Regulating public spaces: the ambiguous role played by new professions

Jacques de Maillard

Despite a hiatus in the debate on community policing in France, the "new professions" involved in regulating public order have been the subject of renewed interest of late. Jacques de Maillard has studied the work of correspondants de nuit *("night-time mediators") in Paris, and here describes how an alternative – a compromise between repression and abandonment – has been sought.*

In the early 1990s, initiatives to manage conflict in public places, on public transport and in social-housing neighbourhoods began to (re)surface in France. Since then, following a number of national policy initiatives (the youth employment programme in particular), the creation of subsidised jobs (*emplois aidés*) and innovative measures at local level, a host of new professions have come into being, for which there exist a wide variety of statuses, contract types, titles (ranging from *correspondant de nuit*, literally "night-time correspondent" – but better translated as "night-time mediator" – to *médiateur urbain*, literally "urban mediator") and tasks (from reminding citizens of the rules to supporting or assisting individuals). Here, we aim to analyse the issues raised by these new activities, situated midway between prevention and safety, and the contribution they make to tackling antisocial behaviour, helping individuals, and ensuring the safety of urban spaces. Our arguments are intended to be general rather than specific, and build on research conducted for Paris City Council into its *correspondants de nuits* initiative. This scheme was introduced in 2004 under direct council control (the mediators are effectively civil servants employed directly by the city council), and has gradually been extended: there are now 135 mediators operating in 9 of the city's 20 *arrondissements* (administrative districts).[1] Do these new activities represent a new way of policing the city? How do they help maintain public order in urban environments? How do the methods of maintaining order employed fit in with the work of public safety professionals, and how are they viewed by local residents? Finally, how is a connection with a given local area – which is at the heart of this initiative, and also what sets it apart from other measures – achieved?
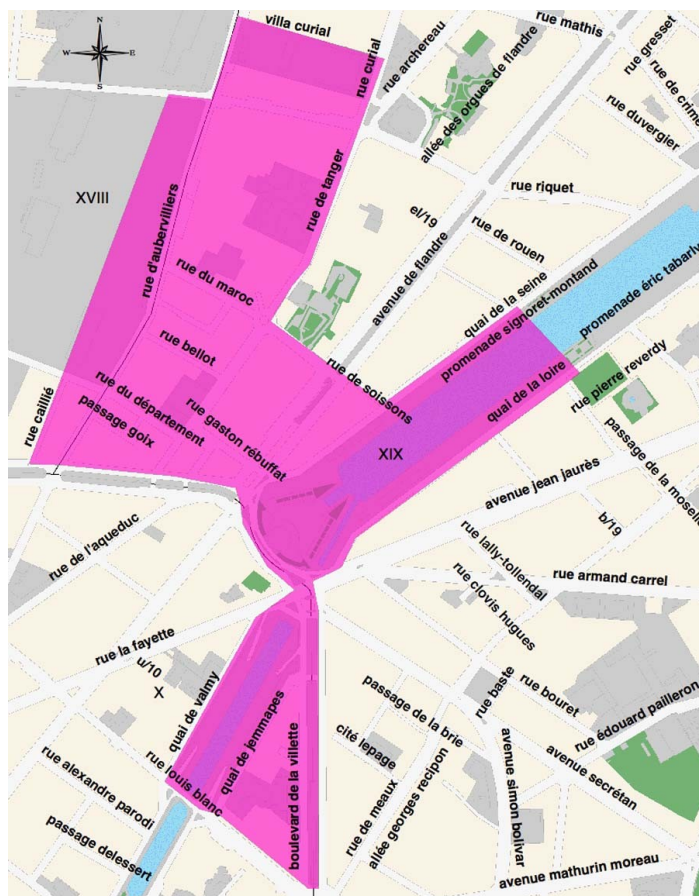
Monitoring urban public spaces

These mediators are supposed to contribute to the quality of urban public spaces in three different ways: by providing a visible and regular presence; by monitoring developments from a technical standpoint; and by reminding citizens of the rules governing the public spaces they use. Regarding the first of these points, their continuous presence and their high visibility, resulting from the uniforms they wear, means they provide a calming presence in public spaces at times of day that can be a source of unease for the wider population. Second, constantly monitoring technical developments enables public bodies to remain responsive with regard to degradation – a factor

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[1] Jacques de Maillard and Patricia Bénec'h-Le Roux, 2011, "Évaluation de l'activité des correspondants de nuit de la Ville de Paris", CESDIP/Mairie de Paris, *Études et données pénales*, no. 111. For a summarised presentation of this research, see: Jacques de Maillard, 2012 "Les correspondants de nuit, nouveaux modes de régulation de l'espace public ?", *Questions pénales*, vol. 35, no. 4.

which we know, following Wilson and Kelling's work on the "broken windows" theory,[2] is essential to maintaining a feeling of security among the population. Finally, the emphasis on compliance with rules, which Sebastian Roché[3] describes as respect for "usage rules" or for "public order" is at the heart of their repertoire of actions.

As we can see, mediators' activities are therefore focused on ensuring a presence in public spaces. Each area "base" (there are nine different "bases" in Paris) is made up of 14 to 18 mediators who operate between 4 p.m. and midnight every day of the year. It must be possible for each area to be covered by foot patrols, in order to foster geographical proximity with the public (see, for example, the area covered by the Stalingrad base, centred on the square of the same name in the 19th *arrondissement*, in the north-east of the city). More specifically, mediators patrol in groups (of two to four) for approximately five hours each night (with the rest of the session devoted to administrative work and briefing/debriefing).

Area covered by the Stalingrad base (19th *arrondissement*)

Based on established contacts and a detailed knowledge of their areas, mediators help to keep the peace in a more or less direct way: first of all, they provide general feedback on the state of the neighbourhood, notify partner bodies of any public disorder situations, and report any damage to the local environment – dumping of rubbish, etc. Second, their presence acts as a deterrent in public spaces by patrolling in places and at times that are seen as particularly sensitive. Third, they can resolve conflicts in the public space, reduce antisocial behaviour through dialogue and remind users of the rules that apply to public spaces. Fourth, they provide reassurance by comforting people who have experienced minor trauma or who feel threatened, simply through their presence or through

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[2]   Taken from the title of their now famous article published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1982.

[3]   Roché, S. 2002. *Tolérance zéro ? Incivilités et insécurité*, Paris: Odile Jacob.

dialogue. Finally, and more rarely, they may also exercise protection-related activities – for example, by accompanying a person at risk or who feels threatened.

In areas where relations are particularly strained, where the police essentially patrol in motor vehicles, *correspondants de nuit* and other mediators offer a compromise between nothing (no public intervention, despite appeals from residents) and too much (forceful intervention by the police for minor incidents). At the very least, they facilitate the coexistence of different uses of public space; at best, they help to forge social ties by establishing contact with populations that are somewhat marginalised (such as homeless people) or isolated (some elderly people). The success of their actions is without doubt dependent on the (challenging) reconciliation of two aspects: ensuring compliance with rules, while avoiding coming across as mere law enforcement agents.

Poorly defined interpersonal skills

To fulfil their missions, these mediators must build relationships with the local population and make themselves accessible and visible on the street. They must engage with people with very different cultural and social backgrounds. Establishing contact with a homeless man who does not speak French, explaining what their job involves to someone in the street, and trying to make contact with indifferent or even hostile young people do not all call upon the same skills and mindsets. It is by using different resources, drawn mainly from personal experience (charm and charisma, linguistic and cultural proximity, authority through age, performing minor favours, shared similar tastes, using humour, etc.) that these mediators manage – with greater or lesser ease – to make contact with the public. Thus, although they are generally older than their target audience, night-time mediators nonetheless tend to share some of the same tastes and interests with regard to clothing, music and sport, for instance; discussing football scores or basketball can be ways of making connections during patrols. Gender can also be a useful resource.

Women represent a minority of night-time mediators (about 25%). Being a girl can, however, be an asset for mediators: it makes it possible to "demasculinise" interactions, by changing the balance of power, and make contact on a different register. What all these skills have in common is an overarching ability to adapt to conditions on the ground, detect potential sticking points, and find the right register, which will vary according to the circumstances and according to the repertoire of resources available. This involves constantly juggling between proximity and distance: knowing how to foster a certain friendliness with young people on the one hand, but avoiding any overfamiliarity or "cronyism" on the other.[4] These contacts sometimes result in mediators not strictly complying with the rules laid down by their superiors: they might, for example, smoke a cigarette with young people (which is prohibited), or even offer them a cigarette, in order to create a form of proximity that enables them to establish a dialogue.

The fact that these skills are difficult to "institutionalise" and "professionalise" raises the question of how mediators are trained: although they benefit from a three-month course that includes modules on conflict management, there is an issue concerning the gap between the content of the training course and the skills actually required on the ground. The adjustment that mediators must make in order to adapt to their area raises questions about the recruitment process and, in particular, the diversity of the teams. In order to meet the many different requirements made of them, team members need to complement one another and know how to take advantage of their differences in terms of age, gender, social background, ethnic background or religion. Belonging to a public body – in this case, Paris City Council – undeniably provides additional resources: it makes for easier identification by partners, facilitates contacts with public services, and enables mediators to offer a wide range of services.

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[4]   See: Astier, I. 2007. *Les nouvelles règles du social*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France; or, on the subject of proximity in social work, Breviglieri, M. 2005. "Bienfaits et méfaits de la proximité dans le travail social", in J. Ion (ed.), *Le Travail social en débats*, Paris: La Découverte, pp. 219–234.

The legitimacy and authority of these "in-between" professions

Despite all this, these new professions are struggling to establish a clear place for themselves in the urban environment, for reasons related to both the nature of the situations they have to deal with (e.g. major confrontations between residents and young people, conflicts over the use of certain facilities) and their scope for action.

First of all, the line between "doing nothing" and "doing too much" is a fine one, especially in Paris, where there is a relatively dense institutional context. It is clear that night-time mediators are rarely called upon by other public services, retailers or even residents, who may have some difficulty in identifying their precise role. Several facilities managers have said that they do not call the *correspondants de nuit* when there is a problem, either because they do not think to, or because they feel that there are other bodies to perform their role.

The second of these uncertainties is linked to the difficult task of mediation, which involves imposing authority without resorting to coercion. Mediators typically have a choice between reprimanding, albeit unsuccessfully (e.g. when someone rides a scooter in a pedestrian area), or not reprimanding (e.g. by not asking someone to turn down loud music that is annoying residents) so as not to jeopardise good relationships that may have taken a great deal of effort to establish. This difficulty is even more pronounced in places affected by relatively long-standing antisocial behaviour problems (e.g. sports facilities, public gardens, social-housing areas where there is a mistrust of public authorities). In extremely tense situations, intervening to enforce a rule is not an easy matter if one does not have the official authority to sanction antisocial or criminal behaviour. Here, it should be noted that night-time mediators in Paris do have such official authority, but they choose not to exercise it so as not to appear to be law enforcement officers, which might blur their public image. Furthermore, this relative powerlessness also affects other professionals, such as City of Paris safety inspectors and even police officers. Indeed, some of the sites we investigated (such as Square Léon in the Goutte d'Or neighbourhood in the 18th *arrondissement*, or Maurice Berlemont sports centre in the Faubourg du Temple district in the 11th *arrondissement*) were the focus of tensions between some young people and the authorities, where antisocial behaviour, disregard for rules and delinquency persisted despite the interventions of these various public bodies. A lack of coordination, a resistance to authority in certain areas and the difficulty involved in gauging the appropriate public response (which may range from punitive measures to reminders of rules or even support) are just some of the challenges facing public bodies.

Finally, we know that these areas are beleaguered by significant generational, social or even ethnic divisions, and that, therefore, expectations of public authorities differ greatly. This means that, even in areas where mediators are successful in establishing solid, peaceful day-to-day contact with disaffected young people on the streets, their work is not viewed favourably by some of the local residents who observe their actions; in their opinion, mediators do not put enough distance between themselves and young people, leading to overfamiliarity. In fact, mediators are caught in the middle of a complex and contradictory network of relationships: if they shake hands with young people, they risk being perceived as being "on their side" by the rest of the population; if they play the authority card, they risk being rejected by young people, who will refuse to take orders from them. They are on a tightrope, faced with territorial antagonisms on both sides that must be dealt with.

These activities therefore raise the question of how to devise methods for constructing urban hospitality and the cohabitation of populations with conflicting aspirations. They question the role of public actors in regulating such areas, at the interface between the private and public domains. The implementation of these activities means reconciling contradictory approaches: being recognised and appreciated within the local area, while avoiding overfamiliarity with the local population; combining an institutional mandate with a certain flexibility in interventions; ensuring compliance with the rules while being able to listen to requests. It is in this delicate balance,

dependent on many factors (institutional support, quality and complementarity of recruitment, effective line management), that lies the success of these new activities for regulating public spaces.

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