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The quest for a fairer formula. How re-institutionalisation begins with neo-illegal transport communities at the fringe of social innovation in Brussels

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Abstract

This article examines how the re-institutionalisation of transport policies starts with the everyday insurgency of fare evasion practices which exist at the fringe of social innovation. In the case of Brussels, fare evaders organised themselves at the heart of the digital world, as virtual communities to claim their rights to mobility and to re-common the public transport infrastructure by mobilising offline evasion actions. This perspective allows to understand fare evasion not as an illegal or criminal practice but as a symptom that embodies how transport policies fail under marketisation. The article concludes that fare evaders have the potential to be bottom-up actors, yet they are limited by socio-economic cleavages and the predominant transport policies.

Introduction

Who are the "rabbits" (Sträuli, 2022), or the "fraudsters" in Brussels? The "black passengers" in Berlin (Sgibnev and Weicker, 2022)? The "folk devils" (Cohen, 1972), or the "hippies" on public transport (Nahuis, 2009)? All passengers who travel without a valid public transport ticket or have a wrong one (Barabino et al., 2015) are called "rabbits" in Russia, Estonia, and Lithuania (Sträuli, 2022) or in general terms, fare evaders. The rabbits run from the controllers ("hunters") to escape paying a fine and/or jumping over turnstiles to exit the station. In evader-oriented studies, Barabino and Salis (2019) explain that fare evasion happens for many reasons, including dissatisfaction with the service or if the travel distance is short. However, such fare evader practices are associated with a social stigma, which portrays fare evaders as folk devils – a deviant group of people whose behaviour poses a threat to the hegemonic societal values and interests (Cohen, 1972). Fare evasion is hence framed as an

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immoral act, unethical behaviour from a psychological perspective, a crime, and an illegal (such as breaking the law) practice (Barabino et al., 2015).

This perspective brings us to the context of Brussels'[1] transport landscape, in which the anti-fare evasion measures control, exclude and include riders in the name of an emerging neoclassical-sustainable orthodoxy, upon which the transport status quo builds (Kębłowski and Bassens, 2018). Fare policy agendas largely disregard the socioeconomic underpinnings of transport reality, and fare evasion is the "symptom" (Žižek, 1997, p. 167). This happens especially when the accessibility levels are partially eroded by the cost of transport fares. Pereira et al. (2016) and Martens (2016) explain how transport policies shape the social and spatial structures, which can easily influence people's opportunities to access jobs, health, and educational services. Such factors can significantly hinder accessibility by certain users, or in other words, push vulnerable groups to improvise ways to access the public transport infrastructure when the cost of transport is unaffordable. This leads to fundamental questions about what public transport means to people, and what makes it a political matter rather than a technical one. This perspective discusses fare evasion as a social phenomenon, the roots of which are due to various reasons, including economic (e.g. low income), social (e.g. desire to connect to other evaders), and political (e.g. stating that public transport should be free) ones (Barabino and Salis, 2019), resulting in a socio-spatial unequal transport system.

Notwithstanding the highly formalised, regulated and elaborated transport system, Brussels, as a salient case study, demonstrates in what ways fare evaders organised themselves at the heart of the digital world as virtual communities (e.g. website, Facebook groups, and Twitter) to accumulate and disseminate information about *Stib-Mivb's* (Brussels Intercommunal Transport Company) inspections in real time. These digitally-mediated groups contest (parts of) the controlled public transport by encouraging commuters not to purchase tram, metro and bus tickets. These virtual fare evader groups, such as the *Contrôle BXL* web application, and the *Contrôle de la STIB* and *Prévention Contrôle Stib* (*Bruxelles*) Facebook groups, are collaborating to allow all passengers participating in the act of evasion to avoid paying fines and increase the level of accessibility for all. In this respect, Brussels fare evaders call themselves fraudsters since they are committing fraud, i.e. reproducing mechanisms of illegal practices in legal terms. The use of social media platforms as legal tools allows connecting a diverse network of users, which are not necessarily a democratic organisation in the traditional sense, as they are fluid and somewhat anarchistic. A sense of community is being fostered virtually to empower and motivate participants to act on their own beliefs and reproduce and redistribute public transport as shareable infrastructure for all. These virtual transport communities reproduce communal acts (Moulaert et al., 2013; Moulaert and MacCallum, 2019) "at the very micro-level", in other words (re)produced at the

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[1] In this article, we refer to Brussels Capital Region as Brussels.

fringe of society, to mobilise on-the-ground evasion in an attempt to negotiate public transport fare policies.

Taking these perspectives into account, this article proposes to move beyond the mainstream perspectives on fare evasion. Instead, it views fare evasion practices and communities as neo-illegal initiatives at the fringe of social innovation. This viewpoint enables to understand how they are 1) mobilising fare evasion on the ground while contesting transport as commons for emancipatory life; and 2) disrupting and managing the transport system by and for the community divorced from the top-down policies and market logic. In other words, these new relevant social groups are re-institutionalising, redefining and reconstructing (transport-related) planning, through "inherently institutionalised" practices (De Blust and Van den Broeck, 2019). As such, fare evasion practices as social innovation (SI) form new institutionalised socio-technical frames (Van den Broeck, 2011). The article aims to make a theoretical and empirical contribution to the field of transport studies and SI, by analysing fare evasion practices as socially innovative initiatives that subvert the existing order and advocate for social solidarity "as a counterproductive sentimentalism" (Žižek, 1997, p. 56).

The next section turns to SI theory in territorial development (Moulaert et al., 2013) and transport exclusion to scrutinise the potentials of fare evasion as a practice that holds the seeds for a social turn in the process of re-institutionalisation to achieve fairer transport policies. The subsequent part presents the research methodology in general and the research position of the first author in particular during research conducted between 2019 and 2022. Relying on the gathered data, the article studies how the logic of fare evasion is being mobilised by social media platforms, which became the "crowd fora" (Dean, 2016, p.15) of a networked collective community, whose members (fare evaders) share social imaginaries (see Davoudi et al., 2018; Jessop, 2022) in commoning transport (Nikolaeva et al. 2019) and the urban space. The discussion evolves on whether these community practices that exist at the fringe of society, are key and vital ingredients to nurture emancipatory social change, and to provide spaces of infrastructural experimentation. The article concludes by arguing that fare evasion practices are prefigurative examples for bottom-up interests and contestations. Fare evaders could be considered as bottom-up actors who have the potential to open up pathways towards making public transport a truly public and collective endeavour. However, they do not change the world as political practices do (Moulaert et al., 2022). In sum, these prefigurative social practices (Swyngedouw, 2022) are limited due to socio-economic cleavages and the predominant transport policies.

Re-institutionalisation of transport policies through fare evasion practices

What is public transport without the public? An infrastructure that strives for efficient movement of passengers while considering space as an empty background and neglecting its impact on people's quality of life (Hickman et al., 2015). However, transport is (not) only about transport. It is rather about integrating everyday life and normal activities. As such, public transport involves travelling with others and hence embraces cultural diversity, social integration, and negotiation. Everyone has the right to access this collective infrastructure, yet at a certain cost. Fare instruments are introduced to influence cost recovery and are organised to attract and regulate passengers' travel patterns, behaviour, and to improve their access to society (Nahuis, 2009). Fares are however producing and reproducing new forms of exclusion. The emergence of fare evasion practices is an example of how some excluded users are circumventing the mainstream public transport fare instruments. The article, therefore, aims to understand how fare instruments trigger such practices and explore fare evasion mechanisms and dynamics that occur at both individual and collective levels in the mobile world.

Fare evasion: The ticklish subject for public transport policies

Public transport remains the public space that provides opportunities to create a social network, trust, and reciprocity among commuters (Currie and Stanley, 2008). These three concepts remain abstract separately, but linking them could enhance the social interaction associated with the liveable city concept, and build social relations or social capital (Putnam, 2000; Lucas, 2012; Schwanen et al., 2015). Therefore, providing mobility (or in other words improving access (Martens, 2016) for all, including disadvantaged groups (e.g. young, low-income, elderly, unemployed) who tend to lack social capital (Currie and Stanley, 2008), is a fundamental objective of transport policies (Levine et al., 2019). This has become a central rationale for the government subsidies to support services by implementing versatile fare structures, such as fare concession arrangements and innovations (e.g. the introduction of chip cards, contactless payment or electronic ticketing systems). Fare policy mechanisms became vital for the allocative and productive efficiency of public transport, to ensure quality and provide long-term investment coverage (Beria et al., 2015), and a positive step for low-income groups. As such, planning systems of transport are considered as action plans using the following policy instruments (Bemelmans-Videc et al., 1998; Van den Broeck, 2008):

1. Legal policy instruments ("sticks"), e.g. laws and regulations imposing sanctions on undesirable behaviours;
2. Fiscal/monetary policy instruments ("carrots"), e.g. subsidies, funding, or tax reductions rewarding behaviours desired by the legislator;

3. Informational policy instruments ("sermons"), e.g. information campaigns, support through education and training, or awareness raising and understanding.

Planning structures (including instruments and rules) become the different strategies tackled by different agencies within an "institutional field" (Van den Broeck, 2011; Servillo and Van den Broeck, 2012; De Blust and Van den Broeck, 2019). In that sense, planning could be seen as the reproduction of a broader hegemonic socio-cultural and technical imaginary (Moulaert et al., 2007) or as supportive to counter-hegemonic movements. It is therefore always socio-political in its nature (Swyngedouw, 2008; Van den Broeck, 2011; De Blust et al., 2022). This interpretation frames planning structures as socially constructed, which implies the need to understand the socio-political implications of institutionalisation processes (Healy, 2006). Nevertheless, this process is subject to continuous change. Actors create, transform and/or reproduce instruments and institutional frames and imbue their interests and values in these instruments and frames. Institutional frames are selectively open to the actors' strategies and tactics, depending on the specific interests and values inscribed in their social practices (Jessop, 2001), but also on the level of structural determination to which actors are subject (Moulaert et al., 2016). Such "interaction between actors and institutions is reflexively-recursively dialectical" (Van den Broeck, 2011, p. 54-55).

In this sense, transport and social infrastructures are embedded in the techno-political frames (infrastructural, socioeconomic, socio-political, geo-political, etc.) of various actors (Toro et al.,2020; Toro and Van den Broeck, 2021), whose powers and authority are being produced and reproduced but also sometimes challenged by new actors. Therefore, the hegemonic regulatory framework plays a key role in shaping the social and spatial structure of cities, such as facilitating the tasks expected from every citizen in contemporary society to access employment centres, schools, or medical facilities, which has become, in the words of Dworkin (1985), a prerequisite for "a life of choice and value" (cited in Martens, 2006, p.7). Perhaps it is useful to remember that, whatever the technical sophistication in transport systems to improve people's access, these systems are however retaining a high political content and concerns over economic growth and efficiency (Martens, 2016). The design of the public transport fare framework is for example based on what kind of users economic policymakers and investors want to attract, rather than meeting the riders' needs.

Fares are fundamental to public transport operation and form a major source of income for public transport companies (Paulley et al., 2006). This implies that subsidies and taxes in the transport sector often focus on cost-efficiency rather than affordability-increasing objectives (van Wee and Geurs, 2011; Martens, 2011). A dilemma then emerges, for instance, when the transport providers are targeting services for disadvantaged groups, yet many users do not belong to these groups. High levels of fare evasion could be also due to low levels of trust and reciprocity including a lack of cognitive knowledge, know-how, the purpose of travel,

aspirations, and/or autonomy regarding fare-paying (Currie and Stanley, 2008), and not only due to poverty.

In theory, such techno-managerial aspects of transport policies, including fare arrangements, often aspire a cohesive and connected society, in which everyone is apparently included. But the reality of the situation suggests that fare arrangements are not all that inclusive. Many scholars argue that transport infrastructures and design (including fare structures) engender and reinforce socio-spatial exclusion, notably among impoverished neighbourhoods (Cass et al., 2005; Martens; 2016; Lucas, 2019; Kębłowski; 2022). Consumers (passengers) purchase a product (ticket formula and mode) only if it has a value to them, greater than the price they have to pay. Bureaucracy becomes an obstacle for transport resources or services. In that sense, people's mobility becomes spatially enclosed within a designed transport system that creates mechanisms of exclusion. The insurgency of fare evasion is hence being nurtured by the range of socio-political and economic forces that often produce transport exclusion among all categories of users. Church et al. (2000) deepen our understanding of the interdependence between mobility and social exclusion by identifying multiple ways in which the design and organisation of transport systems can enhance exclusion:

1. Physical exclusion: This includes the barriers that inhibit the accessibility of services. Such barriers affect many groups of people (children, the elderly or visually impaired, etc.). Other scholars (Cass et al., 2005; Lucas, 2019) add the socio-territorial dynamics in relation to the institutional configuration such as the ethnicity and the built environment of users.

2. Geographical exclusion: The peripheral, poor transport provision and resulting inaccessibility can create exclusion not just in rural areas but also in areas on the urban fringe or in smaller towns and cities.

3. Exclusion from facilities: The distance to facilities (health, education, leisure, etc.) from an individual's home, makes access, especially without a car, difficult. This problem is exacerbated by the growing popularity of peripheral facilities.

4. Economic exclusion: Temporal and monetary costs of travel can prevent or limit access to jobs and thus income.

5. Time-based exclusion: Difficulties pertaining to the organisation of childcare and other caring commitments emerge due to a lack of adequate time to travel, given transport network constraints.

6. Fear-based exclusion: Crime and fear influence how public places and public transport are used.

7. Space exclusion: Public security and space management strategies can discourage socially excluded individuals from using public transport spaces.

In sum, the transport exclusion landscape is very diverse. This implies that decision makers should reconsider the operational strategies behind market and investors' logics, to address more profoundly the needs of users. The production of fare evasion, as irrational and illegal act, tickles and questions such transport fare policies. Fare evaders, considered as excluded users, contest public transport in ways far from transport regulatory norms, built environment and infrastructure, space-time organisation of socio-political and economic aspects, and the collective pattern rhythms of everyday life activities (Cass et al., 2005; Schwanen et al., 2015). The practice of fare evasion could also be a tool for looking beyond the poor and non-poor dichotomy.

At the fringe of SI: Mobilising fare evasion

The transport political-economy implications discussed above nurture a view that foregrounds the insurgency of fare evasion acts. The latter emerged to address uneven mobilities (Sheller, 2018) and do-it-yourself means of access to leverage transport infrastructure and policies. The article continues to examine how fare evasion as small-scale act explicates gaps in the transport sector and redefines public transport as commons. In other words, these acts exist at the fringe of society and attempt to turn public transport from a privately-regulated system into commons. The commons lens clarifies the potentials of fare evaders to reconfigure logic and perceptions, as well as active and collective processes and practices (Bresnihan, 2013) of managing and governing the access to mobility. As Harvey (2012) states "commons are contradictory and therefore always contested. Behind these contestations lie conflicting social interests" (p. 102). In other words, the sphere of commons can only be contentious since its politics depend on whose and which side and interests to protect.

Fare evasion practices start at the grassroots level to manifest unmet needs (Moulaert and MacCallum, 2019), and to contest the right to mobility as well as the right to immobility embedded in fare fixities. The logic of "mobility as commons" therefore shows a potential to reassess mobility not only as individual freedom but also as a collective good, paving the way for fairer mobility transitions (Nikoleava et al., 2019, p. 1-3). Such a perspective allows moving beyond the mainstream transport perspectives in which fare evasion is usually tolerated quietly while being encaged within discourses of "criminality," "illegality and/or immoral act," "unethical," and "deviance" that threatens existing societal patterns and breaks down the existing structures of control (Sabet, 2015). In addition, profiling the fare evaders as "cheaters", "gamblers", "users with no choice", "ideological opponents", etc. in mainstream fare evasion studies (Suquet 2010; Bucciol, Landini and Piovesan, 2013; Barabino et al., 2015; Salis, Barabino and Useli, 2017; Barabino and Salis; 2019), has prompted local authorities and other actors to come up with measures that do not eradicate the need to fare evade. Instead, they treat fare evasion by erecting more security barriers, increasing subsidies for fare

concessions, and transitioning from a proof-of-payment system to smart cards (Kinisky et al., 2005; Nahuis, 2009; González, Busco and Codocedo, 2019).

Badiou (2001) refers to the ethical dimension in the state, which designates a principle that governs the "what is going on" of everyday life (Badiou, 2001). Ethics is conceived as an a priori ability to discern Evil and the ultimate principle of justice in particular political judgment: Good is what is identifiable a priori against the Evil (ibid). Ethics in the case of fare evasion seems to be at the edge of the situation. Building on this, the article aims to challenge the conventional understandings of dichotomies like formal-informal, legal-illegal, planned-unplanned to describe fare evasion. Borraz and Le Galès (2016) explain that "analysing the city requires focusing not just on governments but also understanding the illegal side of the city, the invisible activities" (p. 3). Reflections on the illegal, in this case fare evasion, could let us move beyond what is an ideal view of urban transport governance "through ordinary (i.e. formal) regulation and decision-making, which still prevails" (Chiodelli and Gentili, 2021, p. 1).

This illegal side of the city is multifaceted. First, fare evasion is considered an illegal act since "it transgresses a specific law in force in a given context" (ibid, p. 2). Second, it could be an (il)licit practice since "it is subject to moral judgment, customary practice and social disapproval, regardless of whether it violates a law or not (Chiodelli et al., 2018, p.2). Third, it is referred to as "informal" to identify the arrangements that despite being legal (the example of Brussels virtual transport communities), are not clearly codified and regulated transparently, and are sometimes also hidden (ibid). "Informality is inscribed in the ever-shifting relationship between what is legal and illegal, legitimate and illegitimate, authorised and unauthorised. This relationship is both arbitrary and fickle and yet is the site of considerable state power and violence" (Roy, 2009, p. 80). Fare evaders are not like a secret society, but rather a type of users (as agents of change) that exist to drive interactions between what is considered formal, informal, legal, and illegal frameworks. They carry the potential to challenge the hegemonic discourses and expose the gaps between the regulatory transport policies and their interpretations. In this case, fare evasion is redefined as neo-illegal practice that takes place in a gap between different rules and norms. The institutional setup needs these new change agents to achieve transport justice. It is important to note that these acts are not always due to poverty. Wealthy citizens also rebel or protest against the government itself (Roy, 2005).

So how does SI relate to fare evasion? The everyday insurgency of neo-illegal practices is justified as a reaction to address the spiralling degradation of public transport as commons, or as an open public space for all, following the capital that hinders accessibility. In other words, the mobile commons are enclosed (Sheller, 2018) due to the transport regulatory frameworks (Martens, 2016).

Insurgent (fare evasion) practices attempt to re-common transport as collective public space accessible for all. In that sense, they fulfil the dimensions of SI processes within local communities (Moulaert, 2013; Van den Broeck et al., 2019). In line with the first dimension, they emerged to satisfy individual basic and collective needs. As SI sees planning practice as an inherently institutionalised practice, these new SI actors redefine power relations and power structures and trigger socio-spatial transformation through social action within a specific time frame (Van den Broeck, 2011). These (transport-related) planning instruments are constructed by specific relevant social groups and as such form specific institutionalised socio-technical ensembles (ibid). In other words, the SI discourse is rife with expectations towards more cohesive societies through inclusive practices, coproduction, and pro-active grassroots initiatives. This includes, for example, accessing public transport services freely through different spaces without any barriers. It involves the agency that is essential to satisfy these needs. Improvement in social relations comes as the second dimension of SI. It emerges from organising processes directly addressed to the community's needs and is practiced through collective rather than individual empowerment. Specific tools can play a role here, such as the use of social media to accumulate and disseminate information (Moulaert and MacCallum, 2019), through which to organise and work, bridge differences, and reframe disempowering discourses (Parés et al., 2017). This could be achieved through virtual communication via the internet, communicative travel through person-to-person messages via mobile phones, letters, and other technologies, and imaginative travel enacted by images of people and places in photos and the (mass) media (Sheller, 2011). Moulaert et al. (2022) refer also to Kropotkin in explaining improvement as the ethics that lie behind social relationships and bonding, solidarity cooperation and re-distribution, and mutual aid. Hence, improving social relationships is about respectful cooperation with collective goals in mind. The third dimension of SI is empowerment and mobilisation towards social and political transformation.

Of course, these three dimensions do not cover the entire complexity of SI experiences, but the article explores them interactively through the empirical case in Brussels. The fare evaders in Brussels, which exist at the very micro level or at the fringe of SI on public transport, have organised themselves into virtual communities that refuse to accept injustices as the status quo. The act of fare evasion emerged as an individual contestation to the institutional environment. But later, fare evaders organised themselves through collective interaction, potentially creating room for new agents within the political power. The question still is however, whether and how these acts are considered socially innovative, and how these fare evasion acts scale-up from being at the fringe to provoke socio-political transformations in transport designs.

The article finally builds on the new mobilities paradigm (Sheller and Urry, 2006; see also Cresswell, 2006; Bissell and Fuller, 2011) to conceptualise fare evasion practices as

socially innovative initiatives. Placing SI at the heart of fare evasion, we interpret the four meanings of mobility identified by Urry (2009 cited in Schorpp 2016):

1. The micro-scale movements of individuals and things. In the case of fare evasion communities, the users use mobile technologies (such as smartphones) as tools of SI to mobilise otherwise immobile people. In that sense, immobile people are the users whose access to the public transport infrastructure is limited or not granted.

2. "A mob, a rabble of an unruly crowd,". This can be random or organised, and needs "to be tracked and socially regulated" (ibid, p.2).

3. Vertical movements between social classes. In SI terms, fare evasion begins at the bottom level among users of various social classes in society. Then, they attempt to scale up, aiming to achieve governance shifts. Fare evasion is hence the grey practice in society that represents all social classes while breeding grounds for innovation.

4. Horizontal movement. This deals with "physical movement, ranging from standing, lounging, walking, [...], cars, trains" as shareable – common spaces.

Methodological strategies

Towards the beginning of spring 2022, commuters in Brussels began to see new advertisements posted by *Stib-Mivb* inside the metros, trams or on the bus stops, about a clown that is getting a fine. The purpose of these ads was to urge the riders to pay their transport tickets, so they can avoid paying a fine. Paying, in that sense, allows the commuters to stand in solidarity with the operators and to contribute by paying to a better and efficient public transport system to get around Brussels. As such, the role of the media is to allow the riders to comprehend public transport as a commons and accessible for all but with a certain price. But why did *Stib-Mivb* refer to the fare evaders as the clowns in Brussels? To investigate fare evasion practices up-close in Brussels, this section introduces the mixed-qualitative approach based on participatory and observatory ethnographic methods, and the position taken by the first author.

Research Methods

The primary research method was social media content analysis. The authors analysed the most active Facebook fare evaders communities (numbers date from September 2022): *Contrôle de la stib*, created in 2011, having 57k members; *STIB CONTROLE!!!*, created in 2018, with 52k members; and *Prévention Contrôle Stib (Bruxelles)*, created in 2017, and with 4.4k members. The first author was an active member since 2019 on the *Contrôle STIB* application until it shut down in late 2020 for unknown reasons, after having been in operation since 2012. As for the Facebook groups, they are either totally open to the public or a request needs to be sent to join the chosen group. The high membership numbers show that fare evasion is a topic that deserves attention in Brussels. Overall, the authors went through

the profiles of the most interactive members and profiled them according to their gender, age, nationality, and employment. Also, the authors went briefly through the least interactive members according to the same criteria. In general, the sketching of different profiles was only used to understand the evaders' socio-demographic characteristics. However, this approach was ethically challenging and included a lot of bias.

Additionally, interviews were used as complementary research method. The authors could not to get in touch with the founders of *Contrôle BXL* previously known as *Contrôle STIB* web-application nor the admins of the Facebook groups since they did not respond to the emails and calls. Also, the extenuating circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic have made it challenging to conduct in-person interviews with the fare evading commuters. Therefore, a web-survey was launched in the three fare evaders' Facebook groups, between April and May 2021, to incorporate perceptions on the tariffs of public transport, fines, and fare checks. The purpose of the web-survey was not statistical, as these online-based fare evader communities are limited in terms of socio-spatial temporal coverage. Also, to limit the effects of social desirability bias, the questions were formulated in such a way that the use of words that refer to the infringement of laws were avoided. To note, one of the platform's admins immediately deleted the survey explaining that the group is made to share information about inspections and not for "other purposes." Overall, the respondents were 17 out of 113k group members altogether. This shows that few were interested in explaining their behaviours and the survey was only reachable to one type of evaders with access to smartphones, internet and Facebook. The data-gathering techniques clarified the profiles of the fare evaders and the rationale behind taking part in such practice. In parallel, Table 1 summarises the interviews conducted by the authors in person, online, and through emails with Brussels transport agencies. It is noteworthy that the web-survey was developed and interviews A and B (part 1) were conducted with a Master of Architectural Engineering student at KU Leuven, Belgium (Bienstman et al., 2021), under supervision of the first author.

Table 1: The conducted interviews with the Brussels transport agencies.

Interviewee	Actors	Date(s)	Type of interviews
A	Brussels Mobility government	12/03/2021	Structured via emails
B	Transport activist	23/09/2019	Semi-structured in person
C	Representative from the municipal government	17/07/2021	Semi-structured via Microsoft Teams
D	Social media coordinator and spokesperson of *Stib-Mivb*	02/12/2020 and 15/10/2021	Semi-structured via Microsoft Teams

While the web-survey was based on the fare evaders' opinions, the authors discussed fare evasion practices and communities with these actors who had contributed to the public

transport fares policy discourses. The conducted interviews were semi-structured, which allowed the interviewees to answer open-ended questions in-depth. The chosen statements that summarise the interviews are freely paraphrased to build narratives on the portrayal of fare evaders practices and the virtual communities: as an unethical decision with negative economic consequences for society. Each interviewee gave their consent beforehand for the data to be used. In sum, interviews gave insights on fare evasion practices and riders' challenges. After COVID-19 lockdown measures were eased in Brussels, the first author conducted extensive in-person interviews with 50 non-fare evaders, 25 fare evaders and 30 ticket inspectors over the period of one year between 2021 and 2022 to extract more detailed perspectives. To reach the inspectors and passengers, the first author followed the fare evaders' posts on Facebook, or randomly when the researcher was observing the travel patterns on different bus, metro and tram and stops. Moreover, the stops and the routes were chosen according to the most and the least inspected locations shared on the Facebook groups.

Additionally, a participatory ethnographic observation was deployed as a third method. Through this method, the first author could explore how people's behaviours on public transport are being shaped by the built environment, yet contested according to their needs. The studied behaviour was assessed in all manifestations, such that data was also gathered from a wide range of sources including interviews with fare evaders. In sum, the research methods generated knowledge to understand fare evasion practices and communities' organisational structures, and their deployed tools to negotiate the transport fare designs through mobilising the neo-illegal practices. However, it was still challenging to fully understand fare evasion mechanisms and dynamics. This is when the first author decided to approach and establish contacts with these groups of evaders. One of the challenges was how to approach such online groups and on ground evaders. Therefore, the first author crossed many forms of borders to collect data.

Position of the Researcher

Given the above-mentioned challenges, the first author decided to step in the fare evader's shoes and familiarise herself with the implications of fare evasion. With the research topic in mind, she became a member of the studied object. In other words, she decided to experiment with fare evasion herself to understand the participants' rationales to fare evade. From the start, her position was not neutral, and rather variant: from a researcher examining fare evasion, to a partaker in the practice. Therefore, the first author's position was multi-layered, fluid, shifting at various stages during the research. Notwithstanding that, she never became a full member of such practices, equal to the other real fare evaders. The actual results of these long periods of involvement are written to provide a description and explanation of this particular social phenomenon for outside observers. During such exploratory journeys, the

first author remained open to discovery of unexpected issues that might come to light as the study was in progress.

At the beginning of the research, the first author commuted across Brussels without purchasing tickets for six months. The experience was very stressful since she had to come up with strategies to avoid paying the fines, always being on the lookout for inspections. Also, the presence of turnstiles in metros and some tram lines limited her mobility. Walking was hence the alternative mode to travel around Brussels. Afterwards, she started to buy the 10 journeys ticket but she kept them non-validated since the fine would be only €10 if she would be caught. One of the reasons for not validating the tickets was due to short travel distances, especially when using a bus or a tram, as these do not have physical controls (e.g. ticket gates vs. proof-of-payment). For over a year, she had learned tips and tricks on how to practice fare evasion. As such, she became a gambler on public transport. A gambler is a category of fare evaders that calculate the cost of tickets and fines against the chance of being caught (Nahuis, 2009). Later in 2019, her friend introduced her to the *Contrôle STIB* app and recommended to carry the 1-journey-ticket, for €2.1, in case of sudden inspections. Out of curiosity, she started to investigate about such practice through the social media. During the fieldwork days, she made field notes about the observed behaviours, and had open discussions with the commuters. Also, she created day journals to reflect on the initial analyses of the gathered data, including interview transcripts. In parallel, she produced a map of the potential places for inspections based on the shared inspections in real-time on the Facebook groups. Mapping as tool played a major role in visualising mobility of users and inspectors in a meaningful form, as certain characteristics of mobility are seen to be unmappable. It was noticeable that most of the inspections were in the city centre. Such a map has allowed her to be precautious about inspections, avoiding the stops with a high-level of controls, carrying a non-validated ticket, and familiarising herself more with the introduction of contactless payment in case of unexpected inspections.

To take part in the practice as a whole, she shared also most of the encountered inspections on the Facebook groups or the web-application. The anonymity of the web-application allowed to share more freely the inspections with the fare evaders without fear of retaliation. It is noteworthy to mention that being part of such practice is both a technical and ethical challenge. Given these circumstances, self-reporting was difficult with such illegal behaviour. Nevertheless, the insider view allowed her to explore public transport as an infrastructure from below. Her reflective stances and observations focused on understanding (1) the participants' point of view on the need to fare evade; and (2) how trams, buses, metros, roads, etc. do not only provide an infrastructure, but also expose the users to socio-spatial inequalities and accidents.

Incorporating a transductive approach to this research, the initial findings show that fare evasion seems to occur more on buses and trams and less on metros and pre-metro

(underground tramways). The latter modes are accessed when the gates are opened, passing with other commuters, or by jumping, whereas the former modes are easily accessed without a ticket. It feels that these urban public spaces are inherent parts of the urban environment where the public has free access. They create dominant quality of urban structures and a framework for communication, free movement and other social processes. As for the users' profiles, fare evasion practice turned out not to be a racially or socially defined practice. It is, however, a practice that everyone can take part in. The author's friend, for instance, used to work in a high-level institution. Also, many members expressed that they relied on such platforms to commute for free when they were "students". In addition, the observations indicated that offline evaders are largely men, whereas the online ones are equally mixed. One can conclude that through fare evasion practices, public transport is reshaped as a public mobile space that embraces intense and intimate sites for encountering cultural diversity and negotiating the public transport as commons away from the predominant top-down approaches. The next section discusses in-depth the findings based on a triangulation of the information that was obtained through combining primary and secondary sources.

Neo-illegal virtual communities in Brussels

This section provides a brief overview of the fare concession arrangements and technological innovation to address transport equity issues, including fare evasion. Fare evasion practices, through the virtual communities, are being manifested in the shadow, to deal with the public transport in ways far from *Stib-Mivb* and government values.

Are the fare formulas fair in Brussels?

Since the second half of the 19th century, when the industry in Brussels was flourishing and the railway network provided workers an efficient means to travel, the region became an important node for daily commute (Hubert, Lebrun, Huynen and Dobruszkes, 2013). Nowadays, Brussels is still a very busy traffic junction in the Belgian transport network. However, its optimal central location also has its difficulties. Brussels' location in the federal state makes it an attractive transport node for the Flemish as well as the Walloon region. Therefore, four different public transport providers are found in the region. The National Railway Company of Belgium (*Sncb-Nmbs*) provides the national railways, *Stib-Mivb* is the transport operator of the Brussels region, providing metro, tram, and bus services. Bus services to and from Brussels, with local services within Brussels are provided by *De Lijn* (Transport Operator of Flanders) and *TEC* (Transport Operator of Wallonia). In other words, the governance in the area of mobility in Brussels suffers from several and external shortcomings such as: multiplication and dispersion of responsibilities among the region (and in the region between ministries, administration and services), *Stib-Mivb*, the municipalities; the resulting difficulty in mobilising all the actors concerned around a strategic plan and police

districts; the regional government's lack of de facto autonomy in relation to the municipal councils (Hubert, 2008).

Table 1 summarises the different *Stib-Mivb* fare structure and its relation to *TEC and DeLijn*. It is noteworthy that the authors took almost three hours to extract the fare formulas from the *Stib-Mivb* website. This implies that fare evaders' claims to be unfamiliar with the system, in spite of the instruction placards and websites, are quite valid. In general, the tariff structures are set by the regional government and not by *Stib-Mivb*, with the aim to provide accessibility for all, as explained by the Interviewees A, B and D. In fact, the "ticket fares are always decided to reach balance among users. There is no scenario for free public transit, as revenues are needed to maintain the service. However, fares should not be that expensive" expressed Interviewee A. For instance, in 2019, it was announced that *Stib-Mivb* would become free of charge for youth (under 18) and seniors (above 65) as of summer 2020 (The Brussels Times, 2019). Yet, on June 22, 2021, *Stib-Mivb* tweeted that the school season ticket will drop from €50 to only €12 Euros per year, starting July 1st, 2021. In parallel, other fare structures were introduced such as the integrated system between the four operators to allow passengers to travel in and around Brussels without any unethical behaviours. This adds to the "introduction of contactless payment, which could reduce fare evasions" expressed Interviewee D. Another fare formula is the *BRUPASS* and *BRUPASS XL* issued in February 2021 to allow commuters to access the public transport of the four operators using one ticket. Interviewee A expressed that such fare formulas will make the ticketing system less complicated, and hence people will be motivated to use the public transport more often.

However, Table 1 shows that the innovation in fare policies (including all kind of assumptions that are made about who the users are, what they want and what they are able to do) is a difficult and fragile process. One reason is that users do not always react as expected (Jensen, 2013). An example is that most of the commuters during the interviews expressed they "learned the system by doing", also confirmed by the authors' experience. In other words, users got familiarised with the system by asking the fare structures at the *Stib-Mivb* selling points, reading the brochures, or simply ask other travellers, and rarely they relied on the information shared on the website. In addition, when fare policies are actually put into use, and exposed to real life conditions, often the assumptions about the users' behaviour appear to be wrong. The everyday insurgency of fare evasion is an example of that.

Within this heterogeneity of users, "20% of passengers in Brussels fare evade for various reasons" expressed Interviewee D. He added: "if only 2% are fare evading the public transport, then it would not be a fundamental problem, as long as 98% are paying. However, the 2% are based on the fare inspections." In addition, "the system has been witnessing vandalism and violence such as constant regular drawings on the *Stib-Mivb* vehicles, or breakdowns of the ticket machines. Therefore, anti-fare evasion measures are important". For

Table 2: *The fare formulas of Stib-Mivb (excl. airport fares). See also:* *https://www.stib-mivb.be/abon_tickets.html?l=en*

Stib-Mivb fares	Support	Sales channels	Prices	Customers
Paper tickets	Paper ticket	BOOTIK - KIOSK	1 journey: €2,60 1 day: €8,00	All
Contactless payment	Credit card	Validating machine	1 journey: €2,10 1 day: €7,5	All
Season ticket	MOBIB card (€5,00)		1 month: €49,00 1 year: €499,00	All
6 to 11 years	MOBIB card	GO easy - BOOTIK	€0,00	Identity card of the parents or child, or photo
12-18 years	MOBIB card	Go Easy - BOOTIK - KIOSK-GO-SHOP	1 year: €12,00	Identity card (eID)
65+	MOBIB card	Go Easy - BOOTIK - KIOSK-GO-SHOP	1 year: €60,00 With PRRB[2]: €0,00	eID or a photograph
STIB-MIVB Preferential tariffs (PRRB)	MOBIB card	Go Easy - BOOTIK - KIOSK-GO-SHOP / Shop certified retailers	1 month: €8,10 1 year: €85,00	Up to 64 years with PRRB
GO2CITY Airport line	Contactless payment / paper ticket / MOBIB card	Go Easy - BOOTIK - KIOSK-GO-SHOP	1 journey: €7 or € 7,5 from sales outlet 10 journeys: €46,00 1 month: €60,00	Identity card (eID, new customers) or a photograph
BRUPASS	personal MOBIB or a MOBIB basic card (€ 5.00)	Go Easy - BOOTIK - KIOSK - GO, *Sncb-Nmbs, TEC, De Lijn*	1 journey: €2,40 (De Lijn does not sell this type of ticket). 1 journey: €7,80 1 month: €56, 50 1 year: €583,00	All
BRUPASS XL		Go Easy - BOOTIK - KIOSK - GO, *Sncb-Nmbs, TEC, De Lijn*	1 journey: €3,10 1 month: €78,00 1 year: €780,00	All
Sncb-Nmbs + Stib-Mivb		*Sncb-Nnmbs* ticket offices	1 month: €49,00 3 months: €137,00 1 year: €499,00	Anyone who has an *Sncb-Nmbs subscription*

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[2] Customers up to 64 years old (included) with a PRRB status recognized by their health insurance funds, veterans or equivalent (including dependents).

example, "the regular inspections prove that the system is being regulated and conditions of safety and comfort are being checked" explained one of the interviewed inspectors.

The question remains what is the alternative to fully address the needs of users? Fare-free public transport (FFPT) (Kębłowski, 2018) is out of question according to all the interviewed agencies. For instance, the new vice-president of *Stib-Mivb* has suggested rolling out free public transport for residents during the evening or on weekends. However, his socialist party has upped the ante and suggested it should be free every day (Morgan, 2019). In that sense, "if public transport is to be provided for free, how is it to be funded to sustain and even improve current levels of service? Moreover, free public transport does not exist as it has to be paid for by someone else. This means more subsidies are to be given for the transport sector, which leaves other sectors with less budget. Hence, fare abolition is a nonsensical transport instrument since *Stib-Mivb* and Brussels government co-develop different tariff measures to improve people's accessibility" expressed Interviewee D. Also, "if public transit was free, companies would not be expected to provide a quality service, hence, the system loses its value. In fact, there is no such plan in Brussels to make transit free, but fare reductions for specific categories of users are under discussion" (Interviewee C). Even though the debate of FFPT is not the focus of this article, it is important to note that one element of public transport that is thought to be a barometer of equity is collecting fares. Building on the fieldwork, those who use and need public transport the most are often within lower income brackets or have challenges accessing public transport due to the cost. "To make public transport free means an increase in subsidies; hence, taxes will increase" (ibid). In transport terms, the freedom of movement is a fundamental right for any individual (Martens and Golub, 2012). Hence, the gaps in public transport policies remain manifested by the fare evaders.

Alternatives to stop running like rabbits and making shows like clowns

"Because of the complexity of the fare formulas, we fare evade. The problem is also that not all *Stib-Mivb* sales points offer ticket subscriptions" many fare evaders, often middle-aged men from various nationalities, expressed. Others highlighted the issues related to the legal status of the inhabitants since "every passenger should present the necessary documents, such as identity card and a picture, if you do not have an eID when buying the monthly subscriptions." Fares hence create a space of immobility for certain users filled with irregularities and tensions since their movement is not an option anymore. Based on the data gathered from the web-survey, Facebook and fieldwork, it became clear that this group of users respect the law but not the underlying morality, and fare evasion is a way to take part in the society. Besides, many non-evaders expressed that "if their employers stop paying their monthly or yearly subscriptions, they will reconsider their mobility patterns." "€499,00 per year is around € 1,38 per day. Indeed, it is cheap. Yet not all passengers have this amount of money to pay

immediately. In addition, low-income families move into car ownership as a response to public transport fares explained Interviewee C.

In that sense, fare evaders attach different meanings and values to the public transport system related to cost, morality and law. This means that there is no single typical user that can be addressed easily. Users have different motives, skills and competence to permeate the regulatory framework of public transport. In this respect, improving the link between accessibility, mobility, and quality of life through techno-managerial projects to lower the gap of injustices, is not self-evident, as the capability to move does not only depend on various ticketing formulas or modes available in the market. In fact, "transport needs vary widely depending on one's constraints (including transport mode availability, residential location, and workplace). Fare evaders obviously require socio-spatial policies and interventions that grant (1) a spatial access to the public transport infrastructure and (2) sub-categorise the users not only to age or income but also to their needs. For Banister (2018), passengers should have enough knowledge, trust and reliability, to access the transport. This brings us to the case of fare evaders' online transport communities.

Given the orthodoxy of fare policies, "Brussels rabbits" have organised themselves by taking social media platforms (including Facebook, Twitter, etc.) as their institutional frame to breed seeds for social innovations. In line with Urry's mobilities definition, they mobilise on-the-ground fare evasion through virtual communication among users. Social media hence became a tool to open up public transport for all under such a regulatory framework. One good example is the *Contrôle STIB* application, the founders of which explained that the idea emerged when a lot of people were spontaneously reporting the inspections on Twitter (DHnet, 2013). They decided to centralise everything on a single platform with the purpose to prevent people from having a fine, and not to promote fraud. Afterwards, many Facebook groups started to pop up around the topic of fare evasion. "These pages on social media are not illegal. However, the practice of fare evasion is" (Interviewee D). The emergence of these neo-illegal practices hence aims to rupture the existent order. Then, they became a gap-filler, a symptom of the non-affordability and capability due to the total subordination of society under capital.

Fare evasion is a social phenomenon, communicated virtually through social media platforms. This can be operationalised by looking at the distribution of accessibility and information, and the contribution of social media networks to people's abilities to participate in neo-illegal activities. These virtual groups do encourage illegal and unethical behaviour but they are informal, as they do not have a clear organisational structure except when it comes to creating the Facebook or Twitter pages. Interviewee D expressed that "Facebook did not turn off these platforms when *Stib-Mivb* asked them to do so. One has to consider that *Stib-Mivb* nor the government have taken legal actions against these online platforms. Legal actions can be taken only when there is infringement or abuse of *Stib-Mivb*'s logo, as part of marketing

their platforms." For *Stib-Mivb*, these Facebook groups remain a proof that the system is under control, and sometimes, they share the inspection schedules to reduce the number of fare evasions. Accordingly, these groups are used as tools to improve *Stib-Mivb*'s inspection strategies. Before these groups gained attention, "inspections were about 30 minutes in each spot but now maximum 15 minutes, as the evaders are reporting the real-time inspections" explained an inspector. Fare evaders, however, perceive inspections as a source to generate more profits for *Stib-Mivb*. An inspector, who has been working for *Stib-Mivb* for 14 years, elaborated on such statement that "most passengers who choose to evade aim to go against the state's decisions. To them, paying is an issue. When they get caught, they react aggressively. And one of the reasons is the uniforms. Like we are part of the state." In addition, "the inspectors' job stops after issuing fines since they do not verify if the fines are being paid." Interviewee D explained that the act of fare evading costs the commuters more than buying their tickets or having their subscriptions. For instance, "fare evaders must pay € 214 for a second infraction or more within 24 months after the date of the previous infraction. This amount is double of the first infraction, and the amount can increase more if the traveller continues not to pay." It is, therefore "not cheaper not to buy a ticket." Accordingly, *Stib-Mivb*'s institutional frame is being shaped by the increase of safety responses, through the instalment of security cameras, gates, controls and fare concessions to seek equity. The institutional frame of the online fare evaders' communities remains limited to Facebook.

Within such small frame, the argument for the active fare evaders in the virtual communities is that public transport should be free in order to avoid disturbance in the system. However, the fare payers perceive the social acceptability of evasion in terms of a legal-illegal division. The presence of anti-evasion measures, including conducting ticket inspections, could normalise the users' responsibilities and correct the deviant behaviour. Hence, controls would foster obedience. Here the first author could relate to her experience and to the observations that, in moment of controls, users quickly validate their tickets.

Furthermore, there are distinguishing factors motivating the decision to pay or not, which reflect values and attitudes or ideologies of the riders. Based on the interviews and the web-survey, many fraudsters clarified that "the deliberate act of not paying the fares means there are gaps in the system and the evaders are the symptoms of the erosion of public transport as a shareable infrastructure for all." Others expressed that "it is unjust to pay for the public transport when they are being taxed" since "public transport fares are a second tax."

Fare evasion could also be "out of curiosity", "for fun", "to put pressure on the authorities since the tickets are expensive", "for short distances", "to fight for mobility justice", "the infrastructure is not well-maintained", "as an act of resilience for the low-income and homeless users", "lack of knowledge on special pricing systems or opposition to their complexity". Mobility, in that sense, remains a right for everyone, yet a lot of barriers are being implemented that create immobility. Many fare evaders expressed that the excluded users

found a way to be part of the formal society by taking part in these neo-illegal transport communities, and to avoid getting caught. Moreover, many fare evaders explained the non-intended fare evasion, which occurs when a user has a valid ticket but there are technical failures. For instance, at "the moment of technical failure in a metro station, all gates are opened. This means *Stib-Mivb* is offering a free transport" wrote a young man on Facebook. Therefore, "the gates create sense of unsafety since the fare payers are intimidated by those crossing the gates with them. Gates also imply a sense of enclosure when the movement should be free."

Based on the web-survey and interviews, the term "cheat" was never used for people who evaded the fare incidentally, only for evaders. That vocabulary itself has moral implications. Even though these narratives portrayed a portion of fare evaders positively, it is not even remotely a subversive discourse. Such discourse rewards the users who intended to pay the fare with mercy, which is a form of moral regulation. Even though they may have broken the rule by accident, they had no intention of breaking neoliberal norms of consumption and individual responsibility. In this regard, environmental externalities and considerations affect fare evasion practices, such as individuals' incomes, the time available and how they can organise it, their skills and abilities to master the system and its operation (for example, the ability to understand how public transport works) and being mentally and physically healthy able to access transport.

One justification for the existence of neo-illegal practices and communities is the way they contest the public mobile space for all. However, to what extent are they being socially innovative in raising the voice of the voiceless and in contesting public transport as commons? And can fare evasion be used as a discursive tool to further other political agendas? Many evaders expressed during the fieldwork and web-survey that these groups serve to raise the voice of the voiceless. But is this claim true? A young woman wrote in *Contrôle de la Stib:* "instead of checking at every stop if there are controls every time I take the bus, I check this group. Thank you for being alive." These transport communities became special cases of undesired travellers, which utilise tools, e.g. social media platforms, in novel ways to create new opportunities to fight inequalities, deprivation, and other crisis mechanisms to offer recipes to improve the conditions of excluded individuals and communities. The use of social media hence supported the development of bonding and bridging social capital, and activated collective practices around its issue of concern. Yet, these virtual communities are socio-spatially limited since not all the marginalised users have access to the internet or to smartphones. Many (non)members expressed during the interviews that "these groups mobilise the well-connected users but what if there was no signal? Then, they should reconsider strategies to mobilise on-the-ground fare evasion." Therefore, mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion are created among the fare evaders. Offline fare evaders for example will be the gamblers on the transport system, unlike the online fraudsters who are aware of

the inspections that are happening. Based on the ethnographic observations, a group of two to three fare evaders, who might know each other or not, wait to cross together the gate with other passengers with valid tickets. They act in solidarity among each other. Also, "the online groups do not explain how to leave a station with gates. Therefore, fare evasion is a skill" explained a young fare evader during the fieldwork.

In addition, these communities became a space to communicate information also about *Stib-Mivb* strikes, loss of personal belongings, etc. A solidary started to exist among the users. Also important is that fare evaders now speak the same language. They refer for instance by grey to the inspectors, blue to the police. Quoting a few of the written posts "*Merode* is upgraded into a full stars metro stop," "it is a beautiful day with a lot of blue everywhere" or "watch out at *Botanique* stop, the greys are under the blue sky." In their extraordinary attempts to create new public transport arrangements, such initiatives demonstrated actively the gaps in the existing order. These innovative neo-illegal practices are markers for wider socio-political transformation. However, they are limited in their socio-political and legal implications.

Conclusions

This article proposed to move beyond the mainstream perspectives on fare evaders as the punished deviated group on public transport and/or considered criminals for their unethical behaviours. The article explored the empirical case of Brussels, which showed a different story about fare evasion from the perspective of the community to the officials, in other words, the policy-driven ones. The insurgencies of fare evasion at the fringe of SI are always specific and particular. They turn into a demand for inclusion on an equal base for all people irrespective of gender, religion, skin colour, belief systems, etc. Also, they operate at a distance from the formal-legal framework and aim at transforming the instituted forms. To put it simply, these practices start from the dark side of a city, from the contestation of public transport as public space, and hold the seeds for a social turn to re-institutionalise the transport policies. From a social innovation research perspective, the article sees planning practice, in our case transport planning, as an inherently institutionalised practice. Within this perspective, the article moves beyond mainstream fare evasion studies, both in its analysis of SI experiences and in its methodological approaches. This follows from the fact that SI treats the dynamics of social and personal relations across scales as intrinsically important to building shared values, meeting needs, and empowering communities.

In Brussels, the actors' (fare evaders) initiatives (fare evasion practices and virtual community platforms) that exist at the margins in the society – as both illegal and legal practices – emerged to disrupt and challenge current hegemonic instruments. Fare evaders' platforms create, transform, and/or reproduce new instruments within the hegemonic institutional frames, guided by multiple social rationalities rather than technical ones. They

also showed that seeking mobility justice in transport through techno-managerial investments did not enhance the capabilities of those who need it the most. Being innovative on their own, the latter initiated new autonomous social practices that arise from a complex interaction between virtual spaces of communication and concrete actions in real urban spaces. A form of transport community was created to empower the passengers to access public transport infrastructure without paying. De facto they have the potential to open up pathways towards making public transport a truly public infrastructure and collective endeavour.

However, due to their neo-illegal status, these initiatives remain at the fringe of social innovation (below the micro level) and cannot scale up. One reason is that these actors did not develop different institutional frames other than the social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter). Under such circumstances, these prefigurative practices continued to build up an informal knowledge network to connect different categories of users through virtual spaces of communication and concrete action to nurture public transport as commons. The use of online technologies as mobile methods among different virtual groups was a way to decentralise online communication on fare evasion, to reflect on the available transport instruments and to different extents being informed and constrained by them.

Moreover, they hardly provoked socioeconomic and political transformations, due to their illegal status, making their innovation rather limited. Also, the relevant agencies (Brussels Ministry of Mobility and *Stib-Mivb)* developed their instruments and institutional frames of public safety such as an increase in anti-fare evasion measures including inspections, turnstiles, and/or new fare concession arrangements. As such, the institutional frame (social media platforms) of these online communities does not provoke structural changes in the fare policies. Therefore, the fare evaders' contestations of public transport as commons remain limited. This is due not only to their neo-illegal status but also to the political-economy of transport. The latter is one of the reasons why the gaps of inequality are widening in transport, regardless of the efforts of the governmental bodies to promote a sufficient level of access for all under most circumstances. Immobilities are hence created. A way forward to achieve a fairer transport system and mobility for all could emerge when policy makers reconsider these deviant users as valid stakeholders that contest gaps in the transport policies.

Acknowledgements

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