

Public space and public rituals: Engagement and protest in the digital age

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Abstract

In our technology-based society, individuals have more tools that they can use to manage and ‘show’ themselves in public space. In public space, they are monitored by agencies using surveillance practices but they also share information through location-aware technologies. This profound condition alters social norms and, with that, not only change self-rituals practiced in public but also group gatherings in public spaces. With an emphasis on political protests, this commentary focuses on a set of related questions: what characterises contemporary self-rituals in public space? How are these rituals being altered by digitisation processes? How are these changes manifested in the performance of the self during protests? This commentary suggests that public protests in the digital age are ‘moments of togetherness’, accelerated by social media, which dramatically enhance personalisation processes in collective actions. Reflecting on the contemporary alteration of group rituals and protests as extensions of the self, the commentary ends with a discussion about the opportunities and challenges this might bring for future collective actions.

Keywords

commentary, daily life, Activism, protest events, public space, Digitization, technology, theory

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摘要

在当今的科技社会中，个人拥有更多的工具，可以用来管理和在公共场所“展示”自己。在公共场所，一些机构用各种监控方法监控个人，但个人也通过位置感知技术共享信息。这种深刻的状况改变了社会规范，进而，其不仅改变了公共场所的自我仪式，也改变了公共场所的集体聚会。在着重关注政治抗议的同时，本评论也关注一系列相关的问题：当代公共空间中的自我仪式的特征是什么？数字化过程如何改变这些仪式？这些变化如何体现在抗议期间的自我表现中？本评论认为，数字时代的公众抗议是“团结的时刻”，且被社交媒体加速，这极大地增强了集体行动中的个性化过程。在结尾处，本评论思考作为自我表达的延伸的群体仪式和抗议在当代发生的改变，并探讨了这可能为未来的集体行动带来的机遇和挑战。

关键词

评论、日常生活、政治、抗议活动、公共空间、智慧城市、科技、理论

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Introduction

During Covid-19 pandemic it became clear that the social role of public spaces is, and has always been, their prime role. Public spaces function as places of refuge, negotiation and debate (Harrouk, 2020). Around the world, the daily press has acknowledged the importance of public space during Covid-19, with stories covering creative appropriation and use by inhabitants. The wave of protests, which spread around the globe despite social distancing, was a distinct topic that also received daily coverage, ‘No matter how many open spaces they cleared or squares they blocked off, there was always somewhere for crowds to assemble’ (Schwartzstein, 2020). Both the physicality of public space and technology played major roles during these events.

In terms of the physical space, rules of social distancing did not stop activists. Rather, they contributed to elaborate, aesthetic performances. Some protests were tighter, more designed and better planned, with disciplined use of body and symbols, while others seemed more spontaneous, using a variety of personal signs and voices. The placement and the design of public

space have been viewed as crucial in this dynamic, ‘After decades of tightening constraints, in which public space has shrunk, shifted or vanished, scholars suggest that urban design itself will only become even more of a protest influence in the coming years’ (Schwartzstein, 2020). Some writers suggested that the current dynamic of protests should push planners to rethink and reassess the making of cities.

Worldwide, activists used the second central player, technology, in a sophisticated manner. Digitisation has itself become a feature of physical public space (Graham, 2005; Graham and Wood, 2003). Surveillance practices are used in many cities that have installed technological means to monitor and control public spaces with the aim of reducing fear and anxiety among inhabitants. These are varied public services, such as public transportation, parking, monitoring and observing individuals and/or tracking people’s locations and activities to ‘optimise services’. Activists also used digitisation to optimise their mobilisation. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has been declared a movement that reinvented digital activism by occupying opposing hashtags, hacking ad revenue streams, and

dismantling biased algorithms and censorship. Technology allowed secure communication for on-site protesters, with protective features ensuring secure and anonymous coordination (Seger, 2020). Yet, as researchers have noted, digital technologies also placed the BLM movement in conflicting circumstances. On one hand, state surveillance can potentially be used for retaliation against protestors, while on the other hand, technology gave supporters of the BLM movement a louder, collective voice that reached around the globe (Frankfurt, 2020; Zarnsky, 2020). Similar conflicts are also relevant for activists associated with the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong protests were innovative in using the Telegram and LIHKG platforms to provide activists with more privacy and security. Telegram allows huge, encrypted chat groups that make it easier for people to organise themselves. Telegram channels also allow moderators to disseminate information quickly to large numbers of followers in a way that other messaging apps do not.

LIHKG, a multi-category forum website launched in Hong Kong in 2016, is also central platforms to discuss strategies and organise activities. The forum looks like a virtual community space featuring “channels” and “lists”, through which users can easily glance through the most popular ideas on the forum and express their own opinion (Frosina, 2021).

Physical gathering in public space and role of technology during protests worldwide highlighted the variable, fluid boundaries between physical sphere and virtual sphere, between the individual and the collective in the digital age. Sloterdijk (2011) coined the term ‘spherology’ for the multiplicity and fluidity among spheres. This fluidity reforms protest events and public rituals more generally (Hobsbawm, 2017; Kennedy, 2020). But how does fluidity among spheres operate? More specifically, how does this

fluidity influence individuals’ conduct in public rituals? How does it change group dynamics, as in protests? What are the differences and similarities between individual and group conduct in public? What do all these aspects teach us about the meanings of public spaces? Addressing these questions, this commentary focuses on how digitisation influences public rituals of individuals and groups. It suggests that individuals’ daily use of digital tools in the public space and during protests are related. It further indicates that people use digital platforms in similar ways when they are alone and when they are in a group. Similarities are evident in the ways that digitisation supports the process of personalising things, spaces and activism. Building on these ideas and previously published empirical studies on digitisation practices in cities (Hatuka and Toch, 2014, 2017; Hatuka and Zur, 2020) and public protests in cities worldwide (Hatuka, 2018), the first section of this article discusses how digitisation influences the conduct and behaviour of the self in public. The second section then describes how digitisation modifies group rituals, with specific attention to contemporary forms of protest. Finally, the commentary ends by reflecting on the process of personalising public rituals.

The self: Public rituals in the digital age

Traditionally, public spaces are places associated with political power (Edelman, 1964; Low and Smith, 2006), which uses ‘admiration strategy’ such as a spectacular design, to divert the audience’s attention (Vale, 1992). Alternately, they are part of the political economy as spaces of consumption and branding (Harvey, 1996, 2001; Mitchell, 2003). Traditionally, the physicality of public space is seen as a socio-spatial territory that facilitates and regulates interpersonal relationships (‘access’) (Carmona, 2003; Sennett,

1976; Watson, 2006), where individuals present their idealised selves, following (or challenging) patterns of belief and behaviour (Goffman, 1959/1973). The public space provides a 'space of engagement' within which the public (or various publics) comes to recognise themselves. It provides a material basis for the public sphere (Madanipour, 2003; Mehta, 2014; Mitchell, 2005). The individual's performance in public space was seen as a culturally-influenced construct that human beings wore in social encounters, in order to protect the self. Thus, public practices were seen as a social ritual, a performance, which entails assuming postures, ways of behaving and expectations, if not ascribed roles (Brighenti, 2010).

These performances in public space have been viewed as providing social stability to exchanges among strangers, but, today, in the digital age, the approach that emphasises individual performances in public spaces as a key means for cultivating social life seems anachronistic. Do we still need to rely solely on physical space to interact with strangers? The answer is clearly no. Technology and social media have significantly modified the boundary between public and private, and changed public rituals in profound ways. As a result, the meaning of public space is different. One noticeable change in individuals' conduct in public spaces is their ability to use location-based applications and location-aware technologies that support the ability to participate simultaneously in multiple spheres of action and communication. Mobile technologies allowed the individual to create their own *portable private-personal territory* (PPPT), a socio-spatial condition facilitated by digital technologies that offer individuals the ability to navigate between the material world and the immaterial one (Hatuka and Toch, 2014).

This condition profoundly influences the daily rituals of the individual in public space in three ways (Hatuka and Toch, 2014). First, exchanges and social interactions in

public space formerly implied a physical presence, but today the physicality of space does not dictate social interactions; rather, it is just one sphere among many. Furthermore, mobile technologies reconfigure public space, and daily practices previously confined to traditionally private spaces have moved into the city streets (de Souza e Silva and Frith, 2012). This territorial fluidity was previously recognised by various scholars (e.g., Mitchell, 2005) who pointed to the elastic and fragile boundaries between the physical and virtual sphere that have dramatically changed our navigation in space. Second, social behaviour of the individual responds to the sphere in which the individual is acting. An example would be a loud discussion of private issues while speaking on the phone when sitting on a train or standing at a bus stop. The engagement with multiple spheres sometimes creates situations in which the individual needs to respond simultaneously to conflicting sets of norms and social codes. Yet, as Goffman (1959/1973) already made clear in the 1960s, the condition of civil inattention is not disattention. When individuals use digital technologies, they are not paying less attention to social interactions, but they are engaging differently. People do not use mobile technologies to 'withdraw' from public space (de Souza e Silva and Frith, 2012: 36). Rather, they use them to accomplish a goal similar to the blasé attitude (de Souza e Silva and Frith, 2012: 27). Third, if individual privacy was previously associated with the private home, today it is disassociated from physical space, either public or private. Individuals can be connected to their private, personal spheres regardless of their physical whereabouts. Thus, privacy becomes a portable state, disassociated from the physicality of space and associated with the notion of location (Hatuka and Toch, 2014).

Above all, the popularisation of location-aware technologies contributes to the

changing significance of locations and their meaning in constructing social-personal territory. The use of different types of applications to access various types of information in public space makes people's perception of public space more filtered and personalised. The public space through which people move is perceived differently by those who do not possess location-based technologies or who have technology but choose not to engage with it.

In that sense, PPPT has enhanced and deepened the shift from focussing on objects to focussing on representation (McLuhan, 1962). Object reception and object projection now occur simultaneously. People arrive at a location, immediately take images and upload them to the web. Thus, alone or together, while walking or sitting, people are often 'connected' to their digital device (Figure 1). Digitisation enhances moments of new and varied togetherness, that is,

sitting with a group of friends on a bench, while remaining self-isolated, as each member of the group wanders in their own virtual search. In short, digital technologies have created elastic boundaries between the public and private, between the physical and the virtual, and also between the personal and the collective, restructuring social interaction and modifying the rituals of human communications in public spaces. As such, public/private designations can no longer be assigned to particular spaces, and should not be seen as a linear continuum but rather as juxtaposed spheres with each sphere associated with different degrees of privacy and publicness. Yet, the question is not if the divide between public and private has disappeared, but how does the disappearance of boundaries influence the performances people compose together in public space? How and to what extent has digitisation influenced group rituals such as protest?



Photos by Yuval Hidas

Figure 1. New and varied forms of togetherness supported by digital devices (photo by Yuval Hidas).

The group: Public protests in the digital age

The relationship between the self and the group has always been complex. Historically, the self and the group have been viewed as binaries: the self is independent in its thinking while the group is a condition in which the self loses its autonomy in the crowd. Past conceptualisations of crowds in public spaces tended to portray them as unified entities in which individuals abandon their identities (Freud, 1967). Moreover, protests by crowds were also regarded as mobs, and considered a threat to the stability of the government (Le Bon, 1896). Over the previous century, the term ‘crowd’ became so judgemental that critical studies avoided it altogether. Yet, beginning in the mid-20th century, scholars came to view crowds as sophisticated entities, ones determined to participate in decision-making processes. Unlike the earlier definition of crowds by Sigmund Freud or Gustav Le Bon, contemporary crowds are now viewed in the context of a growing *civilian consciousness* of the ‘power to’ (i.e., the capacity) act, the politics of place and the mutable nature of place (Hatuka, 2012: 348). Generally, people have become more active and responsive to political dynamics and have learned how to translate this *responsiveness* into communicative action.

The civilian consciousness of the power to act is nurtured by communication technologies that have dramatically modified individuals’ responses, discussions, negotiations and participation in collective protest actions. However, as in the case of personal rituals, digitisation has also extended the boundaries of space for groups and, in turn, the individual’s conduct in a synchronised setting that includes physical and virtual spheres. This synchronised setting is not merely a space or a sphere, but rather a

condition that shapes the choreography of protest.

Throughout the history of protest, choreography has played a key role in drawing public attention to shared grievances (Hatuka, 2018). Choreography serves two purposes: one, political, is external to the group; this is when protesters confront a target and thereby enhance the impact of their political message. The second, social, is internal; protesters encounter each other and in doing so, intensify the emotional ties among participants and the group’s solidarity. Processes of digitisation have modified the means by which these two purposes are achieved. It is often seen as both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing when social media penetrates day-to-day personal communications so activists can reach categories of people that they would otherwise be unable to contact. It is a curse when digitally-networked individuals with multiple affiliations, rather than social movements and organisations, become central players in the mobilisation processes and contribute to the sense of fragile togetherness among constituencies that may be spatially-dispersed (Van Dijck and Poell, 2015; Van Dijck et al., 2018).

More specifically, processes of digitisation contributed to personalisation of activism (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011; Van Dijck and Poell, 2015), which implies that the form and narrative of action during protests is also shaped by the narratives of individuals. During protest events, individuals maintain their PPPT. The ‘personalisation, real-time-ness and virality’, that are part of social media’s DNA (Van Dijck and Poell, 2015: 534) are also part of the individual conduct during collective actions. Frequently, the outcome of personalised activism is an expressive protest event that takes place in a complex blend of physical and virtual spheres. This condition is also apparent in

the self-images produced by participants during protest events, when activists take pictures of themselves and upload them to social media platforms or use mobile apps to live-stream the events in which they are participating. These images signal individual participation and tell a personal narrative through the wearing special costumes, the creation of homemade placards and the generation of new symbols.

Furthermore, the personalisation process of protests has also magnified the role of self-

expression in four major ways (Figure 2): (a) Designing personal placards. A common approach in designing handmade placards is the personal take on the narrative of the event. An example of this could be seen in March for Our Lives, at Courthouse on the Square, Denton, USA, on 24 March 2018. This march was one of a series of rallies organised in Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, Austin, San Antonio and other cities across the state as part of the larger student-led March For Our Lives movement formed in



(a) A North Texas teen marching in the "March for Our Lives" rally held at Courthouse on the Square, Denton, Texas, US, on March 24, 2018. Photo by Heather Mount on Unsplash.



(b) Nurses keep pressure on with workplace pay demonstrations. Westminster, London, UK, August 26, 2020. Photo by Ehinetalar Akshere Umuabona on Unsplash.



(c) A young, topless girl, with her back facing the camera, protesting for equal rights at the Amsterdam Pride Canal Parade, Amsterdam, Holland, August 4, 2018. Photo by Shaqje on Unsplash.



(d) Black Lives Matter Protest. A young woman holding a sign, "I am deaf but I hear you," referring to the killing of George Floyd by a policeman, US, 2020. Photo by Nathan Durniso on Unsplash.

Figure 2. Personalisation and self-expression in collective actions: personal placard, costume, self-reference, body as a text (clockwise from the top left).

response to mass shooting at a Florida high school that left 17 students and school staff members dead. In the image a teacher holds a placard personalising the message ‘Which of my students do I shield with my body?’.

(b) Wearing costumes which serve various purposes, including referencing a character from a movie, book or politics, who has come to symbolise a particular group. An example of this could be seen in the case of the nurses’ protests, in Westminster, London, UK, on 26 August 2020, which applied pressure with workplace pay demonstrations. Participants in the protest were angry at the government’s decision to exclude their profession from recent pay awards granted to other public sector professionals in England, including doctors, teachers and police officers. In the image, a nurse wears her work clothed covered with symbolic blood, a reference to the battle and struggle for the lives of others.

(c) Self-referencing is about creating an identification between the self and the cause. The example here was seen at one of the many protests of Black Lives Matter in response to George Floyd death on 25 May 2020. Floyd was arrested after allegedly passing a counterfeit \$20 bill at a grocery store in the Powderhorn Park neighbourhood of Minneapolis. He died after a White police officer, Derek Chauvin, pressed his knee on Floyd’s neck for 9 minutes and 29 seconds during the arrest. Floyd’s restraint and death were captured on a cellphone camera and sparked global protests a day after his death. These protests called for a ban on the use of excessive force by police officers against Black suspects, and for the recognition of the lack of police accountability. In the image a young woman is holding a sign, ‘I am deaf but I hear you’, referring to her disability as a barrier, which, nevertheless, did not prevent her from hearing his pain.

Lastly, (d) using the body as a text is a strong statement that the personal is political. Nakedness also signifies human

vulnerability and the participant’s lack of fear of being exposed and defenceless. In a protest in Amsterdam, Holland, on 4 August 2018, a young, topless girl with her back facing the camera, protested for equal rights at Amsterdam Pride Canal Parade. The text on her back ‘*wij vrouwen eisen*’, means ‘we women demand’, referring to equal rights. The latter two means are often used simultaneously, referring to the self and/or to the body as the basic element of the self. The body in this dynamic becomes the carrier of the message and the message itself.

These examples show how digitisation enhance the place of personal in collective dynamics. Thus, paraphrasing McLuhan famous statement ‘the medium is the message’, the contemporary self in public should be seen in the context of the medium. In that respect, if the body is the message, the medium through which the image of the body, the representation of the message, is at least important as the information itself. This tight interrelated link is inevitable and reshapes the strategy of political protests as a whole.

Responding to this dynamic, critical scholars argue that protests have become a connective action rather than a collective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012), during which activists maintain and cultivate their private-personal territory (Hatuka, 2018). ‘This shift from group-based to individualised societies is accompanied by the emergence of flexible social “weak tie” networks that enable identity expression and the navigation of complex and changing social and political landscapes’ (Hatuka, 2018: 744). This change has created moments of togetherness, which allow individuals to display their own identities in public during a group event. The stratification of details, colours and identities raises a dilemma: does digitisation serve collective action well? Is collective action the right terminology for these

public gatherings of grievances? The answer is complex. Indeed, digitisation has become both an opportunity and a challenge. An opportunity because social media enhances ad hoc mobility in unprecedented ways. It is challenging because the changing role and power of social and traditional media enhance the dominance of images, sight and visibility over text, meaning and processes. The significant role of images on social media have made sight and visibility a central, personal component of protests, which paradoxically supports dismantling protest events. In an era that suffers from an overdose of visuals, it is almost impossible to navigate between the essential and bland (Figure 3).

Protests as extension of the self: Women’s March on Washington

The Women’s March on Washington on 21 January 2017 (Figure 4), can help concretise the above ideas and their impact on contemporary protest strategies. A day after the inauguration of the 45th president of the United States of America, a women’s march coursed through the main streets of the city. It was a carefully planned and organised performance, starting at the intersection of Independence Avenue and Third Street SW near the US Capitol, and with five additional entry points spread along the march route (on both sides of Independence Avenue),

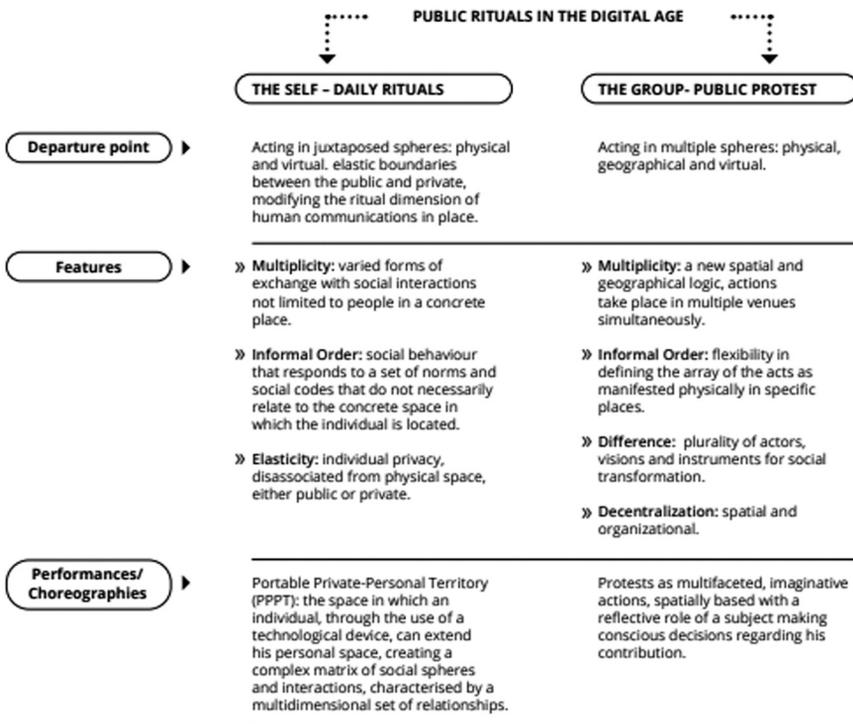


Figure 3. Public rituals in the digital age: The self and the group.



Women's March 2017, Pennsylvania Ave., Washington, DC, United States. Photo by Viad Tchompelov on Unsplash.

Figure 4. The Women's March on Washington and the personalisation of activism.

which ended at the National Mall. The Women's March on Washington was broadcast online on Facebook and Twitter, and national and international mass media also provided extensive coverage. Nurturing connectivity and solidarity among different protest groups in different locations around the world as a means of constructing an orchestrated spectacle on a global scale, the march was based on some key agreed-upon design elements, including (1) the action repertoire; (2) unified slogans, which could be downloaded from a dedicated website; and (3) the simultaneous timing of the protests. The peaceful nature of the march and the image created with the help of the 'pussy hat project' created a collective visual statement, and a memorable and distinct image.

As Jayna Zweiman, Co-founder and Executive Director of the Pussy hat Project, wrote, 'Creating the hat and wearing the hat were physical ways to refute this claim by re-taking ownership and declaring body autonomy. On a practical level, it provided the marchers with warmth, and it was also a way for the maker – as well as the person marching – to be physically represented at the march'. As she further explains, 'We

chose to create a sea of pink, with each individual choosing their own shade, yet being part of a collective' (Zweiman, 2019).

In the process of enhancing mobilisation through digital platforms and producing this memorable image, protest events followed a particular strategy, which can be seen in numerous current protests. Tolerating difference including the acceptance of a plurality of actors, visions and instruments for social transformation, with groups limiting and expanding their membership in ways that suit their goals. For example, the Women's March on Washington wanted to be seen as an inclusive act that would be the first step in what the organisers hoped would spark a social movement. The chant 'Women's rights are human rights, and human rights are women's rights' extends to a wide range of civil rights: reproductive rights, LGBTQIA rights, labour rights, rights for those with disabilities, immigrant rights and environmental justice. In fact, organisers declared:

We support the advocacy and resistance movements that reflect our multiple and intersecting identities. We call on all defenders of human rights to join us. This march is the first step

towards unifying our communities, grounded in new relationships, to create change from the grassroots level up. We will not rest until women have parity and equity at all levels of leadership in society. We work peacefully while recognizing there is no true peace without justice and equity for all.¹

Another principle, organisational decentralisation, diffusion rather than concentration, often restricts the protest to specific goals. In the case of the Women's March, which was open to different groups and individuals, no leadership was claimed. Often, the organisational structure also translates into a geographical logic of multiplicity. Instead of a mega-scale event in a city centre, many actions take place in multiple venues simultaneously. Each act is organised by its respective local group, which allows activists a degree of flexibility in changing/adding new locations to their map of dissent and increasing participation. This informal dynamic can be seen in the map of the Women's March, with an estimated 440,000 participants in Washington, DC, and approximately 4–5 million participants in various locations worldwide. Spatially, the use of urban space is direct in this type of action, and the event's repertoire is basic, often a procession that ends at a known, central point. Most of these protests took to the streets, public parks and squares – in front of national and municipal buildings and US embassies. Social media significantly contributed to the spread and scale of this event. A dedicated website was launched with a 'resources' page listing 40 different online tools, including a map of the march route, a printable guide for the day of the protest, digital security for protesters, an outline of protesters' legal rights, ways of commuting, volunteer opportunities and the unity of goals, which helped participants before, during and after the main event. Protesters were asked not to engage in any illegal actions, and to obey local and federal

law enforcement officers. The march was meticulously planned and cooperated with the local authorities, with over one thousand marshals providing directions to the marchers. A private security firm was also hired; some professional security workers were identified. Law enforcement officers were committed to not arresting any undocumented immigrants who participated in the march, and a legal team for immigrant rights was available at the event.

These principles of difference, multiplicity, decentralisation and informality (Hataka, 2018), that characterised Women's March on Washington, could be seen in different protest events worldwide supported and nurtured by social media. These principles support self-expression in a group setting, which is possible because of this medium. That is not to say that the medium determines the socio-spatial environment, but it does assist in shaping it.

Future protest events: Between the singular and the group

Scholars of urbanism articulate the need for public space (Lofland, 1998; Zukin, 1995). They are correct. Public spaces are an important arena for the growth of the individual and society (Mehta, 2014). The main role of public space is sociability, achieved by serving as an arena for public life, a meeting place for different social groups, a space for the display of symbols and images in society and a part of the communication system between urban activities (Mehta, 2013; Thomas, 1991: 210). But it is important to stress that sociability is not a thing, but rather a condition shaped by rituals in space, be they concrete, virtual or imagined. Time and culture create and modify the details and meanings of these social rituals. These gradual modifications change not only the dynamic of rituals but also how people communicate with each other and convey

messages, as is evident in the case of Black Lives Matter movement and the Hong Kong protests.

Today, each individual can construct their own PPPT, as an elastic, self-designed sphere that can be crafted daily. Similar to the ideas of Sloterdijk 2016, this is a spatial form where human beings find the container-relation which defines their intimacy. This sphere is a 'world' formatted by the individual, marked by a radical and intrinsic plurality, where humans actually live (Bonaiuti, 2020). PPPT vary in size and form. The main question is how this private sphere shapes the rules of collective aggregations. Some scholars, such as Sloterdijk, would argue that group gatherings are aggregates of microspheres with varied formats 'that, like the individual bubbles in a mountain of foam, border on one another and are layered over and under one another, yet without truly being accessible or effectively separable from one another' (Sloterdijk, 2016: 56). Others, might raise concerns about the rules and definitions of this fluid condition between spheres and ask questions about exclusion and surveillance such as,

What happens when the right to exclude expands from the home to commonly accessible space, or when that right exists as a new spatial practice that allows you to always and everywhere keep those you do not want to encounter out of your own personal "bubble" of privacy? What does it mean when a public space comes to be governed by rules formerly reserved for private property? (Mitchel, 2005: 89).

These relationships between spheres, rituals, digitisation and public space are the ones that will shape our public space and in turn society. We live in a new era, where people, alone and in groups, are constantly plugged-in. Isolated or together, they maintain their identity, never giving up the possibility of maintaining their personal view, even in a

collective dynamic. New communication technologies have become extensions of people (McLuhan, 1962). As Marshall McLuhan argued already in the 1960s, 'All media, from the phonetic alphabet to the computer, are extensions of man that cause deep and lasting changes in him and transform his environment' (McLuhan, 1962: 13). This condition supports seemingly contradictory dynamics of individualism and collectivism. On one hand we live in times of enhanced individualism, on the other this reinforces the need for collective actions, which have become a basic tool used to temporarily break free of individualist constraints, constructing temporary collectives to suggest a position contrary to the status quo.

Finally, the core of the discussion is not whether this new dynamic is good or bad, fascinating or creative, as often addressed in literature, but how this personalisation processes will shape power relations and inclusiveness in public spaces. If much of the critical literature on public space dynamics formerly discussed threats associated with economic processes such as privatisation, commercialisation and branding (Harvey, 1996, 2001; Mitchell, 2003), current research should focus on the deep, ontological change enhanced by digitisation. The challenge ahead is to understand how public space as a dynamic sphere is being shaped by new forms of sociability, and how this changing public sphere can continually support inclusive public rituals, meaningful activities, comfort and safety.

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1. See the organisers' website: <https://www.womensmarch.com/mission/>

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