Audio paper 4 - MEDIATING SUSTAINABLE CITIES: Communities between digital and environmental sustainability

Paola: Welcome to the series of audio papers: Mediating Sustainable Cities!

In this audio paper the two curators of the series Paola Monachesi and Marina Turco, engage in a discussion and a reflection on some of the aspects of the research presented so far: communities, the role of media and their impact in creating an alternative storytelling related to the human-centered sustainable cities.

Jingle

Marina: Paola, good morning!

Paola: Good morning Marina!

Marina: Paola, in your research, you analyze two very different communities: skilled creative migrants and elderly in the Netherlands and you look into how they contribute to the smart city discourse. Why did you choose these two groups and are there differences and similarities between them?

Paola: Well, my interest in the elderly has arisen in the context of the EU project GRAGE. The aim of the project was to address elderly well-being in urban context. In this project, I was leading a group, a research group, dealing with technology for green and healthy behavior in cities.

As for the creative migrants, they play an important role in shaping the smart city, I think. I was especially interested in their activities in Amsterdam, also because I belong to this group being an Italian that has been working in the Netherlands for 30 years.

Both in the case of the elderly and of the creative migrants, their discourse on social media had not received much attention. That is why I tough that it could be interesting to look at their communication.

You might think that those are two very different groups, two groups that really don't have much in common, but my research shows that there are similarities that emerge from an analysis of the topics of discussion that was based on the frequency of the hashtags used. And in fact, I applied, I used the same methodology in both cases.

For example, we see that there are similarities because they both address sustainability in their communication on Twitter. This is the case especially for a specific group of creative migrants, that of the architects and designers. In fact, I analyzed different categories of migrants and this group was particularly interesting with respect to the smart city. This is because they are mainly concerned with the economic aspects of environmental sustainability. They address several topics in this respect. For example, circular economy, alternative forms of energy like wind, solar, biofuel but also climate change and sustainable development. Some of these topics come back also in the pre-retirement age group of the elderly that I have analyzed. For example, they mention topics like circular economy, and the 67+ group is especially interesting in this respect because they are really concerned with environmental sustainability, climate change and also its political implications.

Jingle

Marina: You say that both groups address sustainability in their communication on Twitter. Based on the topics they address on Twitter, would you say that they give a significant contribution to the sustainability discourse? And how do they do that? Do they talk about public ownership of data, for instance? About digital sustainability or are they rather concerned with environmental sustainability?

Paola: Thanks Marina, this is an interesting question, but I think that in order to answer it, we should remember that the data I have analyzed has not been extracted from special interest groups on sustainability or from activists' platforms. In fact, the main aim of these users was to promote their work on Twitter, to share their ideas, to discuss their lives and yeah, to share their world with their network. This is why I find it interesting, what I like about social media analysis, social media data analysis. The data I have collected is really spontaneous data, it is data that, yeah, these users share with others and it has not been elicited through interviews or focus groups.

What emerges from my analysis of the data of the creative migrants is that sustainability is a topic of discussion both in relation to work as well as in connection to their private interests. What one notices is that architects and designers are concerned especially about economic sustainability and they are involved in promoting projects that foster social innovation, inclusion, education, for example, played an important role. They also promote makerspaces that trigger inclusion and participation. Even though, they are not very concerned about privacy or data ownership, at least that was the case when I collected the data, and things might have changed now.

As for the elderly, they are concerned about environmental sustainability and interested in nature. Of the three age groups that I have analyzed, the 67+ group is the one that uses most hashtags related to nature.

Marina: this is an interesting finding, indeed, because the mainstream discourse is all about young people being concerned with the future of the planet! Very Interesting. And, are there differences in focus between the two groups?

Paola: Well, it seems to me that both groups promote an alternative storytelling with respect to the smart city.

Among the creative migrants there are also those that praise the idea of the smart city sponsored and financed by governments and municipality. And I think they do that because they profit from the funding made available by these institutions to them and therefore, they do not question the top-down technological solutions that are pushed by funding agencies. But there are also quite different voices, voices that emerge to promote bottom-up participation and social innovation. So those voices are also there.

And with respect to the elderly, as I said before, they are interested in environmental sustainability and nature, their vision of sustainability is different from older adults, say the age group between 55 and 67, those focus more on the economic aspects of sustainability. In a way, that is similar to the creative migrants and almost all the hashtags dealing with sustainability are related to circular economy.

Marina: So in a way, the groups and sub-groups create different public space "rooms", that address different aspects of the sustainability problem, we might say. Can we say that the two groups act as political players, that they create a kind of public space through their online conversations? You know, the stratagematic actions we talked about in the first audio paper? Does this notion apply here, as it did for Banksy and the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement?

Paola: Well, I think it is important to notice that, even though we could refer to the elderly and the creative migrants as communities, they do not really profile themselves as such on Twitter, they are individuals, individuals that express their views, their ideas, they express those views and ideas as individuals and not really as a community. They do not join forces with others. They exploit the available space in Twitter that you can see as a contact zone, as a digital space of encounter where beliefs and values get confronted, and they might compete for domination. But, I didn't find any unexpected use of media giving rise to stratagematic actions, their use of media is quite standard and so, as such they do not shape the space that is given to them in a particular way, they simply use this space in a very straightforward way. Common way, maybe.

Marina: I see… they don't act within a political frame… Still, it looks like they contribute to the creation of a community feeling. At least the idea of blend of physical and digital public space applies here. What do you think?

Paola: I am not sure, but at least on the basis of the data I have analyzed, I could see that there is a potential among those users, an interest to contribute to a different storytelling, but we do not see the clear political impact that Banksy's communication or that of the HKUM had through their use of media. These elderly and creative migrants, they form groups, groups that share certain characteristics, but they are not a community, I don't think they are a community, yet.

Jingle

Marina: From your research emerges that creative migrants and the elderly have a different relationship with technology and with the place they live in. You say, with Nadler, that through Twitter migrants connect "transnational and local communities", while the elderly are mainly involved in local communities. How important is technology, in the creation of communities, local or transnational?

Paola: Marina, this is a difficult question to answer since the issues are complex, if you take all the details into consideration. It is true that the creative migrants analyzed are interested in technology in its various forms and also in data. I am not sure to which extent this is the case also for the elderly because I didn't really look into it, in detail, in my analysis.

But, if we consider social media as a form of technology, then both groups are very active with it. This was to be expected in the case of creative migrants, but I was quite surprised to see that Dutch elderly are also very digitally oriented, they are active internet users, and they are very much present in social media. Statistics from 2016, for example, show that 80% of the seniors in age group 65-75 are online. The situation is different in Italy where only 30% were online. In fact, at some point I also carried out this comparative study between Dutch and Italian elderly. I think the reason for these differences rely in the lack of digital competencies in the Italian elderly. But I think that the current pandemic might have changed the situation. I have seen really a rapid growth of internet use in Italy. This was also due to the use of the smartphone which is quite widespread among the elderly and it is much easier for the elderly to use thanks to the apps than a tablet or computer. CUT

Creative migrants are quite active on Twitter and they, as I said also before, they use this social media platform to express their ideas, to promote their work, to interact with others. The data I have analyzed show that they are connected to more non-creative users than creative ones. This might be evidence of professional as well as private use of this platform so the two are really much intermixed. On the other hand, this might also imply that their messages will spread beyond their professional network. And this might be interesting and useful. Data also show that they are connected to more people outside of the Netherlands than local users. This is maybe what we would expect since they are migrants, after all.

Definitely, technology, in the form of social media, are quite essential in the creation of networks, both local ones and global ones. Both local and international users are in the networks of creative migrants, so they might indeed be able to connect local and transnational communities, this is, really you know, what, I think, they are strong in. However, the frequency analysis of the hashtags they use has also shown that they tweet about local projects and they take part in local initiatives and events, so they show that they are part of the local community. They don't neglect it, on the contrary. But they also mention global smart cities such as London or New York, they feel connected to them and in the end, what you see is that they propose the Western city as a role model for a smart city, as a role model to press…to solve pressing problems of…urban problems.

As for the elderly, the 67+ group is the one that makes the most use of location hashtags among the three groups that I have analyzed. Location hashtags are used mainly by people living in the place that is being mentioned or close to it, but there are even few exceptions to this. They are often used in relation to professional life, and this, you know, could be related to volunteering or socially driven organizations. CUT The 67+ group, as I said also before, is the one that uses more nature related hashtags, and also in this case they might mention locations related to nature. I think this shows that elderly can have a strong attachment to the community, if they are properly involved, and so they can also act as social innovators. And when we consider their relations, elderly also have a strong network especially within the Netherlands, so they especially have a local network but, and this I didn't expect, they connect also internationally, less than the other groups analysed, and, this is the case also for the other groups analysed, most of the connections are in the US.

So, yeah, my conclusion is that technology IS important for both groups

Marina: Yes, you are right, it is a complex picture. But what about the political implications of these networks? Which network – local or transnational – is better in terms of promotion of the sustainability discourse, or in terms of set up for concrete action? Is there a difference in terms of the "political impact" the two networks have?

Paola: Well, I think It is difficult to say something about the impact of their networks at political level and I also think it is difficult to find ways to measure impact, to find good ways. Both in the case of the creative migrants and in that of the elderly, I have been using social network analysis to investigate how these two groups are connected and whether they are connected more locally or globally. This was possible.

And, as we would expect, creative migrants are more connected globally, while the elderly are more connected locally. On the other hand, the hashtag analysis reveals connections to local communities in both cases. These communication networks have the effect to create a different storytelling through local participation and these groups are able to broadcast these activities towards a more human-centred smart city, globally through their international networks. Obviously, at different, yeah, with different degree. I think that both groups, in the end, manage to exploit the digital and physical spaces that are mediated by their social networks.

Marina: but it seems to me that these two groups, contribute to the creation of public space, after all. Even though they do not do so with a clear political purpose. What do you think? Are they creating a space that stimulate political participation on the issue of sustainability or not?

Paola: Marina maybe you are right, yeah, I think it is something I should think more about, it might be that this interaction between the local and the global level mediated by social networks could resemble a stratagematic action and might contribute to the creation of a public space. But it seems

to me that this space was not yet able to foster the creation of a community, a community with a clear political purpose, but it might in the future. So maybe this is something that deserves further study, especially the creation of communities on social media. I have supervised a very interesting honours project, at Utrecht University, that considered, among other things, community forming in Tik Tok. I think it would be interesting to investigate whether new platforms offer new or different possibilities in this respect. In the end, you know, I have only looked at these communities in Twitter. Also it might be interesting to look at the way the Covid-19 pandemic has changed or will change the interactions and the conversations on sustainability.

In the previous audio-paper, I have considered the elderly, sustainability and the importance of care. This audio-paper is based on an article we wrote in 2018 and all these concepts seemed very abstract then, when we thought that we would be unbeatable and technology would solve all the problems, but Covid-19 has made the concepts of frailty, vulnerability, care as common knowledge. We are all aware of our vulnerability and of the importance of care. There are many events and festivals and programmes on radio and television that address the importance of care, so this is in fact a positive change, that Covid -19 has triggered.

And also I think, yeah, these concepts of environmental sustainability and the importance of co-constitution and reciprocal sustenance and promotion between the human and the natural world will definitely become even more clear and less abstract after this summer in which parts of the world, including Italy is experiencing extreme heat that makes fires, as we have seen in Canada or US and lack of water that we also experience here, soon we will not have enough water to grow our vegetables and those become really very tangible problems, that will be less far away from us and probably will make us, hopefully will make us take actions in a more impactful way and will make our voices heard and this is actually also one of the aims of these audio-papers. CUT

Marina: Yes, I certainly agree with you on that. Well, thank you very much for your answers. Now I am giving the listeners a spoiler: Paola will explain the technical details of this analysis in the next three audio papers. For instance, she will talk about the relationship between word frequency analysis and social network analysis, she will talk about the use of hashtags, and many other topics.

Don't miss the next audio papers! Thank you Paola! ADD

Paola: Thank you Marina and thanks to our listeners. Ciao!