For society and technology, the future is hybrid

By
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Cars are not alone in becoming hybrids in modern cities, according to Mimi Sheller. There is a far broader hybrid future that encompasses technology, town planning and the way individuals are increasingly using social networks on the move.

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I'm going to talk about the idea of hybrid, hybridity, hybrid mobilities, hybrid cars and hybrid ecologies – because they have slightly different meanings. Back in 2000, John Urry and I published an article called 'The city and the car' and in that article we started thinking about the idea that the car and the driver are an assemblage of machine and human. And we thought of that as a hybrid. But we wanted to also go beyond some of the existing ideas – of car and driver as a closed unit – and think about hybridity with the whole surrounding environment. So that initial idea of the hybrid car driver was to start to think about how a mobile assemblage of a person and a vehicle interacts with the affordances of the roadway, the signs, the system of oil and petroleum. That whole assemblage makes up what we call the hybrid, and once you start thinking that way, you can then think about how the system of automobility gives better access for some hybrids than others.

So, a person and a bicycle, for example, are often not given the same consideration, the same space on the road, the same safety and only if you put in good biking infrastructure does the person and bike hybrid become do-able and safer. So it was a way to start thinking about these different mixtures of human movement, vehicular movement and then the design of the spaces that allow for that. That was our original idea in writing about "The City and the Car." And really, the city and the car itself are a giant hybrid system of urbanism and automobility – and that's what we began trying to convey.

A digitally-mediated mobility

But now, more recently, that has developed into the idea that there are networked interactions with computing and software - and that those permeate urban spaces and car spaces. We were beginning to think about that, but really that idea took off in a lot of directions because other theorists were talking about the idea of 'networked urbanism' and also what some people called 'sentient cities' and 'net locality.' They are all different ways to think about the mixture of digital information and physical space. We wanted to bring to that the idea of movement through this digitally-enacted space and we call that a hybrid ecology. That's one way to think about moving that is both digital and physical at the same time.

So we have information that is coming to us on screens and we're using that to navigate through urban space.

So I started using the term 'mobile mediality' – mobile media as a form of reality – as a way to think about digitally-mediated movement. It's both that we are moving with digital mediation and that media cultures are now mobile: so the information is mobile, the person using it is mobile. And that's a new way to think about this 'mobile mediality' - as a form of what Ole Jensen calls 'negotiation in motion'. So we're negotiating and we're making sense of things as we move, but the things we're making sense of are both physical spaces and networked connectivity and information that is coming to us.

So that was a different view of a hybrid ecology and what I want to think about is the implication of that for how people are moving around cities. Here, I'm thinking of places that are more connected and where we have available wifi systems and 4G networks that make faster connection available to people. So one thing that happens in that setting, which people call 'any time, anywhere connectivity' is you have the rise of location-aware technology. So devices are locatable, they know their location - they broadcast their location.

The impact of located media on mobility

In the effort to combine the study of mobilities with media and communication, the idea of locatability has become really important, because locatabilty means we have location-aware devices. And the device itself always knows its location and can broadcast its location. So when you do an internet search or when you pull up an app on your phone, it will vary depending on the location where you are based. It will also push information to you that's dependent on your location. And increasingly, people are connected to location-based social networks - so they are connected to their friends via online networks that broadcast to each other where they are. That's led to people thinking about the new ways in which we're able to move around with locational awareness and it changes some of our everyday practices of urban space. In the book 'Mobility and Located Media,' which I co-edited with Adriana De Souza e Silva, some of our contributors talked about some of the effects this has.

One is the idea of what's called 'chance orchestration,' which is that you kind of know where you are going and you have information before you go, but you also might bump into something new. So it's both that you're taking a chance, but you're also orchestrating where you are going. But it's the combination of those that creates a new kind of sense of navigating in urban space. The other way to think about that is what Christian Licoppe and Yoriko Inada call 'proximity-aware encounters.' It's when you have on your phone locational information of someone else in your social network or other places in your social network. And as you get near to them, you're aware that they're getting nearer to you and that you may be passing each other in physical space - and you might actually change your route because either you want to see somebody or you don't want to see them and you're aware of their location. So that's called a 'proximity aware encounter' and it changes the way people might interact when they're using a mobile device and moving around in an urban setting.

This also ties into ideas about mobile gaming and the way in which gaming is kind of filtering more into everyday activity, because there's what's called 'ambient play.' It's not just that you play a game and then you put it away and go out and do something. It's that while you're going out doing things, you might be playing a game, you might be looking for certain things or looking for certain kinds of encounters. You have your antenna open to a kind of playfulness, but you're also at the same time navigating in a more practical way. So there's this kind of funny mixture of what Licoppe and Inada call 'proximity-aware walking' where you're both open and playful, but also navigating and moving through this hybrid ecology.

A need for new digital survey methods

The last effect of this new hybrid ecology is that there is the need for new kinds of mobile methods or the possibility for new mobile methods. So we're beginning to think about how mobilities researchers

might make use of these new location-aware technologies and new forms of interaction; how they might track them and study them, because you both need physical observation and also some kind of digital observation and a combination of the two at once.

A lot of efforts are going into developing new methods to understand how people are moving in these new environments and what the effects are on social interaction and on things like political mobilisation. How do people now gather in a public space using social media, using Twitter? We've heard a lot about the different revolutions that have happened and have drawn on those kinds of media. But there's still the need to really understand it and study it further as a future direction in which political action might be happening - and it happens both online and offline at the same time.

Time to re-think urban spaces?

That's one example, and I think the other question has to do with designing environments. So mobilities research is really picking up on questions now of urban planning and design and how do we design for environments where people are locatable and proximity-aware and have new kinds of connectivity possible. What kind of spaces does that call for? Could we design things differently? Could we provide kinds of information? So will it really be an opportunity to really re-think public urban space in new ways?

One way to think about designing for this new hybrid space is to think about what kinds of exclusion exist. Some people might have access to all the technology and other people will not. So maybe we need to think more about providing public screens and free wifi connectivity and other issues to do with social exclusion from the new kinds of services that are increasingly going to be available in this hybrid space of mobile mediality.

1. Mobility and disability in the digital city

When I think about how we might design for new hybrid ecologies that have this digital and physical mixture of activity, there are two different things that come to mind. One is the way in which the city might be reactive – buildings and surfaces – to people with disabilities. So, for example, they may have a beacon of some kind that says a person who is either blind or deaf is coming in this direction and the actual surface of the street might react and create a texture for them to follow - or create sounds to help guide them across an open space. There are different ways in which we could see this technology being built into new types of urban architectures.

2. Blurred lines between public and private spaces

The other big impact it might have is thinking about the mixture of public and private space and the way they are increasingly blurred, because we are switching between work and private messages, and different kinds of contexts, as we are moving around. So that suggests the need for new kinds of spaces also. There won't be this strict divide between private space and then public space. Increasingly, it's being blurred and one way that's happening, for example, is with the sharing economy. So we have co-working spaces, we have shared vehicles and we have even ideas about shared streets – where different kinds of traffic are sharing the space of the street - and all of that is part of this blurring of the public and the private.

Maybe we need to think about building in more spaces where people will pause, because they will be looking at screens or checking information – or maybe they'll be listening to it. But they will have quiet spaces or stopping spaces in a way that traditional urban space had; it had civic public spaces that were also intimate and small spaces, and we've kind of lost a lot of those in our cities with just streets for traffic. But maybe there will be a comeback of the small intimate pausing space within the urban fabric.

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

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

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 :

Lifestyles

- Living environments
- Futures
- Digital technologies

Policies

- Cities & Territories

Theories

- Concepts
- Methods

Mimi Sheller

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Mimi Sheller is a key theorist in mobilities studies. She is Professor of Sociology and founding Director of the New Mobilities Research and Policy Center at Drexel University in Philadelphia. She was co-founder with John Urry of the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster.

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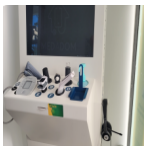---

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