Audio paper 1 – MEDIATING SUSTAINABLE CITIES: Digital and physical public space

Paola

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and I am Marina Turco, we are the curators of this series of audio papers: Mediating Sustainable Cities.

In this audio paper, we discuss the role of media in triggering what we call stratagemmatic actions. These are actions that do not follow a clear plan, but they deviate from the usual paths, often to avoid institutional and corporate control. We claim that they contribute to re-create public spaces, both online and in urban context. Public space, we will argue throughout the whole series, is the necessary building stone on which a more human-centered smart city can be built.

We give examples based on two cases we have analyzed: the HK umbrella movement and the work of the street art Banksy.

This audio paper is based on a scientific paper that we have written together.

Jingle

Paola: Between 2013 and 2018, I was visiting professor at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. I was interested in Chinese culture and I thought it might be easier to start exploring it from Hong Kong. The city always functioned as a bridge between Asia and the western world. During my several visits, I had the opportunity to witness the rise of the Hong Kong Umbrella movement and to observe its developments during those years.

The movement started at the end of September 2014 as a spontaneous protest. People were fighting for genuine democratic elections of the Hong Kong chief executive. Beijing imposed that all candidates for election need preapproval by at least half of the members of the nomination committee, mostly generated by Beijing. Protesters claimed that under these conditions, elections become virtually non-democratic.

The first outburst of the HKUM, brought masses to the streets, masked faces, bodies wearing painted t-shirts, walls covered with post-its conveying political messages. The fight was local. More than 10,000 residents occupied roads in several areas of the city for 75 days. It was an experiment in the organization of urban space. The young people that occupied the business and commercial streets of downtown Hong Kong regained a space that was not perceived as public anymore.

Speaking with colleagues and friends who were directly or indirectly involved in the protests, I realized that the fear of losing freedom and independence was felt deeply by HK citizens.

The protest was not limited to the urban space. Much was happening on the web too. Digital media were used to organize the demonstrations and to transmit critical messages, including harsh political satire. Facebook was used for multilingual updates. Information was spread to Mainland China through WeChat and Weibo. Twitter spread the news about the protests abroad.

Digital media also facilitated control by the authorities. Online information is traceable. Even if Internet censure was not enforced in HK, Chinese authorities would have the possibility to get information legally. For example, using GPS data from mobile phones to trace and arrest protestors.

I was impressed by how HKUM protestors were able to improvise "escape paths" throughout physical and digital spaces. It was as if a new kind of space was being created, a space which integrated the physical and the digital dimension, offering opportunities of free action and communication. A good example is the download of Firechat.

Hundreds of protestors downloaded Firechat, when they suspected government control. Firechat is an app that was originally developed to support communication during festivals since it relies on Bluetooth. It opened a new way to communicate while avoiding Internet control, adding a new digital layer to the spontaneous network of communication means, used to organize and carry out the occupation. Firechat made possible a retreat from Internet to avoid control.

Jingle

Marina: When I met Paola for the first time in 2014, I was investigating new uses of media in the artistic domain. Up until then, the media studies debate had focused on the rhetoric of the digitalization and gamification of culture, utopias of virtual worlds and borderless communities. In the second decade of the century, the discussion took a different direction. A critical gaze was rising towards the domination of social media on the web and their effects on the cultural and civic debate.

Some artists would retreat from the Internet, considering it a space controlled by large technological companies. They considered social media as a means of manipulation that encourages and exploits self-display rather than civic engagement. The early "webnauts" were mostly anonymous. By that time, online anonymity had become an almost impossible condition. Perhaps for this reason, a genre like street art was coming back into fashion. It redirected the attention of art publics to the physical spaces of the city and allowed artists to work outside an increasingly narcissistic mediascape. Street art was anonymous and "location based" like old style graffiti. Yet, it operated within a completely different kind of "hybrid" public space.

This becomes clear when we observe how the perhaps most iconic artist of this second wave street art, Banksy, developed his projects throughout digital and physical spaces. Banksy starts with an intervention at a physical place, and, from there, he weaves a web of relations between local and distant places and publics.

In 2015, ten years after his first intervention on the West Bank wall, Banksy goes back to Gaza, with a project consisting of a series of stencils and a fake travel advertisement video posted on YouTube. In the video, Gaza is ironically presented as the place-to-be for wealthy tourists. He calls it "a place nestled in an exclusive setting (surrounded by a wall on three sides and a line of gunboats on the other)." In the video we see how differently the online public and the Palestinians experience the street art works.

Take for instance the stencil of a kitten, painted on the ruins of a bombed house. To the online public, the kitten represents the uselessness of a globalized web space where images of kittens catch the users' attention much more than a war tragedy. From a different point of view, the local public of the Palestinians interprets the kitten as a symbol of how Palestinian children are deprived of fun and playfulness. The Youtube public is made aware of the contrast between the fakeness and superficiality of touristic experiences, and the reality of countries devastated by war. Different publics react and

interact with the stencil differently, depending on how the work is mediated for them. Yet, both publics inhabit a common public space, because they are aware of each other, almost mirror each other.

Jingle

Paola: When Marina and I discussed about those stories, we discovered that both players, Banksy and the HKUM, were using digital media in an unconventional way. There were deeper similarities between the two players. There was a convergence of political and civic purposes, and of operational strategies.

Our thesis was that the very blend of digital media and analogue media, physical and digital spaces, allowed the players to perform what we called STRATAGEMS. Stratagems are a specific kind of actions, actions that do not follow a coherent plan, but improvise a trajectory across the many layers of those hybrid spaces. Those actions do not aim at a specific effect, or result. They deviate from the usual paths, often to avoid institutional and corporate control.

Marina: Yes, indeed. In Banksy's work, for instance, his anonymity and the online presence of the works function as a *stratagematic device*. Everybody can claim to be Banksy and appropriate or transform his works, spread them online and offline. This fact triggers unexpected reactions, that, in turn, might steer further actions. Someone might erroneously attribute a stencil to Banksy, set up a fake FB page on his name, and the artists might recognize those "fakes" as his own work after all.

Paola: Right! In a similar way, in the case of the HKUM, downloading Firechat allowed for a restructuring of digital public space through a stratagematic use of this app that made possible to escape control. In the urban space, the occupation of the square in front of the government buildings by the activists of Scholarism was an important event. Before that moment, even if the square was a public space, it was never experienced as such. The occupation transformed it into a public space where conflicting political and civic subjects could interact and compete with each other, triggering new political opportunities. After the occupation ended, and the square was closed by a fence, it continued working as a public arena.

The unpredictable trajectories of stratagems create a void, a free space where unplanned opportunities can occur, where new and contrasting views and concepts might emerge. This, we argue, is public space: a site of confrontation between conflicting views. An "AGONISTIC SPACE", as Chantal Mouffe calls it.

Jingle

Marina: The HKUM is a social movement. Banksy and his public are performing political art. Both use "artistic" means to create public space, a space where institutional actors will eventually give rise to political struggles. What is then the role of art and creativity in the making of agonistic spaces?

Stratagematic actions are indeed ephemeral and unique, they don't result in a strategy. The movements disperse and reassemble, and Banksy's art does not usually achieve any specific political goal. But do movements and spaces really disappear? Do they become something else? A regular

institutional player perhaps, like a political party? What is the role of public space in giving rise to communities?

You might be able to find an answer to the questions by reading our article. Or explore further with the theoretical tools we provide to interpret recent developments of movements and artists who act throughout media spaces.

In the following audio papers, we will show how the well-functioning of public space is a crucial element to foster debate and political action, not only with respect to sustainability, but also in the case of other issues. In the next audio paper, we will listen to a debate with a group of international students. They will tell us what a sustainable city should look like. The debate originated in class and was triggered by Paola's papers on skilled creative migrants and the smart city. Education, online or in presence, creates one of the best spaces for confrontation and debate.

Don't miss it!