THE COMMUNICATIVE CITY IN THE PANDEMIC AGE
Abstracts

Platforms & Infrastructure

Struggles to Embed Food Delivery Platforms in the Communicative City: A Comparative Study of Beijing and Singapore

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COVID-19 has exacerbated inequality. Among digital companies, food delivery platforms — such as Meituan in China and GrabFood in Singapore — have grown more rapidly than others. Does this mean food delivery platforms would become a new engine for job creation, economic recovery, and communicative urban renewal? Or is the opposite true, when AI-equipped platforms become so powerful that they evade social responsibilities and government regulation, thereby leaving the communicative city in the dust of "platform capitalism"?

We focus on food delivery platforms that have become an indispensable urban infrastructure during the pandemic. Drawing from interview data, news reports, and online discussions, we attempt to demonstrate and explain the parallels between struggles in Beijing and Singapore regarding wages, working conditions, and algorithmic control. Attention will be paid to the differences within this digital labor sector and its varying relationship with deliverers and regulators who have to confront the platforms, while relying on them to put bread on the table, as seen through struggles and debates in Singapore during April-July 2020 and in Beijing following the publication of the contentious article "Food Deliverers Trapped in the System (外卖骑手困在系统里)" in September 2020.

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Towards Materialist Approaches to Digital Platforms, Urban Space, and Communication Research

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This paper revolves around Didi Chuxing's initiative of volunteer fleets during the COVID-19 outbreak in China. As a timely response to the suspension and reduction of public transportation systems in many cities, this initiative was designed for offering free rides to front-line health workers. By doing so, Didi produced an impression that private platforms can provide better urban mobility than public transportation systems in a time of crisis, which earned it huge social applause. Nevertheless, I suggest that it is nothing more than the latest effort of Didi's social corporate responsibility campaign, which aims to push corporate interests under the flag of public value and the social good. Through an innovative combination of Marxian materialism and new materialism, this paper makes two theoretical interventions. First, it suggests that the idea of communication needs to be extended to incorporate the material aspects of circulation and mobility of goods and people, which is particularly pertinent to the pandemic time. Second, it highlights that the threats of platform capitalism not only lie in the invasions of private interests into the public sectors, but also how this encroachment is shielded from public criticism through platform capitalism's immaterial efforts.

Angela Ke Li is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication and New Media at the National University of Singapore, where her research and teaching emphasize critical studies of information and communication technologies.

How to Collaboratively Research the Future of the Communicative City in a Post-Pandemic Age

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New technologies add alternative vantage points to existing conditions, processes or systems. They complement, supplement or alter them through projects and conquests. The industrial age of the XIX and XX c. brought new forms of energy, mobility and communication by transforming natural resources and human labor. With it, the rural exodus crammed into dense, unsanitary urban settlements.

Today, 60% of the world's population is piled into cities from 2 000 to 25 000 000 inhabitants. UN-Habitat reported in 2010, 1 in 3 urbanites lived in slum conditions and predicted that ratio to be 1 in 2 by 2030, and 2 in 1 by 2050. No wonder disease and virus spread where humans cluster in ever shrinking and promiscuous spaces, alongside our protein-resource livestock, raised in equally dense coops.

The economy of a city, by Greek etymology, is Household Management. The present Smart City concept has exploited surveillance, distribution, gig enterprises and business monopolies. Even if social networking communicated and coordinated some activities, the pandemic heightened livelihood deficiencies for daily human survival, care and income.

After the first decades of the XXI c., our digital age powers of connecting, computing and producing can now allow us to grow and run our cities along rhizome and fractal growth patterns with neuron circuitry distribution analogies using virtual reality panoramas of procedures and effects over time. Cities will continue to thrive as centers of exchange, culture and collaboration. However, now they can also easily multiply and diversify. Architects, designers and planners with social responsibility can visualize new collectively operated, cooperatively managed and ecologically sustained cities of the future better outfitted, tailored and adapted.

Stephan Hawranick Serra was raised in three cultures (French, U.S. and Mexican), and his architectural research focuses on Urban Habitat transformation planning; Socially Responsible settlement designing; Rhizome, Fractal growth patterns; and Time-based Circular Economy systems.

Politics & Pan-demos

The Pandemic, the Pan-Demos and Art

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Recent events have presented profound challenges to our conception of the viability and security of life on this planet. From political changes such as Brexit, to the climate fires in Australia, and now the Covid pandemic, in sum we confront radical questions about the stakes of survival and the hopes for the future. During this upheaval we have also witnessed an exacerbation of the existing social divisions of race, class and gender. Disproportionate harm is meted out to the precariat and people of color. In these new times of crisis the environmental damage is at its extremes in the rural regions and women are more likely to suffer from domestic violence. There is also the generalized fear that the political landscape is being dominated by discourse of isolationism and authoritarianism. At a time when the world needs to come together to find common solutions there are growing signs of hostile retreats and aggressive barricading. How can art hope to offer an alternative in a context where social relations are conducted at a distance or mediated through masks? In what ways has the rush to on-line events given a glimpse to new forms of connectedness? How can art generate new forms of ambient aesthetics that can enhance the vitality of co-presence in these highly mediated environments?

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Pan-demos and the Public Museum

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With on-site visitation restricted, museums around the world have rushed to retain connection with their audiences via digital platforms. While museums have presented online offerings since the 1990s, these are often positioned as a way to increase physical visitation, and this content is generally understood as either an archive or marketing strategy. With the option for physical visitation constrained, public museums are refocusing on the capacity of their digital platforms to facilitate sociality. This has resulted in expanded digital offerings. Taking an exhibition focus, we have seen four main ways this is transpiring: through virtual tours of existing exhibitions, creating new exhibitions (both online and offline) responding to the pandemic, cross-institutional collaboration, and crowd-sourcing content. From the Victoria and Albert Museum's exhibition of 'pandemic objects', to the Rijksmuseum's social media challenge to recreate famous works from the collection, new avenues for public participation are emerging. Activities and objects from the 'private' spaces of homes are entering into the public space of museums, then projected back into the home. These developing dynamics offer the opportunity for increased sense of public agency and ownership within the institution. This virus has brought a multitude of challenges to our lives. However, the mobilisation of digital sociality by museums provides insight into how publics and their institutions are co-constructing spaces and practices for creativity and connectedness.

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Infrastructures and Imaginaries of the Communicative City: The Criticality of Communication Idioms in an Era of Mediated Urbanism

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Popular discourse is proclaiming the death of cities as the twin pincers of viral pandemic and pervasive virtuality spark dramatic reappraisals of public space and pose existential threats to urban inhabitants. Policy responses to these challenges tend to frame urban life as a precarious problematic to be solved through technocratic managerialism. Data-gathering technologies of surveillance capitalism are now recast as essential tools for tracking viral transmission, while the quality of interpersonal connections is increasingly measured by broadband speeds. Under these conditions the very notion of the "communicative city" must be meaningfully disentangled from urban infrastructures and imaginaries that recuperate ideals of communication within ubiquitous systems of capture and control. I argue that the discursive delegation of communicative ideals to technical infrastructures functions to depoliticize practices of city planning, obfuscate the social inequalities inherent to urban development, and foreclose opportunities to formulate an emancipatory or oppositional urban politics. These approaches foreground technological solutions while obfuscating entrenched social problems whose causes are inherently human. I suggest that scholars of urban communication should centralize a political commitment to spatial justice in the communicative city concept in order to directly address the human dimensions imbricated in the overwhelming technical challenges facing cities.

Curry Chandler is a Visiting Lecturer at the University of Pittsburgh. He specializes in the areas of urban communication, new media studies, and the rhetoric of space and place.

Urban Political Thought in the Time of Covid

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Global urban protests, spurred on by Coronavirus and deep inequalities, are symptomatic of a desperate desire for a new kind of urban politics. In this paper I ask: How can this politics be thought? My argument proceeds in four stages. First, I distinguish between management and politics, with the latter referring to the process of thinking through and implementing a radically new and emancipatory form of life. Second, I explore how urban movements are pre-political. Their slogans and actions often express a negative position toward the managerial status-quo, but rarely offer a truly novel alternative. In Athens, Barcelona, Egypt and New York we have seen how such practices are easily nullified by reactionary and obscurantist countermeasures. Third, I explore another pre-political phenomenon, the way left movements embrace manageable and localized forms of alternative living to counter the perceived ills of the city. Think urban farms and worker coops. Finally, I offer an affirmation of the possibility of political thought. Drawing on the example of the Paris Commune and the American Freedom Schools, I argue that this is only possible when crowds withdraw from the street to form programs of political thought, strategically courting privacy, secrecy and security. In our time of 'sheltering in place', why not produce thought shelters? What role can media play in these shelters?

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Sense & Embodiment

The Future of the Communicative City and the Urban Sensorium

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The communicative city is a multisensory construct perceived and experienced in a mediated world. Each era is defined by sensory ratios both attenuated and extended by the extant media technologies. Ideally seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching allow for full multisensorial engagement with the urban environment. That engagement is simultaneously shaped and extended by technology and extrinsic events.

Communication researchers have long explored how communication technology changes, alters, attenuates, amplifies our understanding of the communicative process. The concept of the "communicative city" was developed to examine these changes, along with notions of the city and community.

There have been those within architectural studies exploring the "architecture of the senses" calling for the need to explore the significance of sensing the city through multiple sensory modalities. The balance and ratio of the urban experience is subjected by extrinsic, sometime, uncontrollable events such our current pandemic experience.

The scholarhip of Sontag, McLuhan, Ong, et al link the realm of sense ratios with communication technology, but it is the architect Juhani Pallasmaa who applies shifting sensibilities to communicating structures and the role of the shifting senses in a urban realm altered by the impact of technology and catastrophe.

One current effect of the pandemic has been the radical altering of experience and perception of place in the communicative city. The residual impact is unpredictable but probable. What is the future of the communicative city when our sense ratios are irrevocably altered?

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Slipstreams of Rhythm: Affect, Absence, The City and Sanctuary

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This ethnographic project visualises the quotidian aesthetic rhythms of a boxed existence through abstract photography, exploring the locked down city as an aesthetic frontier. The project uses visual palindromes as a means of encoding affect to manifest a consistent rhythm drawn from the arrhythmic stutter of the now.

The approach to these rhythms is to raise themes drawn from Henri Lefebvre's Rythmanalysis, offering a visual reading of everyday life where spatial and temporal considerations define the scope of the project.

In developing systems of visual 'translations' and 'rhythms' of place it connects to the visual and spatial politics and social practices of art collectives in Yogyakarta, Indonesia and Dili, Timor-Leste, two cities where colonial assumptions of art and its relation to urban politics become entangled in differential collaborative relations in their negotiation of the pandemic.

The presentation builds upon Rosalind Krauss's theory of the grid and the impetus of the form to impose an "aesthetic decree," seeking sanctuary in seriality while approaching the surreal translation of the vocabulary and architecture of emerging forms of urban publics into post-pandemic life.

Chris Parkinson is a multi-disciplined artist whose practices are tethered to the street and the creative articulation of that experience across cultures.

Taiwan is a Place, Not a Problem: Infodemic and Actor-Network Theory

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Infodemic is a neologism that emerged during the COVID-19 outbreak. The WTO defines infodemic as a tsunami of information that can spread misinformation, disinformation, rumours and conspiracies. This paper focuses on the Chinese state-sponsored disinformation campaigns that targeted Taiwan during COVID-19. Disinformation is the purposeful dissemination of false information intended to mislead or harm. Inspired by actor-network theory (ANT), I demonstrate how China's disinformation campaigns mobilise multiple actor-networks rather than a monolithic one and how they activate heterogeneous actors, cash flows, technologies, institutions, policies, and ideologies. The disinformation operations and their implications go far beyond the online environment and entrench the everyday life of the citizens across the Taiwan Strait. We see the formation and the consolidation of the new publics involved in disinformation campaigns, such as Taiwanese civic hackers and Chinese little pinks. Since disinformation operations rely on power difference, they reveal different hierarchies of the transnational urban communications assemblage. Although technologies reconfigure and remediate the actions of civic hackers and little pinks similarly, we need to be cautious when the technological power coalesces into statecraft. We need to recognise that infodemic is not only an issue of public health but also one of democracy.

Isabel Fangyi Lu is a PhD Candidate in the School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne. Her research sits at the intersection of place, technology, public and democracy.