities, unwanted urban gentrification, and social order disturbances. Therefore, while 'smart mobility' paints promising scenarios that link technological progress with social and economic development, it tends to overlook the uneven distribution of externalities among urban residents and travellers, whose daily practices, stances, and attitudes may not be addressed in conventional top-down approaches of digitalization of urban mobility.

However, communicative mobility is not merely determined from above. Extant literature has come to consider citizens' bottom-up engagement with digitally enabled mobility. In this understanding, mobile social media uses as converging practices of mobility and communication are 'conductive to rhizomatic growth and nomadic movements [… to] allow difference to be related in new and creative ways' (Sreekumar, 2020, p. 116). A strand of research has examined the affordances of mobile media and social technologies surrounding the (trans)formation of (counter-)public and (contentious) politics. Existing studies have illustrated how the pervasive adoption of mobile devices and social media afford otherwise dispersed individuals to converge quickly and develop social ties. Owing to the strong Wi-Fi connectivity and growing communicative mobility in the city, mobile media and social technologies thus allow individual users to upload multimedia content in the form of original posts or follow-up comments in real time while riding subways or engaging in quotidian

activities. In this view, visual narrativity on mobile social media platforms takes on a more significant role in reporting ad hoc urban unfolding and presenting a spontaneous experience to a community online (Ting & Chen, 2021). These photo-taking and livestreaming practices sometimes create 'new hybrids of public-in-private and private-in-public that disrupt commonly held spatial models of these as two separate "spheres"' (Sheller, 2004, p. 39)

Observing the porous nature of communicative mobility in the city, a strand of media culture studies refers to this new development as emerging communicative publicness (Sheller, 2004; Sheller & Urry, 2003). As opposed to institutionalized mobility, smartphones and social media apps are said to afford mobile socialities among mobile media equipped individuals, whereby the urban dwellers can flexibly 'slip in and out of different contexts, identities, and relationships […] for the momentary 'gelling' of public identities and actions' (Sheller, 2004, p. 41). For instance, in the case of Hong Kong's grassroots campaign against inbound tourist shoppers prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, concerns about changing urban landscapes and lifestyles led to the emergence of 'mundane citizenship on the move' (Ting, 2022a), where local residents employed mobile social media to articulate alternative public agendas, connect acts of consumer activism, and perform communal belonging amid their daily routines and modest journeys. In the case of the Zambian elections, it has been suggested that mobile social media apps facilitate the articulation of 'mobile social media publics' while allowing for an 'always-on' mode of engagement and 'on-the-go' access in public spaces (Willems, 2020). These discussions thus inform the inquiry into how digitally enabled mobility may facilitate 'momentary stabilizations of collective identities and social-communicative actions as publics' (Sheller, 2004, 50).

Moreover, in the contemporary settings of 'networked social movements' (Castells, 2012), mobile social media is observed to afford new repertoires of contention and connect citizen actions. Nowadays, on-site protestors can share political updates and connect with previously unknown audiences by (re-)posting real-time photos and videos of protests on Twitter, Facebook, and other platforms while on the move (Penney & Dadas, 2014). Other functions of mobile social media, such as location-based hashtags and check-ins, have also emerged as tools for protestors to exchange information during demonstrations or other political events. For examples, in the Egyptian revolution of 2011, protestors used the 'check-ins' service on Twitter and Facebook to recommend safe routes in real time (Meier, 2011). During Hong Kong's anti-extradition bill movement (AEBM) of 2019–2020, mobile media equipped protesters were able to abruptly gather in various parts of the city rising up as nascent smart mobs against the local regime (Ting, 2020). In other contexts, the increasing use of smartphones and social media

apps allows individuals to connect their dispersed acts and discourses to those of activist communities and political struggles more easily (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). For example, individuals in campaign movements can use shared personal photos and narratives on mobile social media apps to construct collective identities that resonate with the group (Khazraee & Novak, 2018). As such, social movement scholars commonly observe the increasingly significant role played by communicative mobility in contentious politics.

The scholarly debate above suggests that despite increasing institutionalization of communicative mobility in the city, the pervasive adoption of mobile devices and social media afford otherwise dispersed individuals to converge quickly and develop social ties across temporal and spatial boundaries. The discussion also offers insights into the strategic uses and organizational functions of mobile social media for the mobilization and coordination of citizen actions and protest movements. Yet undertaking these preceding attempts of alternative mobility is not beyond the power system of the state and other prevailing power actors. How, then, can networked mobile activism be undertaken in the face of despotic urban power? What can it look like and accomplish? We now turn to an alternative reading of digitally enabled mobility that rethinks its contentious political potentials and limitations by analyzing networked mobile activism vis-à-vis the urban governance or local government they encounter.

Furthering the debate: Mobile othering as a practice of urban counter power

How does digitally enabled mobility manifest as (contentious) politics and (counter-)public engagement in countering urban power 'that which represses' (Foucault, 1984, p. 84)? Given that various technologically driven institutions and apparatuses are constructed to support institutionalized mobility for maximizing capital accumulation and normalizing state surveillance in the city as discussed, one entry point into this question is to investigate the ways in which alternative mobility is enacted and deployed to contest such institutionalized mobility and its 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1984, p. 90). This would require us to reconsider the latest forms of spatial political engagement with communicative mobility and to critically reflect on the question of how lay citizens, who often lack formal organisation and institutional representation, render urban resistance possible from within urban repression. I guide us through this journey by drawing on the extended Foucauldian notion of heterotopia to discuss the possible counters of networked mobile activism for political resistance and their manifestations in the city.

The expanded Foucauldian notion of heterotopia is useful in illuminating a specific variant of alternative mobility undertaken to counter strict controls in urban public spaces via the practice of mobile othering. Heterotopia refers to a place that is juxtaposed to other incompatible emplacements, and can be useful for our understanding of networked mobile activism and how digitally enabled mobility makes room for spatial political engagement while on the move. The notion of heterotopia was integrated by Foucault into his later work on urban public spaces more explicitly, especially *Of Other Spaces* (Foucault, 1986), turning it into a theory of counter power. Foucault defines heterotopia as a space that is other than normal space. Meaning literally 'other space,' heterotopia can be understood as something 'connected with all other emplacements, but in such a way as to suspend, neutralise, or invert the set of relations designated, reflected, or represented by them' (Foucault, 1998, p. 178). Notably, whereas the concept of heterotopia captures localities for individuals 'whose behaviour is deviant with respect to the mean or required norm' (Foucault, 1998, p. 180), Foucault makes it clear that heterotopia is never a separation from normality but is actualised in acts of perforating the perimeter of normality. Rather than any intrinsic otherness or absolute difference in the heterotopia itself, heterotopia is a spatial process that is produced through 'a productive clash of spaces as one system of order challenges another' (Topinka, 2010, p. 63), where otherness spills over into the surrounding spaces of normality and upsets the established modes of order. The analytical potential of heterotopia is, therefore, implicated in the process of spatial contestation that Foucault illuminates by referring to it as a 'counter-site' (Foucault, 1986, p. 24), which challenges the dominant spatial relations via the process of othering. Particularly in social movement and critical urban studies, this counter-normative or norm-refusing nature of heterotopia has led to a strand of work examining its operation as assemblages of alterity injected into the surrounding normal urban spaces (e.g. Dehaene & De Cauter, 2008; Johnson, 2013; Saunders & Price, 2009). Extending from these studies, while the notion of heterotopia is discerning in producing variances of space to disrupt the controlling power it resists, a mobile type of heterotopia afforded by the intensive use of mobile media and smartphone devices may refer to how networked mobile activism is to expose and destabilise the predominant institutionalized mobility instated by local authorities and other power agents.

In this regard, Beckett et al. (2017) usefully discuss the analytical potentialities of 'mobile heterotopia' by referring to 'the 'wrong' people, moving in the 'wrong' way, in the 'wrong place' (Beckett et al., 2017, p. 175). Understood as physically mobile social aggregations, they substantiate the concept with the examples of long-distance marches, hunger marches, and the CND marches from Aldermaston to London. Exhibiting a feature of nomadism, mobile

heterotopias challenge spatial norms by enacting mobile aggregations of physically co-present bodies that are incompatible with the institutionalized settlements in the city. Often appearing in unexpected places at unexpected times to upset the usual order of things, the (contentious) political and (counter-)public potentials of mobile heterotopias lie in the gap between mobility cultures and practices that are imposed by power and their disruption, as mobile heterotopias create *other* flows of time-space that are outside of institutionalized mobilities. In line with this argument, mobile activism can be seen as a fluid form of heterotopia for it functions as 'matter *out of place*, co-existing with matter *in its place*' (Beckett et al., 2017, p. 171, emphasis in the original). Simultaneously presenting and representing overlapping contradictory kinds of activity in motion, it thus enables political resistance to unfold vis-à-vis repressive urban normality through an inseparable dialectical process of displacement and disruption.

However, in their study, Beckett et al. analytically separated mobile heterotopias from 'cloud heterotopias […] that are technically dependent on the corporate infrastructure of the Internet, Twitter, Facebook, etc.' (Beckett et al., 2017, p. 176). Yet, in contemporary networked urban settings, mobile heterotopias are increasingly intertwined with and supported by mobile media and communication in the processes of networked mobile activism. By contrast, my work on Hong Kong's networked mall protests illustrate the potentials of such digitally enabled type of mobile heterotopias for political resistance as an integral part of AEBM (Ting, 2022b). In the case of Hong Kong, whereas the local government unleashed policing of space and asserted that citizens should dedicate themselves to economic development and treasure social stability instead of taking to the streets, mobile media equipped citizens deliberately induced ruptures of this type of normalised city life at shopping malls. Over a hundred of networked mall protests were mobilized online and coordinated in real time to continuously challenge the normality imposed by urban repression, without the need to defend a fixed place of protest. Such nascent spatial 'tactics' (de Certeau, 1984) afforded by mobile media and communication, carve mobile otherness not merely to convey political messages but to disrupt the state's desire to get back to 'normal' as citizen activists travel across urban spaces and penetrated daily routines. Albeit individually short-lived, together these tactics of networked mobile activism amount to the formation of 'opposing otherness in motion' (Ting, 2022b, p. 21), simultaneously exposing and nullifying normalised urban repression in the city.

In line with the Foucauldian notion of (counter) power, the conceptualization of mobile otherness highlights the contours of networked mobile activism as both closely link to and are shaped by the regime of power which they oppose. In Hong Kong, whereas the government spatialised strict controls in the city of protests, digitally connected citizens retaliated by

forging alternate flows of time-space in correspondence with the changing forms of urban repression that sought to exclude or hide opposition politics. Such counter-normative and rhizomatic dynamics of the mobile spatial tactics were invoked by the politically powerless to undertake a large-scale urban movement in everyday areas of the city, despite urban policing and social distancing rules. Notably, rather than a starkly fixed model of operation or fully planned trajectory, the citizen activists' digitally enabled practices of mobile otherness served as tactical responses that temporarily transformed available urban spaces into other protest spaces to subvert the top-down order as well as the normalised modes of living, working and moving imposed by urban policing. These instances demonstrate the ways in which networked mobile activism can be enacted to interrupt the institutionalized mobility and spatio-temporal order imposed by the state, while interfering with its circuits of power via mobile othering.

However, on limitations of the disposition, the Foucauldian notion of (counter) power has been criticised, still, for underestimating the state as a prevailing system of power in analyzing grassroots activism and its agency (Bayat, 2013, pp. 44–45). In Hong Kong, for instance, while the networked mall protests helped refashion the city's contentious political and (counter-)public life and successfully prompted international attention in support of the protesters' bottom-up endeavours for over a year, the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and the approval of the local legislation of national security law eventually clamped down on the urban movement in late 2020. Nowadays, while some of the activist citizens have continued to contribute to social media content and update information on smartphone apps in partaking in politically driven consumption activities as opportunities for street politics faded, they have been required to engage in risk-taking activities when facing urban policing and legal consequences.

Therefore, doubts and questions remain about whether and the conditions under which such connective acts of mobile otherness are capable of resulting in effective structural change or meaningful social change. In principle, networked mobile activism unevenly unfolds in different (parts of) cities depending upon specific local experiences and context of contemporary urban struggles, while some of them are necessarily costlier or less fruitful than others. Sometimes, the costs of subverting and bypassing institutionalized mobility can be great as are the potential punishments imposed and incentives offered for doing so. As such, the effectiveness of using mobile media and communication for political activism and prodemocracy movements may be considerably undermined in particular geopolitical contexts. Recognizing these limitations of networked mobile activism could be particularly important in

the traditional or emergent authoritarian societies that are characterized by constant urban policing and repression.

In response, Foucault would probably reason that the purpose of mobile othering is to contest, rather than to alter once and for all, the relatively totalizing despotic power that instates institutionalized mobility to support and sustain its urban governmentality. In this view, rather than the pursuit of an urban revolution par excellence at the centre of power (cf. Harvey, 2013), the task of networked mobile activism lies in how it employs what Foucault would call 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1988, p. 17) to (re)appropriate spaces and mobilities everywhere or including the peripheries in the city to make room for self-transformation that runs against or beyond institutionalized mobility. One such possibility is for us to look at how the enactment of mobile otherness at the everyday level may in turn initiate and revitalize contentious political discourses and practices. In this regard, Liu has proposed the notion of 'the politics of mundanity' to examine the political dynamics of digitally mediated, routine daily life, which may serve as 'precursors of open, confrontational forms of contentious activities' (Liu, 2017, p. 418) and 'the less publicly conspicuous tactics of protest' (Liu, 2017, p. 422). Following Melucci's (1996) understanding of the interactions between 'latent' and 'visible' movement activities, Liu argues that mobile devices and digital platforms are means through which people's mundane activities structure social networks and prefigure collective goals that become available for collective action mobilization.

Along these lines, other scholars have investigated the relevance of everyday processes of networking, learning and meaning construction as mundane online tools for contentious political participation. For instance, they have examined how camera phones enable people to record or livestream unexpected incidents that can result in popular protests (Liu, 2013) and how snapshots of private acts can have a political effect in the case of online feminist activism (Vanden Abeele et al., 2018). My own work has also paid attention to how activist media usages were reproduced in Hong Kong people's daily routines, work patterns, and habitual activities during the Anti-National Education Movement (Ting, 2015; 2021), Umbrella Movement (Ting, 2017; 2019), and AEBM (Ting, 2020; 2022b). This emerging literature has thus focused on examining the ways in which everyday processes set the conditions for protest movements to occur and proliferate as they help maintain 'submerged networks' (Melucci, 1996). Following this line of argument, today's civic and political involvement revolving around mobile media equipped urban dwellers, may not be effectively captured by conventional contentious political paradigms like those before (Theocharis, 2015). If urban (contentious) politics and (counter-)public engagement may indeed emerge in precarious and

ostensibly apolitical settings, the ways in which mobility is networked in the realm of the mundane and functions as a politically significant domain of counter power constitutes another research program that demands and deserves more future research.

Conclusion

Digitally enabled mobility has been playing an increasingly significant role in shaping urban landscapes and organizing everyday life in the city. Intentionally or unwittingly, it (re)produces and sustains particular social, spatial, and economic relations and power structures, while marginalizing and ruling out others. Against this backdrop of the growing institutionalization of mobility, recognizing the political imperatives and contestations of these processes carries practical and scholarly significance for our understanding of the latest contours of urban (contentious) politics and (counter-)public life. In this chapter, I have sought to contribute to this debate by reconsidering the potentials and limitations of networked mobile activism. By drawing on recent research on digitally enabled mobility and extending the Foucauldian notion of heterotopia, I have contended that mobile activism opens new paths towards alternative ways of resistance and intervention, and suggested a renewed conceptualization of urban counter power that can come in the form of citizen collectively or connectively moving through and beyond institutionalized mobility vis-à-vis the existing power structures they confront and oppose.

Specifically, I have proposed a type of networked mobile activism that inverts prescribed mobility and transforms it into spatial-political transgression and public engagement via the process of mobile othering. As a practice of urban counter power on the move, the enactment of mobile otherness refers to the counter-normative encounters with institutionalized mobility in ways that purposely subvert and defy the predominant spatio-temporal order it imposes. Illustrated with real-world exemplars to explicate this process, I have reconsidered what it would mean to reconsider networked mobile activism as connective acts of opposing otherness in motion and suggested directions for future research and further debates. Meanwhile, throughout the discussion, I have held to the contention that none of the possibilities of urban counter power are easily attainable. Even though the manifestations of mobile othering as discussed shed new light on the possibility of urban (contentious) politics and (counter-)public engagement, in which citizens actively engage and innovatively experiment with mobile media and data technologies, they are necessarily contested and variously experienced across different networked urban settings, thus requiring an analytical approach to context for arriving at a

sophisticated and situated understanding of the anew praxis of mobile media and data technologies.

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