Reframing Public Space Through Digital Mobilization: Flash Mobs and the Futility(?) of Contemporary Urban Youth Culture

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Abstract
Flash mobs, silent raves, and subway parties organized by the urban playground movement have spread like wildfire across the globe in the past five years, fuelling new uses of urban public space by younger generations. The media has wondered if these events are simply pointless pranks, creative public performances, or mass social experiments in community building. Researchers who have noted this development only emphasize the vital role of digital communication technology (social networking sites, mobile phones, blogs) in the mobilization process. In contrast, this paper shows through a broad range of examples from New York, London, Berlin, Budapest to Tokyo that these nascent forms of collective action are also important to examine because they provide insight into the intersection and interaction between new communications media and changing uses of physical urban space. The analysis situates the flash mob in a historical context, constructs a basic typology of flash mob activity based on extensive Internet research, and theorizes it as a new form of sociability. It also explores how these examples of urban creativity have inspired commerce and politics to rediscover urban space, increasingly borrowing the organizational techniques of these social events in marketing campaigns, environmental protests, and urban riots.

In June 2003 over a hundred people gathered in the home furnishing department of Macy’s in Manhattan. They claimed to be members of a commune living in a warehouse in Williamsburg and quizzed the sales associate about a 10,000 dollar “love rug” they wanted to purchase “to play on”. After about ten minutes they suddenly dispersed as if they had never been there. The sales associate was confused and bemused but unaware that he just witnessed the birth of a new urban phenomenon: the so-called flash mob. A senior editor of Harper’s Magazine, Bill Wasik (2006, 2009), is credited with organizing this prank and consequently, with the very invention of the
flash mob. In an interview in which he revealed that he was the mastermind behind the idea\(^1\), he explained that he had conceived flash mobs “specifically as a New York thing” (Heaney 2005). He aimed to poke fun at people in New York as “they are always looking for the next big thing. They come here because they want to take part in the arts community […] and they will come out to see a reading or concert on the basis of word of mouth. Partly they just want to find out what everybody else is so excited about, but partly they just want to be part of the scene” (Heaney 2005). He devised flash mobs “as a stunt that would satirize scenester-y gatherings” and caricature the hipster culture and “insiderism” of New Yorkers (Heaney 2005).

Hence Wasik himself was surprised that flash mobs quickly spread beyond New York, taking the summer of 2003 by storm, growing into a global fad nearly overnight, and casting their spell on large cities from Toronto to Tokyo. In 2004 the term made it into the Oxford English Dictionary, together with expressions like “congestion charge”, “designer baby” and “speed-dating” – a sure sign that flash mobs have become integral part of contemporary urban culture. According to this official definition a flash mob denotes “a public gathering of complete strangers, organized via the Internet or mobile phone, who perform a pointless act and then disperse again” (Oxford English Dictionary 2004). Their most common incarnations include freezing in place, pillow fights, silent raves, subway parties and zombie walks. And even though Wasik (2006) declared in 2005 that flash mobs were dead, a quick Internet search on YouTube

\(^1\) Although the term itself was coined by Sean Savage who first reported about the new fad cropping up in New York on his blog cheesebikini? (http://www.cheesebikini.com/category/flash-mobs).
returns over 11,000² hits for videos that depict recent flash mobs, indicating that flash mobs are well and alive and have clearly evolved beyond their creator’s orbit and original intentions.

The media world has wondered if these flash mobs are simply pointless pranks, creative public performances, or mass social experiments in community building. Such performative, playful but subversive acts, which aim to shock the conformist middle classes – i.e., épater le bourgeois, as the French expression more effectively captures the underlying intention – are, of course, not entirely new to city life. From the Italian futurists of the early 20th century through Dada and Surrealism in the inter-war period to the Situationist International and the Yippies of the 1960s to contemporary culture jammers, a wide array of politically minded avant-garde movements have embraced similar guerilla tactics (see Bowler 1991; Ford 2005; Foster 1996; Knabb 2007; Korte 2003; Stevens 2007).

Interestingly, the rather sporadic scholarly studies of flash mob activity have focused overwhelmingly on the role that new digital communications technology (social networking sites, mobile phones, blogs) plays in the mobilization process (see Nicholson 2005; Rheingold 2003; Schepers 2008). By contrast, I argue that flash mobs are interesting precisely because they provide insight into the intersection and interaction between new communications media and physical space. Research on the impact of digital media on cities has projected the unstoppable rise of dematerialization and the waning social significance of traditional city spaces. Elaborate prophecies, exemplified by William Mitchell’s City of Bits, suggested that virtual communication would gradually render the physical city obsolete (1996). For long, the virtual and the physical, cyberspace and urban space, have been posited as dichotomous, and even

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² 11,200 on June 25, 2009.
oppositional, categories (see Miller and Slater 2000; Woolgar 2002). However, the emergence and immense popularity of flash mobs forcefully demonstrate that the virtual and the physical are not parallel realms but continuously intersecting social realities. Flash mobs support an increasing realization that “networking is neither as uniform, as universal, nor as nonmaterial as its proponents sometimes imagine” (McCullogh 2007: 388; see also Dourish and Bell 2007; Ikegami and Hut 2008).

This article argues that flash mobs follow a distinct online-offline choreography providing insight into how digital media interacts with physical space, how it changes the experience of urban life, and how it challenges established norms of using urban public and semi-public (mostly commercial) spaces. The following analysis proceeds, first, by offering a brief overview of the historical precursors of contemporary flash mobs, highlighting the intellectual debt they owe to twentieth century avant-garde and countercultural movements as well as key elements that differentiate them from earlier incarnations of urban pranksterism. Second, to rectify the lack of comprehensive empirical research on the topic, it constructs a basic typology of flash mobs based on systematically collected empirical evidence on flash mob activity over the past six years. Third, it traces the organizational and archival logic of flash mobs to capture the interplay of virtual and physical practices. Finally, it builds on the findings of these sections to discuss the theoretical implications and illuminate the social meaning of this recent phenomenon: its significance as a new form of sociability (see Simmel 1949) and an important reflection of contemporary urban youth culture.
Urban Pranksterism in the Analog Age

Media and academic coverage has similarly treated flash mobs in a historical vacuum, overemphasizing their novelty attributed to the central role of new communications technologies in their emergence. ³ It has thus privileged the structure of this new form of social interaction at the expense of the content, overlooking as a result the substantive analogies between flash mobs and earlier forms of urban pranksterism. Already back in the 1910s the Italian futurists plotted and employed similar stunts to meet propagandistic goals: surprise, chaos, agitation and spectacle (Bowler 1991:783). They proposed techniques such as placing glue or dust on theater viewers’ seats and selling ten tickets for the same seat in the hope that the performance would break into a riot, spreading to the streets and bars of the city, “to be followed by scandalized articles in the next day’s press” (Bowler 1991:783). The Futurists’ legacy was cultivated and developed throughout the 20⁰ century by radical avant-garde art groups that all incorporated urban spectacle into their agenda. ⁴

Dadaism, for instance, was a somewhat elusive art movement that both drew inspiration from and left its mark on the urban culture of Zurich, Berlin and New York in particular during the turbulent times of the World War I era and is mostly known as the precursor to Surrealism. Instead of a full-blown and clearly defined art movement, Dada fashioned itself as a loose

³ The only exception is a recent unpublished doctoral dissertation in performance studies that examines flash mobs as part of the legacy of radical street theater popularized by the 1960’s countercultural movement of the Yippies (Shawyer 2008).

⁴ This section doesn’t aim to provide an exhaustive overview of all such groups. It focuses on the most important ones and those that exhibit the closest affinity with contemporary flash mobs.
network of practitioners and local groupings, cohering around a set of strategies (abstraction, collage, montage, the readymade, performance, incorporation of chance and forms of automatization) that evolved into everyday staples of 20th century modernist art. It employed this repertoire to attack the bigotry and staleness of bourgeois art and promote its signature radical “anti-art” philosophy. Dada artists also invented “media pranks” and used various forms of mass communications (posters, newspapers) in novel ways to both create and provoke their audience (see Finkel 2006).

Similarly, the Situationist International (SI) was founded in 1957 and also had close intellectual ties to Surrealism. Its agenda centered on the convergence of popular revolution with revolutionary art and its activism culminated in the student protests of Paris in May 1968. Urban space was conceived as integral to its transformative aspirations from its inception.5 The web of ideas that became the cornerstone of SI included urbanisme unitaire (unitary urbanism), psychogeography, play as free and creative activity, dérive (drift) and détournement (diversion, semantic shift). In pursuit of these principles artists were to “create situations” that critically transformed everyday life through constructing unexpected encounters and “creatively lived moments in specific urban settings”. They were also to produce settings for situations and models for possible modes of transformation of the city, “as well as to agitate and polemicize against the sterility and oppression of the actual environment and ruling economic and political system” (Wollen 1989: 68).


5 This is in part because members of SI were strongly influenced by the work and personality of the most important postwar French urban theorist, Henri Lefebvre.
Suggestions for transformative situations involved equipping street lamps with switches so that people can adjust the lightening as they wish; abolishing museums and distributing their masterpieces to Parisian bars; opening up prisons as tourist destinations and holding a monthly lottery in which a visitor could win a real prison sentence; providing access to Parisian rooftops for pedestrian traffic by modifying fire-escape ladders and by constructing bridges when necessary; and removing all information regarding departures (destinations, timetables etc.) at train stations to facilitate dérive (Lettrist International [1955] 2006). The ultimate goal of such stunts was to accelerate the breakdown not only of the divisions among individual art forms but of the split between art and politics, sublimating art into a unitary revolutionary praxis (see Wollen 1989). Although the SI was elaborate and prolific in providing theoretical underpinnings to revolutionary art, the radical proposals were never turned into praxis and were confined to the written universe of journals, pamphlets and exhibition catalogues (see Knabb 2006).

Besides the SI whose activism unfolded mostly in Paris, there were other similar groups in the colorful cultural and political patchwork of the 1960s student movements, such as the Spassguerilla [fun guerilla] in West Germany and the Yippies in the US, that tried to incorporate humor and theatrical performance into urban political protest in more practical ways. Wolfgang Lefèvre, a prominent member of the Students for Democratic Society (SDS), a key umbrella organization of the German student movement, noted that it was imperative to organize demonstrations creatively so that they were exciting and fun for students in a very tangible sense, highlighting the entertaining and socializing aspects of student protest (see Walther 2008).6

6 It is true, however, that Spassguerilla was often criticized by the SDS and central figures like Rudi Dutschke for not being “serious” enough.
The Berlin based *Spassguerilla* was the offspring of an intellectual marriage between a reinvigorated political Marxism and a subversive tradition in the arts. Its members argued that the most effective way to criticize society was to ridicule the everyday routines and structures that reproduced it (see Teune 2007). One of their first actions took place as part of a protest against the Vietnam war in December 1966. About two hundred protesters passed into the central shopping area around Kurfürstendamm (the upscale commercial main street of West Berlin). They caused traffic jams, mixed with Christmas shoppers, sang alienated Christmas songs and chanted “Christmas wishes coming true, US bombs are brought to you.” (Teune 2007: 120).

*Spassguerillas* were also among the first (together with the *Yippies*) to transform pie-throwing from a slapstick comedy staple into a potent political publicity tool. They became legendary for the “pudding assault” in which they planned to attack US Vice President Hubert Humphrey on his visit to Berlin in 1967 among other things with pudding (his favorite treat) (see Thomas 2003). Although the realization of the stunt was prevented by the police, the idea greatly inspired student activists who were dissatisfied with conventional forms of protest.

Meanwhile, the *Yippies* (i.e., members of the *Youth International Party*) in the US aimed to build a bridge between apolitical hippies and radical activists of the New Left, using politically themed pranks and radical street theater. *Yippies* had no formal membership or hierarchy and comprised a loose network of hippies, anti-war activists, and left-wing radicals. They developed their own brand of networked participatory street performance, which they termed “revolutionary action theater”, combining performance theories drawn from New York’s avant-garde art world, the concept of guerilla theater introduced by the San Francisco Mime Troupe, the political radicalism of the New Left, the mobilization strategies of anti-war protests, as well as the countercultural and anti-establishment attitude of the hippies (see Shawyer 2008).
One of their first and most famous pranks involved a guerilla theater event in which a group of Yippies got into a tour of the New York Stock Exchange. Here they started throwing dollar bills from the visitor’s balcony to the trading floor bringing trading to a halt and leaving brokers in expensive suits trampling each other to pick up the dollar bills. Their most flash mob like happening, however, was the 1968 “Yip-In” that took place in New York’s Grand Central Station – a favorite flash mob location today. The Yippies posted flyers and used word-of-mouth networking around New York’s East Village and Lower East Side to call for a peaceful celebration of the spring equinox.

Both Spassguerilla and the Yippies started out as advocates of non-violent forms of protest incorporating humor, disruption, spectacle, and guerilla tactics into political action. They were, however, often denounced as hedonistic and unserious by other student groups that favored more traditional views of political protest.

Undoubtedly, there are strong affinities between these avant-garde formations and latter-day flash mobs including the loose, horizontal, network-based organizational structure, tactical repertoire, savvy use of media, and accusations of frivolousness. But what makes contemporary flash mobs different from these earlier forms of pranksterism and propagandistic performances is threefold: First, the gags that were previously confined to exhibition halls, theaters and printed manifestos have moved outdoors, treating public and semi-public commercial spaces of the city as their playground. Second, compared to Dada or the Situationist International the political and cultural intent of flash mob organizers and participants are extremely diffuse and nascent (in fact, such intent is often expressly denied by participants and organizers alike). Third, the use of new media (mobile phones, social networking sites, blogs) in organizing and carrying out these stunts has lowered the threshold of participation (see Rheingold 2003); it no longer requires
participants to be integrated into a close-knit social network and an organizationally bounded movement. This creates a dual effect: first, it becomes very difficult to predict the size of the group that will turn out for the event; second, digital communications devices that operate in real time make it easier to smoothly prepare and control the choreography of the event.

**From Pillow Fights to T-Mobile Dance: Types of Flash Mobs**

As indicated earlier, flash mobs have diffused and evolved considerably since their emergence in 2003. We have conducted extensive Internet research and gathered detailed data about 200 different flash mobs that have taken place in the past five years all over the world. We have collected information including the precise location of the flash mob (country, city, location within the city), the type of activity, the approximate number of participants, whether there was a simultaneous flash mob in other cities as well as visual documentation in the form of photographs and videos. YouTube proved to be the most comprehensive source in this endeavor and the prime entry point into the world of flash mobbing. Organizers and participants almost always upload amateur videos about the event to YouTube because generating publicity is integral to flash mobs. Based on our database New York, San Francisco, London, Berlin, Toronto are the most popular sites for flash mob, but we have found evidence of flash mob

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7 YouTube also provides the broadest access to information on flash mobs, as it doesn’t require registration from users, in contrast to social networking sites such as Facebook and My Space. Even flash mobs that were originally organized and documented on more restricted access social networking sites would be reported on YouTube as well. There were no cases of flash mobs that we found on Facebook or other sites that didn’t at the same time have a clip about the event uploaded to YouTube.
activity from Tokyo to Pretoria, South Africa to Lebanon, Beirut. The most common activities include freezing in place, silent raves, pillow fights, sudden disrobing of pants, and zombie walks, although we have found a wide array of other activities ranging from worshipping a dinosaur in a toy store to synchronized swimming in the fountain of a public park. Flash mobs are mainly organized in public spaces such as city squares, parks, train stations or semi-public settings, mostly stores and shopping malls, but also in subway cars and university campuses. The large number of cases we examined has also allowed us to distinguish different types of flash mobs and construct a basic typology of the main variations. Such a classificatory exercise reveals that flash mobs have evolved within the broader category, spawning a variety of subtypes. The following typology therefore is an important corrective to existing, mostly journalistic, commentary on flash mobs, which is primarily based on singular cases and anecdotal evidence, and as such, often lumps together different types or singles out one type (e.g., political flash mobs) as the only authentic form of flash mob activity which all flash mobs are likely to gravitate towards.

“Atomized” flash mobs make up the first type. Many flash mobbers consider this the original and the only authentic form of flash mob. At these events people who are mobilized mostly through text messaging and emails come together in a public or semi-public space – in fact, most frequently in some commercial space, usually a store – to perform the same activity and disperse within ten minutes. People strictly do not interact with each other and the apolitical nature of the gatherings is strongly emphasized. The early New York flash mobs organized by the Mob Project, i.e. the journalist Bill Wasik (recall the “love rug” stunt at Macy’s), freezing in place events, and silent raves – when people gather in a public space and silently dance together while listening to their own music or the same music on their IPod – exemplify this type (see
Delio 2003). Hardcore, traditionalist flash mobbers in fact have become concerned that global diffusion has diluted the original meaning of the form, which aimed at being simply a test in viral culture, a “cynical in-joke on scenesterism”, a kind of “anti-expression” where people participate to “be a big physical presence for no other reason than because they think that it’s funny” (Heaney 2005; Wasik 2009). Wasik declared flash mobs passé in 2005 because he felt that they were becoming too “serious” and taken up increasingly “in a politically tinged way” to “express a certain kind of commonality” such as a certain opposition to corporate space, thereby corrupting their original anti-expression purism (see Heaney 2005; Wasik 2009).

Interactive flash mobs constitute the second, and probably most popular, type. Principally, they take a children’s game such as a pillow fight, capture the flag, follow the leader and transpose it into an urban setting with multiple participants. These events involve interaction among participants and also often last longer than 10 minutes, causing quite considerable disruption in the life of affected urban public spaces. Subway parties in particular, which also belong to this category, have left innocent travelers baffled and uneasy even though participants do not perform any illegal activity or break any formal rules (except for listening to loud music which is explicitly forbidden in New York but not in a lot of other cities). Many claim that interactive flash mobs lack a political component. As a 22-year old woman named Melanie summed it up: “It’s sort of like being at a protest, but without the politics. It’s not like you have to have a cause, to be an activist” (Anderson 2003). However, others, especially those who see interactive flash mobs as part of a new so-called “urban playground movement” attribute a strong anti-consumerist element to this type of flash mobbing (see Berton 2007, http://newmindspace.com/urbanplayground.php). They argue that flash mobs combine whim and serious social commentary: they want to create fun but also to “reclaim” public space that is
otherwise often choked with tourists and overtaken by commercial uses (Newmindspace.com). They contend that these urban games “arise out of an underlying frustration with consumer culture and simply, a desire to have unabashed childish fun” (Berton 2007). In a society where choices for social entertainment are largely limited to activities that involve some form of consumption, flash mobs offer free and non-commercial entertainment while “reframing” public space and breaking the mundane routine of urban life (see Breton 2007). They often refer to themselves as Flash mob 2.0 to distinguish themselves from classic flash mobs of the atomized type.

**Performance flash mobs**, the third type, follow the age-old script of performance art but spice it up with innovations made possible by new communications media. These pranks differ primarily from earlier manifestations of performance art by moving out of the insular and exclusionary world of art galleries and theaters to the open space of the city and by involving large groups of strangers as opposed to a few artists in the role of professional provocateurs. For instance, in the summer of 2008 nearly 3000 people, all dressed in white head to toe, invaded the Brooklyn Bridge filling the pedestrian walkway from end to end. The stunt was the opening salvo of a massive transborough celebration across New York, “One Night of Fire”, organized by an art troupe that calls itself TheDanger and puts on large-scale public productions to spread, in their own words, “senseless culture” (see Avery 2008). At the same time, performance flash mobs differ from other flash mobs in two ways. They have an explicitly stated artistic intent to

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8 This aspect makes them similar to the “Reclaim the Streets” movement in the United Kingdom, except that the main enemy that public urban space had to be reclaimed from was car traffic in that case. They usually invaded major roads, traffic intersections, highways to stage a party to protest against cars as the dominant mode of transportation. Critical Mass cycling events would also rather fall into this category.
promote an artist, performance or an exhibition and, more broadly, to theatricalize and celebrate urban life. Second, they rely on artist and comedy groups that are made up of professional agitators as main organizers whereas, as I’ll explain shortly, most other flash mobs are much more loosely knit through horizontal networks and lack a clear organizational framework. Ironically for Bill Wasik though, it seems that the scenesters he meant to mock by inventing the flash mob have wholeheartedly embraced his brainchild as well.

Another type includes political flash mobs, which are a close kin of so-called “smart mobs” (see Rheingold 2003). The term flash mob was in fact derived from the concept of smart mobs (cheesebikini?) that was introduced by one of the preeminent commentators on the social implications of new media, Howard Rheingold, in 2002 to describe the role of new communications technologies in the organization of political protests (2003). An early and much discussed case of a “smart mob” is undoubtedly the People Power II movement in the Philippines. Mobilized by forwarding text messages via mobile phones Filipinos took to the streets in unprecedented numbers to successfully overthrow the Estrada regime in 2001. Mobile phones and text messages were used to coordinate the protests, to keep protesters abreast of events and mobilize citizens to march. Political flash mobs, however, differ slightly from their smart mob counterpart by adopting more guerilla type tactics than traditional street protests and incorporating an element of absurdity associated with the original flash mob. For instance, in Minsk in the capital of Belarus a group of youth gathered in a public square and each participant began to slowly consume an ice cream. While, to many of us, this seems like an innocent prank, this flash mob was disrupted by plainclothes policemen and several flash mobbers were arrested. Even though participants do not perform a political act of protest, these flash mobs seem to
possess an inherent political quality because they offer a powerful test of the limits of free assembly in public spaces.

Other examples sadly illustrate that the political leverage afforded by new media technologies is not necessarily used in the name progressive politics. Right wing groups in Budapest in 2007 organized an anti-Semitic flash mob to express their anger against a ticket agency that allegedly refused to sell tickets to a woman who wanted to attend the concert of a nationalist rock band. Flash mob participants lined up outside the tiny ticket agency, located in a neighborhood with a sizeable middle-class Jewish population, and one-by-one demanded tickets to the aforementioned concert as a form of protest. From rioters to soccer hooligans, flash mobs offer an effective organizational script to swiftly bring large groups of people together and engage in coordinated action.

There are a few politically motivated flash mobs in the USA, like First Amendment flash mob organized by the faux Southern preacher, Reverend Billy that involves people gathering at the Ground Zero site in Manhattan and reciting the First Amendment into their cell phones (see Heaney 2005; Trav 2004). But political flash mobs are relatively rare in the US and most commonly occur in Eastern Europe and Asia where any occasion of unannounced free assembly in public spaces is still likely to be perceived by authorities as an imminent political threat.

Advertising flash mobs constitute the last type. While countless advertising blogs have dwelt on the enormous potential of flash mobs as a powerful and original advertising tool, so far only a few advertising campaigns have actually utilized flash mobs to promote their products. Nevertheless, the realized marketing campaigns have been high-profile and well-documented events, suggesting that the commercial appropriation of flash mobs is likely to gain more ground in coming years. In 2008 Ray Ban staged a fake flash mob to launch its “Project Colorize”
campaign to introduce five new colors to its iconic Wayfarer line. Around 100 people wearing brightly colored Wayfarer sunglasses stood for 20 minutes like frozen statues at the corner of 31st street and 6th Avenue in Manhattan staring at a six-story billboard, drawing the attention of passers-by and causing interruptions in traffic (see Elle News blog 2008). Interestingly, Ray Ban hired Ron English, a well-known culture jammer, “agit-pop” artist, and self-proclaimed “billboard liberator” to craft the “adverart” for the promotion.9

T-Mobile is another company that has recently experimented with the commercial use of flash mobs. The cell phone service provider organized a “flash mob dance” at Liverpool Street Station in London as part of its “Life is for Sharing” campaign. On January 15th, 2009 a single “commuter” suddenly broke into a dance on the main concourse of the train station. More and more people joined until over 300 hundred “strangers” performed a perfectly choreographed dance routine, drawing in unsuspecting bystanders into the show. The ad proved immensely popular; it currently counts close to 13 million views on You Tube and has won a prestigious award at the 56th Cannes Lions advertising festival. It also generated several copy cats across Europe (see Leo 2009) including, ironically, a real flash mob that mimicked the original T-Mobile dance at the original Liverpool Street Station location and eclipsed it in many ways. At

9 Ron English claims to be the founder of “agit-pop” art (from the marriage of Agitprop and pop art) that infuses pop art with a socially responsible attitude. In true culture jammer fashion his work has involved pirating (i.e., “liberating”) commercial billboards to subvert their advertising message thereby discrediting corporations and satirizing corporate culture. In addition to Ron English, Ray Ban in collaboration with fashion magazine, Marie Claire, hired four other New York street and pop artists (Tara McPherson, Scott Alger, Queen Andrea, and Toofly) to create billboards as part of the “Project Colorize” campaign. Ray Ban’s move is a perfect example for the clever cooptation of street culture by commercial interests.
the latter event, which was organized on Facebook and drew around 12,000 people, the crowd performed a silent rave (listening to music through ear phones and dancing to the tunes). The station had to be closed down for 90 minutes for fear of overcrowding and the police made a couple of arrests for public order offences, as one man, for instance, stripped naked during the dance (see Wardrop 2009). It seems that London’s Liverpool Street Station, much like Grand Central Station in New York, has become a favorite stage for avid flash mobbers.\textsuperscript{10} The apparent success of the Liverpool Street Station Dance also encouraged T-Mobile to organize an even more ambitious flash mob style promotion in the form of a Karaoke sing-a-long at London’s Trafalgar Square in May 2009. The event was attended by about 13,500 people and included a surprise appearance by the rock star Pink. Flash mobs are clearly becoming an everyday occurrence in London.

Despite the obvious logistic and choreographic challenges involved in creating effective flash mob promotions, flash mobs are likely to become a promotional staple, as they perfectly resonate with contemporary advertising’s combined emphasis on viral and guerilla tactics, the performative and unexpected use of urban space, interactivity and Internet enabled social marketing. They also generate a lot of secondary Internet buzz on user-generated platforms such as Facebook, You Tube, blogs (advertising blogs in particular) and Twitter creating a relatively long-lasting positive ripple effect. Advertising flash mobs are a close kin to performance flash mobs given the carefully choreographed nature of both. The main difference is, however, that the former are used for commercial gain and are staged by professional advertising agencies. At the

\textsuperscript{10} The latest involved a “moonwalk” flash mob at the station as a tribute to Michael Jackson, organized the day after his unexpected death, June 26, 2009.
same time, increasing commercialization of flash mobs is likely to accelerate the hollowing out of flash mobs as a form of social interaction. The commodification entailed by commercial use is frequently frowned upon by urban youth who have originally embraced flash mobs for the democratic, non-commercial, spontaneous, and ludic experience they offered.

Organization, Mobilization, and Reporting: The Digital Management of Urban Culture

Buzz

Early flash mobs were organized through chains of text and email messages that were circulated over a span of days and sometimes weeks containing instructions about the event, although information about the precise site and time were often only communicated in the last minute, partly to prevent the police to preempt the gatherings. In the past few years organizational techniques and the use of new media technology have become even more sophisticated and multifaceted. Most of the preliminary organizational activity has shifted to blogs, Internet groups (Yahoo and Google), Listservs such as Nonsense NYC, and most recently, to social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter. Step-by-step on-site instructions nowadays usually come in the form of MP3 files that can be downloaded to IPods and cell phones. The main organizational platforms all exploit one of the key novelties of new media: the possibility of offering an effective one-to-many communication channel. This feature is largely responsible for the ability to mobilize unusually large groups of strangers or relative strangers\(^{11}\) in a short span of time without having a firm, hierarchical, formal organizational

\(^{11}\) One of the best examples to illustrate the size potential of online mobilization is the flash mob at Liverpool Street Station in London in February 2009 that mimicked a T-Mobile ad and was discussed in the section on advertising
framework or any charismatic leader, assuming instead a form that has been described by some participants as a “just-in-time community” (see Schepers 2008). Flash mobs generally attract crowds that number anywhere between 40 to several thousands participants, with smaller flash mobs usually taking place in commercial settings while larger ones invading public open spaces such as city parks, squares and bridges.

At the same time, it has to be noted that not all attempts to organize flash mobs have been successful. In fact only a small fraction of all attempts result in a flash mob event, underscoring that the availability of the technology in itself is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for mobilizing people to meet in physical space. The next phase of this research will try to understand what other conditions have to be met to bring about a successful flash mob. Our findings so far show that even though, theoretically, anyone with access to Internet or mobile technology can organize a flash mob, practically the best organized flash mobs with the greatest entertainment impact are still put together by individuals or groups that do have some more solid organizational backing.

The New York-based performance art troupe Improv Everywhere is certainly a case in point. Improv Everywhere was founded by a “semi-employed” comedian, Charles Todd, in 2001 with the chief mission of “causing scenes of chaos and joy in public places” (http://improveverywhere.com). Since its inception it has organized over 80 “missions”, i.e. flash mobs. It was organized on Facebook and drew ca. 12,000 participants, forcing the police to shut down the station for fear of overcrowding.

12 Improv Everywhere’s mission “to cause scenes” echoes closely the Situationist International’s call to “create situations” discussed in the first part of the paper.
mobs that fall somewhere between interactive and performance flash mobs, with the aid of thousands of “undercover agents”. These events have ranged from shopping in slow motion at a Home Depot, to over 200 hundred “agents” freezing in place in the busy main hall of Grand Central Terminal in Manhattan, to nearly 100 agents dancing in the shop window of a Filene’s, Forever 21 and DSW store in an eight-story glass-walled building overlooking Union Square. Some basic flash mob genres including no pants subway ride, MP3 experiments, synchronized swimming in the fountain of Washington Square Park are recurring missions, repeated year-to-year. Some of the pranks involve only a handful of “agents”, but others, like the MP3 Experiments, are open to the public and can attract thousands of participants (see Pogue 2009). The group has an exceptionally well-maintained and up-to-date website (http://improveverywhere), You Tube channel, recently published a book about its missions (see Todd and Scordelis 2009) and is even selling DVDs of its flash mobs, which have been immensely popular in New York and beyond. The Grand Central Freeze in Place organized in 2008 remains one of the best executed and publicized flash mobs ever. It has become a kind of

13 Improv Everywhere claims that their “missions” are not flash mobs, mainly because they supposedly started organizing them two years before the term was coined (http://improveverywhere.com). Novelty, originality and authorship are highly coveted and competitive assets in the world of viral culture and performance art, which is why I believe that Improv Everywhere tries to distance itself from the flash mob label that has been closely associated with the Harper’s journalist’s, Bill Wasik’s experiments in viral culture. But as a sociologist I don’t have to be influenced by such turf war among various cadres of cultural producers and can classify forms of social interactions based on their sociological similarities. According to the definition I provide in the introduction. Improv Everywhere missions do qualify as flash mobs, although they fall into a different subcategory from the one conceived by Bill Wasik, i.e., performance and atomized flash mobs, respectively.
gold standard in the flash mob and viral universe, as evidenced by the over 17 million views of the stunt’s You Tube clip.

The example of Improv Everywhere highlights another crucial aspect of flash mobbing: its rootedness in particular geographical locales. Flash mobs tend to be strictly urban affairs, favoring large, densely and heterogeneously populated urban centers as evidenced by the very high incidence of flash mob activity in New York, London, or San Francisco. Most flash-mob themed Facebook groups are also organized by city affiliation and bear urban labels such as the very active Flash Mob Gbg14 that stages flash mobs in Sweden’s second largest city, Göteborg, which is incidentally also home to the country’s largest university. There are a few important websites including the Urban Prankster Network, Newmindspace or flashmob.co.uk that function as clearing houses for flash mob organizers and participants offering information on upcoming flash mob events. But even these sites limit their geographical focus to a handful of large urban centers and have local member groups organized by metropolitan area.15 Only a few smaller places have seen vigorous flash mob activity and they are usually university towns such as Bialystok in Poland, and especially in the case of the US, are home to large, spatially concentrated university campuses (e.g., UC San Diego or Austin, Texas). In other words, the high spatial density of digitally networked college student and post-collegiate populations seems to be the key to the success and vitality of flash mobs in a particular physically bound area.

14 Gbg is a short hand for the city of Göteborg.

15 The Urban Prankster Network is international in scope, although it focuses primarily on flash mob activity in US cities. The most active local groups are found in Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, London and in the Dallas/FT Worth metropolitan area.
As I mentioned earlier, flash mobs follow a back-and-forth dramaturgy between online and offline modes of operation. Flash mob events are organized online, exploiting the power of digital media to communicate quickly and virally. Yet, flash mobs can really only mobilize people who are in relative physical proximity to each other to be able to make the leap from cyberspace to urban space. The stunts themselves take place in physical space and are recorded by participants. Short videoclips are uploaded to YouTube and Facebook, both to popularize flash mobbing and for organizers to get feedback on the events. Just to illustrate the popularity of some of these videos: The T-Mobile Dance clip has been viewed nearly 14 million times since it was uploaded to YouTube in January 2009 (on August 20, 2009). The YouTube page as well as flash mob oriented Facebook pages include links to additional blogs, videos, listservs and flash mobbing communities that act as information portals for up-to-date information on flash mob activity.

Online reporting has indeed largely been responsible for the rapid global diffusion of flash mobs – flash mobs became a global phenomenon within less than a year– and facilitated the organization of flash mobs that take place simultaneously in several cities across various continents. The vast online archive of flash mob activity has spawned copy cats and been mined endlessly for ideas, publicity and feedback. In addition to YouTube, which is the largest PR platform for flash mobs, blogs (e.g., cheesebikini, Satan’s Laundromat) as well as more traditional media coverage has been crucial in institutionalizing and legitimizing this new form of sociability.

16 There have been some attempts to organize flash mobs that take place simultaneously in several cities but these remain relatively rare.
Social Meaning of Flash Mobs: Contemporary Exercises in Sociability

Cyber commentary (comprising readers’ and participants’ comments on You Tube, Facebook, blogs, and online news sources) is also an essential source of data that can bring us closer to the social meaning of flash mobs and their place in contemporary urban youth cultures.

Interestingly, the reception and assessment of flash mobs is very polarized, split sharply between passionate endorsements from supporters and harsh criticism from opponents. You Tube and Facebook pages usually draw commentators who have themselves actively participated in flash mobs and/or are enthusiastic supporters of the flash mob cause. Blogs and online news sources, however, attract a more heterogeneous readership and offer a glimpse of strong criticism that is also directed at flash mobs.

Positive reception of flash mobs emphasizes first and foremost their entertainment value (“massively fun”, “hilarious”, “amazing”, “makes me feel happy”). It argues that flash mobs present a novel form of urban entertainment that places spontaneity, creativity and sociability at the center and is free in a world in which youth entertainment tends to be costly and ubiquitously commercialized. Flash mob enthusiasts stress the “pointlessness” of the event but appreciate the inventiveness and seamless choreography of the pranks. They are also attracted by the anarchic quality, the surprise and confusion effect, and the insider feeling, i.e., elements of the event that question everyday, taken for granted, principally middle class norms of urban public space use.

The New York Times technology reviewer’s description of his experience of Improv Everywhere’s sixth MP3 Experiment on Roosevelt Island in New York aptly sums up this nonchalant positive attitude towards flash mobs: “The weather was absolutely perfect, the crowd
was young and fun, and the whole thing was orchestrated, planned and written exceptionally well. […] What a totally cool idea: part mass hypnosis, part party, part comedy club…like a political rally but with more to do” (Poug 2009).

In contrast, negative responses single out their pointlessness and “frivolousness” as their biggest drawbacks. They denounce flash mobs for their “silliness”, lack of a “productive” cause as well as novelty and originality. They are seen as a nuisance and a reflection of the narcissism of younger generations as expressed in the following, typical disapproving comment17: “What a bunch of self-indulgent tossers. Get jobs.” Although flash mobbers stress the harmlessness of the stunts and the fact that they do not violate any existing laws, discontents are quick to point out that many flash mobs (e.g., pillow fights, subway parties) leave behind public spaces in a considerable mess that has to be cleaned up by the city resulting in a very real waste of public resources. The pointlessness, which is seen by participants and sympathizers as an intrinsically positive and essential quality of flash mobs, is an unforgivable flaw in the eyes of critics. While disruptions in the life of urban public spaces are often tolerated if caused by a strike, political demonstration or commercial activity (e.g., film shooting), the lack of serious – for instance, political, commercial or charitable – agenda renders flash mobs as an object of scorn. Some critics are even concerned about flash mobbers’ readiness to obsequiously follow whatever instructions they are given by unknown organizers, which they see as a troubling sign of conformity and herd mentality rather than creativity (see BiL 2008).

Most research that investigates the impact of the Internet and related digital technologies on social interactions and social groups operates within the conceptual framework of community

17 In this particular case, in regard to a flash mob at London’s Liverpool Street Station.
formation. Scholars are mainly preoccupied with how online communities are similar to or different from traditional, face-to-face communities: whether they can offer the same of type and intensity of companionship, social support, sense of belonging and information, whether they foster the formation of strong or weak-tie dominated social networks (see Granovetter 1985; Rheingold 2000; Wellman and Gulia 1999). The above outlined folk evaluations of flash mobs, however, indicate that the sociologist, Georg Simmel’s unfortunately underused concept of sociability might also be useful in capturing the social logic of the type of digitally mediated socialization incarnated by flash mobs.

Simmel (1949) considered sociability one of the main forms of social interaction in addition to exchange, conflict, and domination. He suggested that sociability represented the “play form of association” that was “related to the content-determined concreteness of association as art is related to reality” (Simmel 1949: 255). Sociability in its pure form has “no ulterior end, no content and no result outside itself” and the “free-playing, interacting independence of individuals” takes center stage in the interaction (Simmel 1949: 255). In this sense sociability distils out of the realities of social life “the pure essence of association, of the associative process as a value and satisfaction” because the “pleasure of the individual is always contingent upon the joy of others” (Simmel 1949: 257). It is also a democratic form of interaction because “the more serious purposes of the individual are kept out of it, so that it is an interaction not of complete but of symbolic and equal personalities” (Simmel 1949: 254). “Riches and social position, learning and fame, exceptional capacities and merits of the individual have no role in sociability”, i.e. social status in itself has little structuring effect, thus enabling interaction among people of different social backgrounds as equals (Simmel 1949:256).
Sociability can permeate social life to varying extents. Conversation, for instance, when talking is an end in itself and the content is secondary, simply a “carrier of stimulation”, is one of the most common manifestations of pure sociability. Similarly, coquetry presents the play form of eroticism (Simmel 1949: 258). There is an element of sociability even in social and civic associations that are governed by clearly defined interests and are directed towards objective content and purpose inasmuch as members derive satisfaction from the simple fact of being associated with each other. But in these associations sociability generally plays a more marginal role.

Flash mobs’ emphasis on playfulness, creativity, pointlessness and togetherness as principal meanings suggests that sociability is a central and controlling principle in this form of association. The fleeting and loose organizational – the “just in time” – nature of flash mobs, which has been fully attributed to the use of new media play in the process, also seems to be a more general expression of the centrality of sociability in the social networking culture of participants, who tend to be predominantly in their 20s and 30s. It is at this age that people’s social networks tend to be most fluid, when they are most open to meeting new people and experiment with new group activities that are governed primarily by sociability. New communications technology simply enables, enlarges, and intensifies this deep-seated tendency of youth socialization.

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18 The role of sociability in associations can also vary over time. For instance, the knightly fraternities in Germany of the Middle Ages were founded to pursue concrete religious and practical ends. Yet by the fourteenth century only the chivalrous interests and conduct remain of the original aims. Over the next centuries even these fade away, leaving fraternities as the purely sociable unions of aristocratic social strata (see Simmel 1949: 260).
The criticism of superficiality and frivolousness that are repeatedly directed at flash mobs is also characteristic in the case of the play form of association. Simmel argues that as sociability assumes the welding of certain “concrete”, “rational” and “serious” elements (including the burden of social background) from the interaction, the complaint of superficiality of this type of social intercourse often arises. This leads observers to discount the sociological importance of sociability even though “the freeing and lightening, however, that precisely the more thoughtful man finds in sociability is this; that association and exchange of stimulus, in which all the tasks and the whole weight of life are realized, here is consumed in an artistic play, in that simultaneous sublimation and dilution, in which the heavily freighted forces of reality are felt only as from a distance, their weight fleeting in a charm” (Simmel 1949: 261).

But even in the case of flash mobs we can see variation in the degree to which sociability governs different types of flash mobs. Sociability is dominant in atomized, interactive and performance flash mobs while political and advertising flash mobs introduce more concrete content and purpose, diminishing the sociability aspect through instrumental use. There is also interesting geographical and cultural variation with respect to the centrality of sociability. Flash mobs in the US or the UK tend to be dominantly about sociability. In contrast in Eastern Europe and Asia political aims often overwhelm the pure sociability element in flash mobs. Even the inherent and nearly universal political content of flash mobs, namely the fact that they present a non-commercialized form of entertainment, highlight the importance of urban public spaces as sites of non-commercialized forms of socialization and underline the public character of quasi-public places such as shopping malls, remains latent and residual in the US context. In Eastern Europe, however, where a consumer society has emerged only recently and arrived as part and
parcel of rapid social change, flash mobs in shopping malls (and similar quasi-public commercial spaces) have a clear and explicitly political character.\footnote{A flash mob in one of the largest shopping malls of not only Budapest but of Eastern Europe supports this argument. The shopping mall named Westend City Center has advertised itself as “The New Downtown of Budapest”. The group called the 4th Republic organized a flash mob in November 2008 with the intention of unmasking this label as an empty and hypocritical marketing slogan. The 400-person strong “mob” that just tried to use the mall as public space provoked nervous overreactions from security guards exposing the true and rather private nature of commercial spaces (see BiL 2008).}

While sociability captures the essence of flash mobs as a form of digitally mediated social interaction, attention to its varying levels help to understand variation in the form across geographical, political and cultural contexts. It is also important to note that the flash mob originated as a play form of association that should be taken seriously in its own right not only when it is filled with more “serious” and “rational”, political or economic purpose.

\section*{Conclusion}

An innocent bystander to a flash mob in Vancouver, Canada remarked the he thought that the happening had to be “either a protest or advertising” (Nicholson 2005). And it is true that by virtue of their power to quickly and surprisingly transform physical space, flash mobs carry enormous potential as a vehicle for mobilization both for political collective action and commercial promotional campaigns (especially in an age when techniques like guerilla and word-of-mouth marketing are all the rage). But I believe that we shouldn’t downplay the importance of non-political forms of flash mobs either. By blending spectacle, activism, experiment and prank flash mobs offer compelling evidence as well as homage to Lewis
Mumford’s idea of the city as a “theater of social action” (Mumford 1937). Mumford argued that “the city fosters art and is art; the city creates the theater and is the theater. It is in the city, the city as theater, that man’s more purposive activities are focused and worked out, through conflicting and cooperating personalities, events, groups, into more significant culminations…The physical organization of the city may deflate this drama or make it frustrate; or it may…make the drama more richly significant, as a stage-set, well-designed, intensifies and underlines the gestures of the actors and the action of the play” (Mumford 1938). Flash mobs thus evidently illustrate that mobile communication technologies have in fact become powerful urban design tools that can effectively shape our experience of urban space and enlarge the urban drama while fostering new forms of sociability and reinventing public space.
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