

SETTLING FOR SYSTEM CHANGE

BY TEMPERING HYPE INTO A STRUCTURAL RESOURCE

The transformation of urban mobility has become a grand challenge as we strive to achieve zero emissions in the transport sector and meet the climate targets set by the Paris Agreement by 2050. Efforts to radically reimagine mobility in densely populated urban areas have proposed Mobility as a Service (MaaS) as an alternative to the intertwined issues of congestion, emissions, heat, and safety hazards posed by passenger car-dominated systems. A MaaS system aims to "smarten" cities by integrating open data infrastructures, digital platforms, apps, and autonomous technologies to create seamless, interconnected, zero-footprint journeys. Although this vision has been actively pursued in several cities, new systems have often fallen short of the anticipated changes (Audouin & Finger, 2018; Heikkila, 2014). This paper theorizes this settling effect in organized system change (Stephan, Patterson, Kelly, & Mair, 2016) by examining the transition of a mobility system from an old to a new state in a large European capital city (Helsinki Metropolitan Area, Finland). Leveraging the highly public nature of this change, we employ a combination of digital and multi-actor ethnographies to trace the full life cycle of organized change.

Theoretical motivation

Mair and Seelos (2021: 3) define organized system change as being “concerned with the efficacy of organized efforts to change social systems and the legitimacy and desirability of the nature and outcomes of such efforts.” They explain that understanding how systems change requires simultaneous attention to two realms: a situational realm, which delineates the objective characteristics of situations and their dynamics of change, and a problem realm, where subjective processes of evaluating and problematizing situations unfold. In this study, we emphasize the subjective processes to explore what may be different when multiple actors, at different levels, agree on the objective problem and the urgent need to change the entire system.

To do this, we draw on Montgomery and Dacin’s (2020) work on claim-making processes. According to them, rather than being static and homogeneous, actors may adopt different identities, make different claims, respond to different situational triggers, and create various intersections within the problem space. Toubina and Zietsma (2017) demonstrate how (counter)claims can be amplified, creating echo chambers and cycles of emotional contagion. Barberá-Tomás, Castelló, de Bakker, and Zietsma (2019) explain how claims generate emotional shock, which stimulates energy around moral emotions and, in turn, compels actors to pledge action to resolve a given situation.

We connect these insights about actor interaction with the concept of hype. While often narrowly construed as promotional language that runs ahead of evidence, hype can have broader properties and functions. We adopt the view that hype itself can become a resource, explaining how it can accelerate concerted efforts to change systems that no longer serve their constituencies. We take a constitutive view of hype, summarizing how it can alter subjective interpretations of an objective issue (Lounsbury & Wang, 2020; Logue & Grimes, 2022) and energize those actors who seek to depart from the status quo, motivating them to invest time and effort in developing alternative solutions (Hachigian, 2024).

Methods

Our analytic approach followed the recommendations and best practices for studying organized system change. We employed a four-phase inductive approach, combining digital ethnographies with multi-actor engagements, iterating between data collection, analysis, and literature as the research progressed. The very public nature of the change being studied ensured public scrutiny and transparency of the main actors, both public and private, and their interactions, providing detailed accounts and accountability from all key actors. We leveraged access to these multimedia sources by conducting a digital ethnography that covered the full life cycle of this organized system change (2006–2024). Two of the authors also experienced the transition firsthand and documented it as participant observers. Additionally, they actively engaged with this system transformation by interacting in multiple roles with key actors in real time (2018–2024). To deepen our insights into how the system change settled, the first author conducted 26 formal interviews during the most critical period when the new system replaced the old one.

Findings and contributions

Our paper describes the transformation of an urban transit system as it shifted from a "mobility as a public good" model to a "mobility as a service" system. Our findings reveal that public and private actors not only fueled and harnessed hype but also tempered it through sequential stages of amplification and abatement, which helped ensure public understanding and buy-in of the ongoing system change.

The government managed the system change by using the hype generated in interactions between public and private actors as a structural resource. In the public eye, the objective issue followed a hype cycle, often used to describe the rollercoaster of expectations accompanying new scientific discoveries and technologies before their mainstreaming and commercialization (Dedehayir & Steinert, 2016). Hype played a crucial role in creating and conveying consensus on a shared vision of system change, which accelerated governmental action to develop, pass, and implement new legislation in record time. At the peak of this hype cycle, Helsinki's MaaS example was acclaimed as a breakthrough in system change, held up as a model of the broader global movement toward digital architectures of mobility as a service for having so quickly sanctioned into law a transformation deemed both urgent and necessary. At the valley of this hype cycle, public and private actors fed and harnessed hype to enshrine their own involvement in implementing the shared vision, shaping hype pipelines, which energized both the public conversation and fueled their own energy to innovate and implement solutions. As the plateau of this hype cycle, both public and private actors settled for a new system that was sufficiently better than the old one, yet short of the shared vision.

We complement current global conversations on mobility as service by emphasizing the importance of energy-in-conversation as issues of public significance demand not only grand visions but also sufficient settlements. Our study extends the literature on organized system change by revealing processes typical to transformations occurring overtly and engaging their beneficiaries through transparent sharing of problems, visions, and outcomes. Lastly, we contribute a new theory of structural resources, showing how resources generated through interactions between public and private actors, such as hype, come to shape the boundaries and the causal apparatus of the new system.

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