

Audio paper 0 – INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES of AUDIO PAPERS: MEDIATING SUSTAINABLE CITIES

Walker: Welcome to the series of audio papers: Mediating sustainable cities!

In this introductory audio paper, we give an outline of the themes addressed in the series which is based on the scientific work of Paola Monachesi, researcher at Utrecht University and her collaborators. The series focusses on the communities and the communicative processes that foster a different idea of the smart city. Attention is dedicated to digital and environmental sustainability.

The audio paper in an innovative medium that resembles academic papers but through its audio format, simplified language and brevity makes research results more easily accessible to a broader academic public. Students can listen to these audio papers to get insights into the most important aspects of the relevant scientific papers, before reading them in detail. For researchers, these audio papers can be a means to catch up with innovative aspects and methodologies in the sustainability debate. Both students and researchers might get ideas and inspiration on how to contribute to a more human-centered smart city.

Jingle

Walker: The smart city is based on digital data. It is a data-driven space. The storytelling behind the smart city claims that data can contribute to a better understanding and efficient management of urban processes. It is in this way that data and sustainability are linked. Data should support sustainability. But what we see in the current situation is that economic growth, is the main concern of urban development. Data produced by devices and citizens are exploited by corporations and governments, often through public-private partnership. They create new markets and profit that often do not take into account the needs of the citizens and of the environment.

In this series, we understand sustainability as protection of the environment and social equity.

Data ownership plays an important role in environmental and social sustainability. We, as citizens, produce quite a lot of data through online and social media activities, but we do not own these data and we have no control on the way these data are being used. Data are valuable and value-creating but are in the hands of big tech corporations that exploit them for their own benefits. In this series, we claim that it is necessary to regain control over the data we produce. Data should be employed to serve the needs of the citizens and of the environment.

The current pandemic due to covid-19 has highlighted the failure of the technocratic smart city model. Smart cities such as London or New York that are driven by data and algorithms failed to use smart technology to carry out contact tracing. They didn't manage to limit the spread of the virus and the high number of deaths. They have instead relied on quarantine: isolation, borders, closure. The same methods that were used to limit the spreading of the plague centuries ago.

Smart cities proved not to be adequate to support the well-being of their citizens. For example, they do not have enough bike paths to ensure safe transportation. Amsterdam, which has been much praised for its smart city policies, doesn't have sufficient parks and green areas for people to breath fresh air and maintain distancing. Our homes are not conceived to have the entire family working and living in the same space 24/7. Those people that could afford it, left the (smart) cities for the countryside, as did the kings and the nobilities when pandemics occurred in the past.

Covid-19 has shown what the scientific literature of the last years (especially within Humanities and the Social Sciences) has heavily criticized. The smart city is driven by technology, but it shows a use of

technology that serves mainly the interests of corporations and governments rather than those of the citizens.

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In this series of audio papers, we claim that digital and environmental sustainability are strictly connected. The lack of sustainability in the way we relate to the environment and to digital networks are two aspects of the same problem. They are two symptoms of the same illness: communities have lost control over social and economic data-driven processes that are happening at large scale on a global arena. At all levels, from small local contexts to the state, communities are not being heard in the decisions regarding environmental policies or in their request to protect their privacy.

A growing body of research and academic literature has argued for a different approach to the smart city, suggesting an alternative vision that considers the environment and the well-being of citizens as priority. The human-centered smart city literature asks for citizens' awareness and participation in innovation processes and for a view in which technology is being used in support of the environment and citizens' needs. The work of Paola Monachesi can be embedded within this research line. It looks at urban sustainable development from the vantage point of new media, communication and language technology.

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Paola: the audio papers of this series are based on my academic writing in which I highlight an alternative smart city storytelling that emerges from different communities. Identifying specific communities is the first step in my analysis, since it is the community that fights to rebuild public space. Public space is a space where people can discuss, fight for their rights and interests, work for the common good, and gain control over the data they produce. This space is the premise to build a more sustainable way of life.

Examples addressed in this series include how Bluetooth apps create new spaces in the HK pro-democracy demonstrations, the ideal of a smart city shaped by creative migrants and the efforts by the elderly to improve the natural and social environment of the city they live in. From these cases a common thread emerges: the need for a sustainable environment and a sustainable city. Sustainable in terms of nature, democracy and ethical way of life.

My work relies on an innovative methodology. In the case of creative migrants and the elderly, it is based on social media data to identify the communication carried out by these groups. The narrative of these two communities has not been analyzed in relation to the smart city before. The smart city discourse promoted by governments and big tech corporations is often one-way. I show instead that social media allow for a more open, participative and interactive communication that reveals different narratives. The methodology I propose merges quantitative and qualitative methods. It relies on a language analysis of the geo-tagged data and it combines it with a social network analysis that shows the contribution of these communities to the smart city debate.

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Walker: How is this series of audio papers' structured? Each audio paper presents a different aspect of the sustainability theme. We start from few of Monachesi's publications and we introduce new ideas and debates by employing different formats. They include interviews, a conversation with students and narrative. We will talk about media and public space, communities, urban sustainability, the importance of care and research methodology.

We will ask questions on the role of technology in social and political interactions, particularly in an urban environment. What is the role of public space in a “human-centered” smart city? What kind of sustainable city do we want? How can care practices contribute to the creation of a more sustainable environment?

The audio papers attempt to answer some of these questions, and, most importantly, to stimulate a debate on the role of (communication) technology in shaping a “human-centered smart city”. We believe that research and debates should inspire people to carry out actions and regain political agency within their communities. For instance, by getting back control over data and their use in city policies. Please enjoy the series!