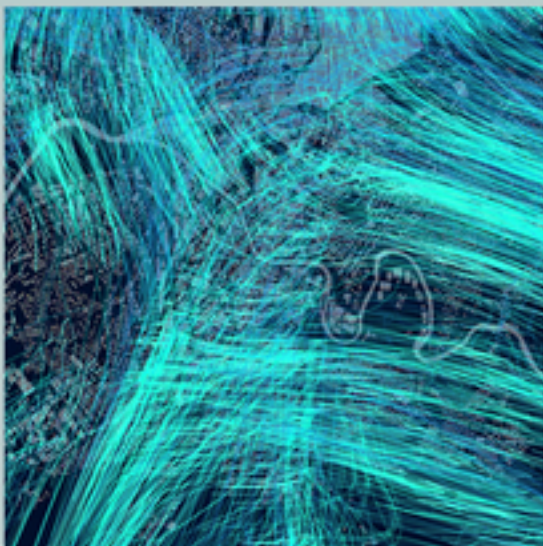Oliver Leistert

From Protest to Surveillance – The Political Rationality of Mobile Media

Modalities of Neoliberalism

1   Introduction

The ubiquity of mobile phones and the ongoing integration of services into mobile devices is a challenging subject to study. This almost global phenomena connects very large parts of populations with a machinic addressable space. It is a medium that connects the literate and the illiterate, those that have no access to the banking systems, the street dwellers, and the children, to name only a few. It appears as if mobile media has no limits. Global mobile phone penetration rates are higher than electricity. Mobile media also brings the internet to new places and milieus. It leapfrogs landline telephony and recently also internet access.

> Most of the people don't know how to read. But every family, even very poor ones, have access to mobile phones. I stayed at a very basic house, a couple with two kids, and they had two mobile phones. And the kids used the mobiles. They didn't have landlines and now they have mobile phones.
>
> Caminaghi / Campinas (Br)

Such a media revolution in an unprecedented invasive mode rearranges many sectors and fields of sociality. It changes subjectivities in many ways and invokes new regimes of powers. The way it restructures, but also reinforces power relations, calls for an analysis from a governmental angle; from an analytics of powers.

A great number of scholars has published a solid body of literature on mobile media. To name only a few: Plant examines the effects of the mobile phone in many different places and cultures (2002). While trying to cover very many topics, and showing both the wide spread use and different practices, the analysis remains brief and reads more like a report. Goggin (2006) approaches the cell phone from the point of view of a device for cultural production, consumption and media convergence. This account is very much focused on the gadget as such. Rich in statistics, documentations and in the style of a textbook, Ling (2004) provides a

history of mobile telephony that tries to cover the whole phenomena. Völker combines a genealogy of mobile technology with the history of the idea of virtuality (2010). But the technological stories, which are centered around engineers and inventors, do not in my opinion connect very well to the philosophical reflections about virtuality. There are of course many more monographes, and a fast growing universe of journal articles on mobile media.

The Social Construction of Mobile Media

Anthropologist Raul Pertierra from Manila, who has written extensively about mobile phones in the Philippines (2002, 2006, 2008), argues that

> the mobile, like all other technologies such as the computer and the internet, or earlier ones like the telephone and the radio, are socially constructed and located. Their effects are only the result, even if unpredicted and unintended, of the possibilities that they make available to their human operators. (Pertierra 2006, 16)

While the social construction of technologies certainly is a solid argument, at the same time it lacks explanatory reach: the roll out of mobile media across the globe equals new and conflicting layers of *powers* that structure those human operators in their pursuit of mobile use and subsequent thinking, mentalities and practices. As much as "[cell phones] themselves are embedded in existing social practice" (de Souza e Silva, Sutko, Salis, and de Souza e Silva 2011, 412), the social practice itself is structured, updated and made operational enmeshed in a political rationality.

Thus, the influence that mobile media, by way of an ubiquitous arrangement of numerous different and heterogeneous power vectors, has on subjects, social relations, and society is the subject of this work. It is about the political rationalities of mobile media. The term 'mobile media', that I use, comprises a semiotic-material conglomerate of heterogeneous sources and trajectories; therefore it is not *limited* to the gadget and neither to the data it sends through the networks. And, as already said, not to its social construction. Mobile media comprises the material and the immaterial. Mobile media, in very general terms, here is regarded as an apparatus of security for the production of neo-liberal freedom.

Towards an Analytics of Mobile Media Rule

By pursuing this ambitious and rich theme, the intention is to show that concepts of mobile media need to acknowledge many more facets than commonly investigated. As a political technology it prescribes and describes simultaneously, thus establishing its own rationality and regime. On a very general level, it facilitates the flow of signs, people and goods. Just as James Beniger in his seminal "Control revolution" stated, "*control* encompasses the entire range from absolute control to the weakest and most probabilistic form, that is, any purposive influence on behavior, *however slight*" (Beniger 1986, 8; emphasis in original). Mobile media influences with soft means behavior in many ways. It supplements technologies of control.

When seen under the lens of governmentality, the faster ways of contacting, communicating, exchanging data, and other *productive* constellations that support the flow of things, signs and people can be understood as techniques and technologies of governing. Thus, mobile media is a social machine of circulation. But what are theses virtues and qualities, that mobile media supports, enhances, and strengthens? In what larger picture do they positively resonate? How does mobile media fit into a larger dispositif or arrangement? What are the needs and problems that push mobile media?

The Co-Presence of Signs and Material

Hartmut Winkler, with reference to Beniger, argues strongly in favor of a co-evolution of media with other spheres: "The development of media appears to be *embedded* within the larger context of an economic-technical-social development, which in the first place produces the super structures of modernity that are based on the division of labor"(Winkler 2004, 68; translation O.L.; emphasis in original).[1] In his semiotic-material investigation into the relation of media and economy, Winkler proposes to put the concept of traffic to the foreground, because traffic provides the possibility to "describe goods/commodities and signs albeit their obvious differences in concepts that can be connected" (2004, 93; transla-

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[1] "Die Entwicklung der Medien erscheint *eingebettet* in den größeren Zusammenhang einer kombiniert wirtschaftlich-technisch-sozialen Entwicklung, die die arbeitsteilig vernetzte Großstrukturen der Moderne überhaupt erst hervorbringt."

tion O.L.).[2] One of the terms that he proposes to investigate amongst others is transmission [*Übertragung*] in the sense of postal delivery. By recourse to Siegert (1993), Winkler asks: "Not only that the state owned postal service demands the addressability of subjects is to be shown but that and why the subjects 'themselves' saw mailbox slots into their mahogany doors" (2004, 108; translation O.L.).[3]

In a similar way, I am interested in exploring why subjects always carry a digital transceiver around, which makes them addressable and integrates them into the circuits of circulations of a political rationality. This echoes Foucault's notion that (neo-)liberal freedom facilitates "the possibility of movement, change of place, and processes of circulation of both people and things" (Foucault 2007, 48-49). Different to Winkler, I am more interested in the political rationality in relation to the emergence of (mobile) media, while I share the assumption that only an approach on the semiotic-material co-presence can convincingly shed light on the problem.

In addition, this work is limited by further specifications: mobile media has reached a point of economical-technical-social integration where it seems problematic for me to formulate a thesis on the subject as a whole. While the angle of an analytics of government provides an entry point to the whole phenomena, the theme here is reduced to two focal points of mobile media: protest and surveillance.

Mobile Protest Media and Mobile Surveillance Media

These focal points are no coincidence. Protests have gained a high degree of enmeshment with mobile media. The mobilization capacity of mobile media, its use within protests for coordination and its easy to use capacity towards media production, such as small films and audio recordings for internet distribution, have been generally acknowledged in the last waves of large protests; maybe most emblematic are the mobile media video documentations from Egypt's uprising. It is

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[2] "Waren und Zeichen wären, ihren augenfälligen Differenzen zum Trotz, in anschlussfähigen Begriffen neu zu beschreiben."

[3] "Zu zeigen eben wäre nicht allein, dass die staatliche Post die Addressierbarkeit der Subjekte verlangt, sondern dass und warum die Subjekte 'selbst' Briefkastenschlitze in ihre Mahagonitüren sägen."

here that mobile media is widely seen as a tool of empowerment.[4] And there is no question that a media technology that is in the hands of everyone, has effects on empowerment and agency alike.

> In my opinion, when we would not have been able to send out SMS, we would not have been able to mobilize the people across the country. We have successfully been able to manage it with SMS across the country.

Mohammad Azhar Siddique / Lahore

But what is gained when one acknowledges this? Many further questions need to be asked: Who gets empowered? What kind of empowerment to which agency is this? What political rationalities are set in the foreground by mobile media? What effects on which subjectivities are the result? To understand which kinds of power relations and which kinds of subjectivities are empowered, is one of the central themes here.

The second leitmotif is surveillance. And again, this focal point is no coincidence. As a political technology mobile media allows many new kinds of surveillances, as well as many old ones, at an incredibly cheap rate. Be it targeted or mass surveillance, be it on the contents of communications or relational about social networks, the issue of mobile media surveillance, be it commercial or by state agencies, is unprecedented. The device on the body, seen from this perspective, is a materialization of pure surveillance media camouflaged; never before was there a digital location tracker that everyone enjoyed carrying around. In the activist universe this has triggered specific fears that lead to radical practice.

> There was a time, when at a social centre they had a sign on the wall and that said 'turn off your phone and take the battery out'. They established this rule that everyone that would go to a meeting had to turn off the phone and take the battery out. The reason being that if you turned off the phone and leave the battery in it, it could be used that people would be able to listen to your conversation through your telephone. It was one of those things that I saw, where I thought: you should be more concerned what you talk in a local bar than taking the battery out of your cellphone.

Anonymous1 / Mexico City

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4   See the *mobile active* portal as an example of a hub for mobile media empowerment programs. http://www.mobileactive.org (accessed 4 March 2012).

Both focal points are in a very special relationship, which makes them a premium site of investigation. Mass surveillance schemes like data retention (see section 7) hold two main capacities: on the one hand, they produce a larger picture, or better said, they establish a new knowledge-power axis for governing. The algorithmic production of knowledge about the population's communication behavior entails a whole new set of possible measures for neo-sovereignty. This goes as far as to the production of data derivatives for contemporary pre-emptive modulations of discrimination. The other capacity relates to the first, and advances from there. Once a specific target is calculated, relational surveillance provides access to the social network and automatically shovels more suspects into the profiler's file.

Participants in protests have always been of interest to governments and agencies in many ways; the ongoing habit of police and secret services to collect information about those who go out into the streets is just one. Another one adheres to the problem of governing: one cannot economically govern against the desires of the population. Those articulations of protests need to be channeled into programs of government, they need to be made productive. In this sense, mass surveillance provides abstract information that is available for mining, as if it was statistical data on birth and death rates.

Mobile media serves both: empowerment and surveillance. One might even say: what it gives to one, it just as well gives to the other. But this divide is a problem. It feigns a contradiction. This contradiction is an effect of an oversimplified concept of power, echoing the binaries of "the governing" and "the governed". This is where an analytics of rule is enlightening. At the core, it understands that power is everywhere and foremost inter relational. There can be no societal life without power. The idea is a radical 'democratization' of the power concept: to show that power is effective in different modalities through all fibers of social life; to show that it is a productive force that bridges gaps as it proscribes a continuum of relations.

Ubiquities of Powers and Traces of Rationalities

Foucault, who was the initial figure for such a power model, was often described as a dark thinker; the thinker of the prison (Foucault 1977). A common critique is that he never wrote a book about resistance. An even more common critique is that he reduced the subject to an effect of powers. I cannot disagree more: an

analytics of rule can provide a fruitful base to analyze protests and resistances. The paradigmatic shift that makes this possible is to understand government in a very wide sense: that all sociality is interwoven by governmental aspects that connect the subjects to programs of government while at the same time these aspects offer choices and allow the subjects to experience a certain freedom. This shift provides many different ways to look at government and thus understand power. Then, I argue, the rationality, the horizon of truth, that justifies one practice while it delegitimizes others, can be understood and questioned.

To see subjectivity as a primary site of investigation for power relations, takes into account that by pure force no regime can prevail. It is necessary to find those 'interfaces' or points of affirmation that allow a 'system' of devastation and crude social injustice to prevail. If power is seen this way, and one includes into the problem of government the totality of society as multiple productive sites, as a transit passage of governing, a substantial contribution to resistance and protest can be made too, because protests and resistance, by their very own nature, articulate societal issues and demand changes. This makes them a problem of government.

Agency Revisited

There is a third focal point lurking behind the two others – empowerment and surveillance – and in a sense this point fuels this investigation and is its trajectory: how can surveillance mobile media, once it is analyzed and understood, be deprived of its powers? How can communication technology make a difference within the liberal paradox of secured freedom? How can a data collecting assemblage of surveillance technologies be confronted so that it no longer, seamlessly and in a more and more automated fashion invades privacy and social relations with a single click from an operator's desk? The easy, but cynical answer is, by switching off the mobiles. But there is a point here: while it has become increasingly problematic to partake in social life without a mobile phone, because mobile media is invested with great powers, the question is why are there no privacy enhancing technologies in wide use?

If one divides surveillance into surveillance of contents and of relations, the former can be encountered with privacy enhancing technologies, while the latter is situated in a technical necessity, that of meta data or transactional data. Therefore, the retention of transactional data is an operation that benefits from the neo-liberal

scheme of mobile media. At the same time, it is an expression of the paradox of liberal rule, which excessively tries to control what it cannot control. Because meta data cannot be avoided in mobile communication, it does not help much to use privacy enhancing technologies here. Only in self-operated infrastructures, this I try to show in part three on bottom-up strategies, can the problem of meta-data be faced. And here the interviewees come into play.

In this work the discussion of mobile media as, a facet of governmental rule, was informed by 50 experts who I interviewed in 2009.[5] These interviewees actually guide the discussion to large parts as they provide the insights to practice. Be it mobile protest media or the effects of surveillance, it is their encounters which have informed the analysis and which made sure this research is based not only on theoretical considerations but grounded in narrated practice. The interviewees are reporting about their experiences in protests, how they use mobile media and what surveillance means to them.

But one has to be cautious here: no matter how much one refers to the interviews as expert interviews, that are analyzed as discourse, they remain a problematic hinge of knowledge transposition into an analytics of rule. On the other hand, the gains are high: what they show is a discourse about protests and surveillance that has a global reach.

Although this work it not about the goals, detailed interests and actions of the interviewee's groups and movements as such, I still felt a need to contextualize them briefly. This is done in appendix C where, as much as possible, the interviewees themselves explain their activities. Ethical considerations can be found in appendix A. The problems treated there consider academic knowledge production about activists that engage in fights for social justice. It provides information about measures taken to protect the sources, and the problem of language and dissemination of this work.

Mobile Protest Media Case Study and Mobile Surveillance Media Case Study

There are two case studies present in this work that propose an understanding of mobile media from two very different ends as a political technology: The first is about the lawyers' movement in Pakistan, which took place in 2007 and 2008. My

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5   This round number is a coincidence.