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Comments by John Postill
on the EASA Media Anthropology Working Paper

"Studying youth in the Media City: Multi-sited reflections"

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Available at: http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars

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The stated aim of this working paper is to explore 'the methodological challenges of studying youth in the contemporary media city' (p. 1). To do so the authors draw from ethnographic research among young people in the inner cities areas of Malmi (Helsinki) and Tower Hamlets (London). Their main argument is that young people living in 'media cities' like London or Helsinki organise their lives 'around the complex and contested dynamic between physical and virtual spaces, a dynamic that - by definition – calls for a multi-sited approach to research' (p. 1).

The authors divide the paper into three main parts, dealing respectively with (1) the question of what a media city is, (2) the physical and virtual dimensions of multi-sited research among young denizens of media cities, and (3) the challenges and opportunities offered by this kind of research (p. 2).

In the introductory section, the aims and main thesis are spelled out, along with the claim that an ethnographic approach is needed that will recognise that space and social life are today inextricably entwined 'and in constant interaction' (p. 1).

There follows a section titled "The media city: a multi-faceted context for the study of urban youth". This section starts with reference to Scott McQuire's (2008) observation that the history of the modern media city dates back to the mid-C19, which created a contrast between static media objects and structures (billboards, cinemas, newspaper peddlers) and mobile city residents. This relationship is now being eroded with the emergence of 'hybrid spatialities' that trouble the dichotomy. As the authors put it: 'Today, when you step onto a bus, instead of people look out the window, you see people staring at their mobile devices'. As a result, many of us now experience the city 'through private screens' which we then return to the public domain 'through image sharing' (p. 3). In this context, young people find themselves right at the centre of both 'romanticising and pathologising images' of the media city. In other words, they are constructed by older city dwellers, including the media, as both vulnerable and threatening, with CCTV and other technologies used to keep track of them (pp. 3-4).

The next section, "Physical spaces", argues that the modern city is an amalgam of the physical and the virtual, of public, semi-public and private spaces - an amalgam that is constantly being (re)negotiated (p. 5). Out of this mix, 'the street' is the most visible space, both in its obvious transit function and as a key discursive site attracting a great deal of mainstream media attention, with the topic of 'street crime' being a favourite staple (p. 5). So the ethnographers went out looking of young people in the streets of Tower Hamlets and Malmi. There was a complication, however: 'they weren't there' (p. 5). It turned out that the youths found the street 'too public, too controlled', e.g. in London's post-7/7 climate, most of the Muslim boys have been regularly stopped and searched from the age of 10. As a result, the researchers had to cast the net wider and search for research participants beyond the streets, in semi-public spaces such as libraries, youth clubs, estate

courtyards and parks. Public libraries became particularly interesting sites to observe 'spaces of negotiation' in which youth engage in the 'subtle fight for their right to public space', sometimes engaging in transgressive practices, e.g. Muslim boys and girls 'cuddling on the sofas' (pp. 6-7). In addition, the library media (books, mags, videos, computers) allowed them to escape from the constrictions of their daily lives to 'a virtual world of stories, fantasies and dreams' (p. 7). Although the libraries impose strict rules, these are nonetheless safe places. By contrast, the much less controlled estate courtyards and parks were attractive precisely because they were beyond the reach of adult - including police - surveillance (p. 8). These are male-dominated spaces in which young Muslim women are rarely seen. The section ends by contrasting the mainstream media portrayal of 'a generation whose socialisation has utterly failed' with the ethnographic experience of a far more variagated social life that is not primarily about 'the streets' (p. 8).

We then move to young people's "Virtual spaces" in the following section. The authors start by suggesting that media are 'places of imagination that encompass different practices of social life' (p. 8). Although today's 'hybrid media' landscapes offer youths a range of opportunities to range beyond their physical settings, e.g. via the blogs and vlogs of young 'self-made celebrities' (p. 9), these virtual spaces, too, are controlled and shaped by adult supervision. After all, they are regarded as 'vulnerable members of a media city' (p. 10). Adding to this the dynamics of peer pressure, youths have to make 'everyday ethical decisions' about their social media interactions: what pictures to share, how to respond to comments, etc. What emerges is a discrepancy between mainstream media representations of these areas and the more nuance, multiply mediated emic understanding of their young residents.

The paper ends with the section "Multi-sited methodological reflections". The authors emphasise, among others, the following points:

  - Because the youths 'weren't there', the fieldworkers had to branch out to other public and semi-public spaces occupied by them.
  - There are few spaces left, e.g. public libraries, where young people attain some degree of autonomy, as well as safety, allowing them 'to experience the media city via media and internet access' (p. 13).
  - This poses ethical challenges for ethnographers, as they could be impinging upon these rare havens.
  - Multi-sitedness takes places 'simultaneously in physical and virtual spaces' (p. 13, see Massey 1992).
  - The right to use the media city is unevenly distributed among different generations.
  - Constructing an ethnographic field is always an unfinished business. Interestingly, the more 'boundless' the setting (e.g. the street), the more boundaries researchers are likely to face in the field.

I have over a dozen questions or comments about this fascinating paper, but in the interest of time and broader seminar participation, I'll just limit myself to a few issues:

1. I find the account of how the fieldworkers had to move 'beyond the streets' to find research participants in libraries, parks, estates, etc, really interesting. I think it works very well as a narrative device to explore both the ethnographic construction of the field and also how young people themselves work to create and maintain sites of mediated sociality. Two birds with one stone. The one-line paragraph 'But they weren't there' (p. 6) is a highly effective way of breaking the narrative to introduce an element of surprise and a challenge, an empirical and theoretical problem, that the rest of the paper then addresses.

2. That said, I'm wondering what the notion of 'multi-sited ethnography' (Marcus 1995) brings to the discussion at this point in time, almost 20 years after it was first proposed. Haven't we established its usefulness time and again since then? Is there a need to reiterate the value of such a well known concept? What newer methodological developments can this research into young people living in urban areas contribute to?

3. To me, the elephant in the room in this working paper is class (or, if you prefer, social and economic inequality). For instance, when the authors argue that young people are portrayed by the mainstream media as both vulnerable and threatening, doesn't this apply much more strongly to youths (especially Muslim and/or black males) in marginalised inner city areas such as Malmi or Tower Hamlets than it does to rich kids in affluent neighbourhoods? What do we actually know about the similarities and contrasts across divides of wealth and class? We hear that the right to use the media city is unevenly distributed among the generations, but doesn't the same point apply to different socioeconomic classes?

4. I find there is a tension (by no means unique to this paper, we're all struggling with it) between 'the virtual' and 'the physical' -- a key analytical distinction that helps the authors divide the paper into separate sections and that crops up throughout the paper. On the one hand, the paper argues that we now live in 'hybrid media' environments in which the virtual and the physical, as well as mainstream and social media, are inextricably entangled. On the other, 'the mainstream media' portray young people in certain ways -- and this contrasts with their own understanding of their live -- whilst online experiences allow people to escape, to some extent, from their bounded physical spaces. So how do we conceptualise not only the hybridity, but also the segmentation (or differentiation), of these variously mediated experiences?

5. The authors make the point that young people's voices are rarely heard in the mainstream media, yet this something I missed in the paper itself: the backgrounds, voices, stories, experiences of some of the research participants. Of course, there is only so much one can fit into a meta-ethnographic paper such as this one, but I think it would've helped the argument to hear what they had to say about their media practices and forms of sociality. Perhaps they could tell us a little more about them in this seminar?

Many thanks for a thought-provoking paper.

John Postill