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Studying Youth in the Media City: Multi-sited Reflections

By
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"Studying youth in the Media City: Multi-sited reflections"
by Johanna Sumiala, Titus Hjelm, Minttu Tikka and Leena Suurpää

Available at: http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars (PDF, 100 KB)

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

Johanna Sumiala (johanna.sumiala@helsinki.fi)   **Feb 27**
Dear John and the list members,

First of all, many thanks for John's comments. We find them extremely insightful and helpful as we keep working on this project both in terms of developing its theoretical reference points and empirical interpretations. Just to give all the seminar participants a bit of context, the project is still very much ongoing. Our field work in London is not finished yet and in Malmi, we are still in the process of analyzing the materials gathered in the field(s). Hence, our comments at this stage focus more on some of the theoretical and methodological framings of the paper, not so much the empirical findings as such (as

our reflections are still rather preliminary stage).

Let us start with John's comment on the usefulness and relevance of applying multi-sited ethnography as our methodological framework for this paper. As well known the debate around Marcus and his conception of multi-sited ethnography has been massive during the last decade. In that sense, we may well ask what new does it bring to this study. We also acknowledge a 'risk' of getting stuck with endless debates over more or less justified interpretations and applications of multi-sitedness. And yet, we wanted to apply this concept to our particular interdisciplinary reflections. The rational behind this was that to our knowledge (please inform us if we have missed something relevant!) not much current research has been carried out with an explicit effort to bring the paradigms of youth studies and media (anthropological) studies together. Multi-sited ethnography as an approach of many sites (including methodological and conceptual as well as empirical and material) provided a fruitful way to bring the two together to a closer scholarly dialogue with each other. (The present day gap between media (anthropology) and youth studies may be perceived odd also from the perspective of history. Strong historical ties exist when it comes to shared research traditions and links – namely the Birmingham school.) In our view, also the lively discussion on multi-sited nature of contemporary mobile live (see e.g. Urry) often carried out in the frame of transnational, diaspora and/or migration studies points to a need for new avenues of thinking about the complex interplay between media and youth in such settings as a media city.

This said, in this project we approached the idea of multi-sitedness, perhaps not so much as a fixed approach, but rather as an empirical starting point and metaphorical inspiration, if you will. The more we learnt about our fields in London and Tower Hamlets, the more profoundly we understood the multi-sited character of youth lives in a media city. So, in addition to our interdisciplinary gaze to the concept of multi-sitedness, including also a particular quest for the methodological reflexivity and openness vis-à-vis the field, it was very much our empirical reality that encouraged us to broaden our scope of the field from streets to other public and semi-public sites as well as the media. And when we think of it, media city, the conceptual context of this study, is unavoidably multi-sited. Even the concept in itself consists of elements of multiple spatializations (media and city)

The second point in John's comments (point number 3) is the tension between 'the virtual' and 'the physical'. The question is indeed, 'how do we conceptualise not only the hybridity, but also the segmentation (or differentiation), of these variously mediated experiences?' The discussions we have had in our research group about this analytical distinction have been many, to say the least. We've tried out 'online' and 'offline', but felt it didn't really solve the fundamental philosophical problems related to the dynamics between the two dimensions of the social reality. While, we all recognize the problematic nature this analytical distinction carries within (there is an explicit dualism in it, often this distinction is embedded in hierarchical assumptions of 'physical' being more 'real' or 'authentic' than the 'virtual', sometimes the 'virtual' is claimed to replace the 'physical' as a 'primary' reality, how to define the line between the two, where does the 'virtual'

end and imaginary begin and so forth…), we still believe there is empirical value in thinking in terms of this dynamic (even though imperfect). Our ethnographic challenge is thus, HOW this interplay between 'physical' and 'virtual' is acted out in the lives of young people.

Furthermore, John makes a very relevant point about the contradictory character of the multi-sitedness associated to the realm of 'physical' and 'virtual'. On one hand, there is a growing mobility of young people, both in physical and in virtual sense, and on the other hand, increasing marginalization and control of different groups of people – particularly those categorized as "minorities" of different sort is emerging. So to refer to John's 'elephant in the room', a theme we wish to come back later as the seminar matures, although not very explicit in this paper, we certainly acknowledge that many unwritten rules, social agreements, gendered, age-based and racialized hierarchies and inter-generational power relations affect the ways in which young people may (or may not) occupy different spaces in the media city. At this stage of the project, we can only say that as we continue our fieldwork and analysis of how these spatializations in a media city take place in the lives of young people, we will definitely pay attention to those issues related equality and inequality as well as belonging and segregation. The overall 'spatial turn' in humanities and social sciences has provided us rich literature to discuss with.

With these preliminary responses we wish to open the floor to the other participants to join in.

With best regards,

On behalf of the research team
Johanna Sumiala

Veronica Barassi (v.barassi@gold.ac.uk)   **Feb 27**
Dear All,
I would like to thank John for his comments and Joanna for her response and take the opportunity to open the discussion to all.

It seems to me that there are different issues at stake and that are worth exploring: from the challenges and meanings of multisited ethnographic practice to the concept of 'media city' and 'virtual environments'.

I am looking forward to receiving your comments, ideas and contributions.
all the best
Veronica

Sally Applin (saa26@kent.ac.uk)   **Feb 27**

Hi,

For multisitedness issues, you might want to look at my work with Mike Fischer on PolySocial Reality (PoSR). PoSR is a framework modeling the types of connections you are describing, particularly with the real/virtual issues. More at http://www.posr.org and http://posr.org/wiki/Publications

In particular, you might find these papers useful:

(Applin and Fischer 2011) A Cultural Perspective on Mixed, Dual and Blended Reality

This paper is an anthropological perspective on the impact of Dual, Mixed Reality and 'PolySocial Reality' (PoSR) on Location Awareness and other applications in Smart Environments.

http://www.dfki.de/LAMDa/accepted/ACulturalPerspective.pdf

(Applin and Fischer 2011) Pervasive Computing in Time and Space: The Culture and Context of 'Place' Integration

We consider some possible broad changes that may impact society as a whole as a result of widespread integration of full-spectrum deployed pervasive computing technologies. Our approach considers design challenges for successfully developing and integrating pervasive technologies into culture and society.

http://anthropunk.com/Files/Applin_Fischer_PervasiveComputingInTimeAndSpace.pdf

(Appiin and Fischer 2013) Asynchronous adaptations to complex social interactions

In this article we explore how multiplexed networked individuated communications are creating new contexts for human behavior within communities, particularly noting the shift from synchronous to asynchronous communication as an adaptation.

http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/xpl/articleDetails.jsp?reload=true&arnumber=6679308

-Sally

Johanna Sumiala (johanna.sumiala@helsinki.fi)   **Mar 4**

Dear list members,

Let me include some additional reflections from our colleague Titus Hjelm.

Best,

Johanna

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First, thank you to John and everyone else for valuable comments and advice. I just wanted to add a couple of observations to John's 'elephant in the room', ie. our (non)engagement with social class and/or inequality.

The class aspect is definitely present every day in our fieldwork, probably more starkly so in Tower Hamlets than Malmi (and I can really only speak properly about the former). Its relative absence in the paper is more of a function of focus rather than ignorance or indifference, but the point is well taken that class should feature in discussions about multi-sitedness and the virtual/physical distinction. On the other hand, the research design itself offers little help in answering the question 'what do we actually know about the similarities and contrasts across divides of wealth and class'? We welcome any pointers to existing research (if any?) exploring this aspect.

Some of the issues we do mention: the tendency to avoid the streets was especially prominent among Muslim males in Tower Hamlets. Although this is an issue of both class and ethnicity, it seems to be a disproportionally common experience among young Muslim men. Interestingly, the local newspaper East End Life, although otherwise conscious of the ethnic diversity (less so of the economic deprivation) in the borough, largely reproduces the mainstream media's discourse on youth as a social problem. The 'postcode wars' are another aspect largely confined to deprived areas. Further, in deprived areas families live in cramped conditions. Muslim families are on the average larger, so among the more derived population boys especially feel that public and semi-public spaces are the only places where they can spend their days. In a telling quote, one young Muslim man remarked: 'the girls can always stay inside in the kitchen, but we have no place at home, we have to come out'. 'Private' space was never part of our research remit, but it also features in contexts where deprivation 'forces' presence in public and semi-public spaces. Only the better off have their own rooms where they can barricade with a connected game console.

In terms of engagement in the virtual street and/or city, class is a factor, but perhaps less so than expected—at least in terms of access. Many of the kids whose parents are either working class or unemployed have fancy smart phones nevertheless. With the older (16+) youth these might have been paid by own work—I don't have sufficient information to generalise even about the group that I have been observing—but I am reminded of a quotation in Naomi Klein's No Logo, by an American shoe shop owner, but which I think applies to our situation as well:

'I'm always forced to face the fact that I make my money from poor people. A lot of them are on welfare. Sometimes a mother will come in here with a kid, and the kid is dirty and poorly dressed. But the kid wants a hundred-twenty-buck pair of shoes and that

stupid mother buys them for him. I can feel that kid's inner need—this desire to own these things and have the feelings that go with them—but it hurts me that this is the way things are' (Klein 2000, 370).

There are, however, instances where the experiences of physical space constrain experiences of virtual space. Some of the kids don't have fancy smart phones, not because they don't want them or think them nice and useful, but because of fear of being mugged. This, again, is most evident among young men from ethnic and economically deprived backgrounds—ie. the population most likely to be victim of property and violent crime.

We know little about the class aspects of virtual 'hanging around'. What are the venues, who are the people? There is some indication that the young people's social media friendships largely overlap with the 'physical' friendship profiles—the one exception being friends in online games, which remain more anonymous and (judging from the limited number of discussions I have had) almost exclusively virtual.

In sum, class is important and should and will feature more in our analysis. The observations in the field, even if not 'representative' in the hallowed traditions of class analysis, confirm its importance. In terms of multi-sitedness, class and inequality are the framework that define (if not quite determine) the spaces that young people inhabit in the media city. The dialectic of everyday life is enacted in the virtual reproduction of complex class and ethnic positions on the one hand, and physical reproduction—the 'habitus', if you will—of virtual and discursive class identities, on the other.

As always, all comments and suggestions welcome.

On behalf of the research team
Titus Hjelm

Sally Applin (saa26@kent.ac.uk)   **Mar 5**
Dear List,

John has requested that I post a follow-up comment or question to my post to help spark some discussion:

The authors write:

To continue this line of thinking, when the media city is conceptualised as the primary research field, the hazardous and unanticipated dimension of multi-sited ethnographic work becomes even more prominent. This suggests a constitution of 'the field' as something that is under constant construction. Our experience is that the more seemingly 'boundless' the research setting is (as the street is in our case), the more numerous the boundaries that researchers may face during their fieldwork (from physical street to semi-

public places and virtual spaces).

This is in part why I pointed the authors to our work on PolySocial Reality (PoSR): http://www.posr.org

One cannot, with multi-sitedness (particularly as it relates to the network) ever get anything close to a full ethnography. Because the field (and I would argue here that it has always been under constant construction, just slower (more on that in my upcoming doctoral thesis, which I am just finishing)) is in fact under constant construction, it would be that no ethnography was ever 'full' or 'complete' -- or even, dare I say it, fully accurate with regard to the subjects themselves. But we know that. It never is. We try to get as close as we can. (Maybe that's a point to discuss!)

This is why we started writing about PolySocial Reality. There is a moment in time, if you froze things, where all communication threads between everyone in any context could be catalogued. But, we can never freeze things. The perpetual change is what we decided to look at. PoSR is a model of the idea of these dynamic connections.

We know dynamic connections are happening, we know they are happening between people and between people and machines and between machines and machines, and we know, based on context, that there are going to be different outcomes. We look at the overlaps quite seriously. We need overlap for cooperation and connection. Not enough and there is no cooperation. This is why I suggested (Appiin and Fischer 2013) Asynchronous adaptations to complex social interactions: http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/xpl/articleDetails.jsp?reload=true&arnumber=6679308).

The authors write:

The encounters with young people in both London and Helsinki revealed that they did not want to be a silent part of the public story being told about them and their multi-sited realities. Les Back (2007) talks about absolute moral categories attached in particular to those groups of people that seem to require the parallel care and control exerted by a part of society. Such moral categories of urban young people may become an easy source of knowledge production, leaving young people's complex experiences of the media city inaccessible. Moreover, it seems clear that young people's right to use the media city is highly controlled and conditioned. To reflect further upon the paradox stated above, one might state that in a seemingly open media city, there are less and less places where young people can feel simultaneously safe and independent of public control.Moreover, it seems clear that young people's right to use the media city is highly controlled and conditioned. To reflect further upon the paradox stated above, one might state that in a seemingly open media city, there are less and less places where young people can feel simultaneously safe and independent of public control.

The idea of it being youth, for me has less of a significance, for this multi-site problem only in that youths need to practice more covert agency to find places that they can exist within a framework of commerce oriented private space and more rules about behaviour within public space. In that case, the mediated space/network space becomes a freer (and a preferred) space because there is nowhere for the bodies to hang out (so to speak).

There is more about the idea of covert agency and workarounds to perceived surveillance in our paper: (Applin and Fischer 2013) Watching Me, Watching You. (Process Surveillance and Agency in the Workplace) http://posr.org/w/images/0/0d/Applin_Fischer_ISTAS13_PREPUB_DRAFT.pdf final is here: http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/xpl/login.jsp?tp=&arnumber=6613129&url=http%3A%2F%2Fieeexplore.ieee.org%2Fiel7%2F6596466%2F6613092%2F06613129.pdf%3Farnumber%3D6613129

The logic follows that if you have a group with diminished range for physical presence gathering, you will have a stronger network presence for that group if they have access to network capabilities. (Again, more about that in my upcoming thesis.)

Here I would argue that there are covert parts of the network where young people do find ways to participate. There are apps that enable workarounds to network participation, such as Snapchat, where there are pretty much no records of interactions past a certain time if designated as such. As certain network spaces become colonized by adults (MySpace (back in the day), Facebook, Twitter), youth flock to newer apps that aren't yet discovered or used by those who are seemingly controlling them.

Hope this stimulates some further discussion!

Sally

Johanna Sumiala (johanna.sumiala@helsinki.fi)   **Mar 8**
Sally, thanks for your comments and useful suggestions!

Firstly, we very much agree with Sally's point about non-finished nature of the field (whether 'traditional' or 'virtual' or something between the two). Three issues of crucial significance seem to be: how to understand the ethnographic place as a site of research, how does a researcher encounter with his/her site, and with what kind of situated and contextual knowledge is believed to be produced in those encounters.

This said, the question of multi-sitedness goes much further than 'just' changing the setting of the field from physical, geographically specific territory to the late modern urban context of a media city. There is a need to think about multi-sited ethnography as a deeply contingent practice.

Inspired by Liisa Malkki's ideas related to capturing the central element of ambiguity and

surprise embedded in the practice of ethnography, we wish push our take on urban multi-sitedness even a bit further. According to Malkki, many phenomena that the researcher encounters are not just expressions of stable systems or structures, and may even be 'antistructural' (cf. Turner). The ambivalence itself makes them difficult to localize as objects (or partners) of fieldwork since they cannot be easily analysed in relation to the system of meanings, dominant knowledge or performative codes. This 'radical impermanence' – to use Malkki's expression (Suurpää, forthcoming) may contest (and in our project has already contested!) the researcher's engagement with urban sites of intense contingency in profound ways.

Secondly, Sally quite rightly raises an issue of the relevance and meaning of our choice to focus on the youth when the research interests related to the media city are at stake. It is true that we need, indeed, critical rethinking of the popular(ized) conception of 'digital natives'. This concept has been much criticized by youth and media scholars; it has been claimed to rest on a combination of technological determinism and essentializing or romanticizing views of young people, as it is well argued in the recently published book Youth Cultures and the Global Media (ed. Buckingham , Bragg, Kehily). What's more, the focus tends to be easily on young people's spectacular and / or glamorous uses of digital technologies rather than their fairly 'banal' ways of maintaining diverse everyday social relations online from their early childhood. The criticism is particularly pertinent when young people are approached as a monolithic rather than as an inherently contingent 'cultural category', which gets its meaning in combination with other social categories of difference, such as gender, class and ethnicity.

In this project we try to look beyond those very spectacularized polarizations and examine the mundane socio-cultural and socio-spatial dynamics of the media city, as they are understood and lived by young people in two distinct contexts (Tower Hamlets and Malmi). This approach might, indeed, resonate very well with Sally's concept of polysociality. We look forward to reflecting that further in the course of the empirical analysis of our multisited data. So, thanks for bringing that up in the discussion!

On behalf of the research team,
Johanna and Leena

Sally Applin (saa26@kent.ac.uk)   **Mar 8**
That's a great response!

I'm looking forward to a more thoughtful reading about what you've written.

Just a clarification: we call our approach PolySocial Reality -- or since, we've been steering away from the 'reality' part, just PoSR.

-Sally

John Postill (jrpostill@gmail.com**)** **Mar 9**

I'm intrigued by the following remark by Johanna and Leena:

"According to Malkki, many phenomena that the researcher encounters are not just expressions of stable systems or structures, and may even be 'antistructural' (cf. Turner). The ambivalence itself makes them difficult to localize as objects (or partners) of fieldwork since they cannot be easily analysed in relation to the system of meanings, dominant knowledge or performative codes. This 'radical impermanence' - to use Malkki's expression (Suurpää, forthcoming) may contest (and in our project has already contested!) the researcher's engagement with urban sites of intense contingency in profound ways."I was wondering if you could give us an example or two of this problem in the context of your media research in Helsinki and London. What does 'radical impermanence' entail in these contexts?

Many thanks

John

Elisenda Ardèvol (eardevol@uoc.edu**)** **Mar 9**

Thanks to Johanna, Titus, Minttu and Leena for sharing their reflections about how to study the city ethnographically, and in concrete, if I understood, how the "young citizens" hang out and find their places in mediated urban spaces.

The paper also brings to the fore the "classical" discussion in ethnography about field construction and the useful concept of "multi-sited" ethnography (George Marcus, 1995) along side with the troublesome online/offline ontological? methodological? divide (Hine, 2001; Horst and Miller, 2012).

They bring out some suggesting methodological questions, but I would rather to focus on two: The first has to do with the object of study: it is not quite clear to me which are the implicit or explicit reasons to choose these two neighbourhoods for the research. I also wonder if the ethnographers impressions about "the boundless, amorphous and somewhat quasi-open character of street as a public space to encounter young people" was because of some characteristic of these neighbourhoods, of the bad weather like, or because their media usage. My question then, is to what extend can we generalize that the streets are or are not spaces of young sociality and the role of the conceptualization of "media city" in this.

I think that this question of street as public space poses something relevant about how the city is occupied, practised and appropriated by young citizens that the paper can further explore. In addition, I am intrigued by how "youth" is defined for this specific study and how questions of race, class, religion, gender, etc. are taken into account in relation to existing literature about media and youth (Ito, 2010 and 2009; Boyd, 2007; Livingstone, 2002).

The second is related with the issue of delimiting the field. I think that Marcus foundational paper is related with the problematization of the conception of the ethnographic site as "place" also undertaken by the inspiring work of Gupta and Ferguson in the last nineties. He suggested following the actors, connexions, associations and fluxes of information in contemporary world. Then, what defines the "field" is the "object" of study and what define the "site" are the subjects and their movements and connexions. As we argue in a recent paper (Gómez and Ardévol, 2013), and as Veret Amit and others suggested in the seminal book "Constructing the field" (2000), the field is not something settled down from the beginning as a pre-existing reality, nor can be conceptualized as a stationary point, as a place where the ethnographer enters and inhabits, rather, it is defined during fieldwork, by the ethnographer's movements and trajectories. And this brings out the last consideration regarding the separation between "the" physical and "the" digital. Internet ethnographers have developed different strategies regarding the online/offline dichotomy. Leander and McKim (2003) for example -when studying young video gamers in cybercafés, point out that this polarity cannot be an assumption of the ethnographer but that we must be concerned with describing the participants' practices to create, bound and articulate social spaces. Then, in their study, they propose to identify 'siting' as a productive social process, instead of identifying 'sites'. For Jenna Burrell (2009), connecting online and offline ethnography is not only a question of mixing methods, but to construct the field-site as a heterogeneous network to map out the social relationships of the subjects and their connections to material and digital objects and locations. Methodologically, the online vs. offline distinction turns out itself problematic if taken as opposite modes of social communication or as ontological worlds apart.

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Johanna Sumiala (johanna.sumiala@helsinki.fi)   **Mar 10**
To John,

We'll come back to Elisenda's comments later, if you will.

We were mainly thinking about Malkki's 'radical impermanence' when reflecting the nature of ethnographer-informant relationships established in different material and communicative contexts. For one, we claim that these relationships were shaped by the very boundless, amorphous and somewhat quasi-open character of the 'street' as a site of research. In many cases the relationships proved to be more or less accidental and ephemeral.

Another observation related to 'radical impermanence' had to do with our ethnographic encounters with young people on Facebook. Perhaps naively, we expected that our informants would find it comfortable and easy to continue communication in an environment they already felt 'at home'. However, in many cases their commitment to keep communication alive remained relatively vague.

Both of these examples challenge us to go further in thinking about the complex interplay between spaces and social relationships (in this case namely between ethnographers and young informants in open, urban and multi-sited contexts). Even if spaces do not determine the kind of researcher-informant relationships that are possible in a given environment, they certainly affect them - how and with what kind of consequences - still

remain somewhat open questions to us.

with best,
Johanna and the research team

Veronica Barassi (v.barassi@gold.ac.uk)   **Mar 11**
Dear All,

I just wanted to let you know that we decided to extend the seminar until Friday the 14th of March, 00:00 GMT.

I also would like to take the opportunity to follow up on Elisenda's questions with a question of my own. Elisenda has rightly pointed out that the paper engages with the methodological complexity of 'constructing the field' and relates back to the anthropological debates of the late nineties (Gupta and Ferguson, Amit, Marcus etc.).

In addition to this Elisenda has shown that these questions are crucial when we want to understand the relationship between online and offline activities. Drawing on Burrell (2009), she highlighted the fact that " connecting online and offline ethnography is not only a question of mixing methods, but to construct the field-site as a heterogeneous network to map out the social relationships of the subjects and their connections to material and digital objects and locations".

Following up on this, I believe that with the development of Web 2.0 platforms we are confronted with a further complexity on 'how we construct the field'. Online activities today happen (often simultaneously) on a variety of web platforms that have different logics and structures, and thus that create very different social and communicative spaces. Thus online experience is often multi-sited and multi-modal.

My question, thus, is how did the researchers, during their fieldwork, approach the multi-sitedness of the virtual spaces described in the paper? How did they make sense of the multimodality of young people's online experiences?

all the best
Veronica

Johanna Sumiala (johanna.sumiala@helsinki.fi)   **Mar 13**
Dear list,

Apologies for a slight delay in responding...

Let us start responding first to Elisenda's comments and then move on to Veronica's question.

Elisenda asked us to reflect on the question of generalizability e.g. to 'what extend can we generalize that the streets are or are not spaces of young sociality and the role of the conceptualization of "media city" in this.'

It is of course impossible to generalise, in an empirical sense, from the ethnographic fieldwork we have done. There are massive differences between neighbourhoods in one city, not to mention between cities in different national contexts. Young people's 'street sociality', if you will, takes very different forms in Chelsea than it does in Tower Hamlets. In terms of the media city, our observations highlight the sense of surveillance (the omnipresence of CCTV) and control imposed on the streets, especially among ethnic youth. The stop and searches disproportionately target young Asian and black men, for example, and the experiences and discourses of our informants seem to confirm this. 'Discourses' in the sense that even if a young person has not experienced police harassment, everyone knows someone who has. For these youth, attending a youth club means 'staying out of trouble', not only in the classic sense of clashes with other youth, but also in the sense of avoiding a stop and search. In terms of the media city, there is a sense of 'targeted hanging around', if you will. The youth we met hang around less in the classic sense of walking on the streets to find where the 'action' is, than wait for a BBM or a What'sApp ping to tell them where their friends are.

The second point had to do with our definition of youth. This is, as well, a highly complex and context-sensitive issue, impossible to treat in an exhaustive way in one seminar setting. Anyhow, some words about our ethos: We approach the idea of 'youth' following the mainstream youth studies, that is, as a social age and as a cultural category rather than a biological age or a strict age-cohort. The concept of youth is never independent from historical, political and cultural surroundings where it is used and reused –similarly it needs to be constantly rethought and elaborated upon also in academic terms. This is particularly true when the concept is employed in the field of media anthropology where the contested interplay between young people's subjective identifications and mediatized representations of the youth can be considered a highly intriguing subject matter. Indeed, we are surrounded by paradoxes what comes to mediatized imaginaries of young people, today maybe more than ever before. This is particularly true when it comes to young people and their collective struggles in the public space. The list of paradoxes could be long. Some examples:

- The media are crowded with images of youth as deviant AND fashionable, personifying a society's anxieties and hopes about its own change.

- Any discourse about the future seems to be somehow linked with young people who are claimed to embody the projected dreams, fears and obligations to the future. This is true both in our empirical contexts and elsewhere.

- Lauded in this way as a symbol of hope for the future AND as a threat of existing order, young people have increasingly become objects of ambivalence between contradictory representations of the emancipation and control of public life.

So, when thinking about this particular ambivalence related to the concept of youth, one rather taken-for-granted mission of the youth researcher would be to trace counter-knowledge, counter-discourses and counter-action: as British sociologist Les Back puts it, to be able to express the issues that can't be verbally formulated in any easy way, that have been muted, or that are not easily accessible in any official form. Our experiences in the multi-sited field have revealed the difficulties in fulfilling this noble – and maybe somewhat romanticized – aim.

Thirdly, and this is to respond to both Elisenda and Veronica.
We couldn't agree more with Amit's idea of the field as something defined during fieldwork by the ethnographer's movements and trajectories. We also agree with Burrell's (2009) point reminded by Elisenda that 'connecting online and offline ethnography is not only a question of mixing methods, but to construct the field-site as a heterogeneous network to map out the social relationships of the subjects and their connections to material and digital objects and locations.

This said, in our paper the distinction between physical and virtual should be perceived as an analytical not as an ontological categorization. The very idea to apply the idea of multi-sitedness in the project was to investigate how young people occupy and experience different urban spatialities in their everyday lives. This idea implied an assumption that these spatialisations may include elements of sequential, but also simultaneous presence of different spatial experiences.

So, to put it simply we definitely agree that online and offline should and cannot be separated as opposite modes of social communication.

Last, but not least, to Veronica, and her question about how we made sense of young people's multimodal online experiences on a variety of web platforms that had different logics and structures.
We had to start modest by sketching which online environments these young people occupied and what they did in those environments. More complex questions such as how young people experienced those online environments and how they felt their online lives were connected with their offline lives is a subject matter we are still very much processing as we go through our materials.

Our preliminary observations point to a direction that for our informants (particularly in Malmi) online life was rather mundane practice closely embedded in their everyday practices of communicating with their friends (using e.g. smartphones), connecting with wider social life by checking up and sharing news online (typically online versions of tabloid newspapers), but also used to create a sense of belonging to different 'virtual socialities' (e.g. by making videos, following blogs and vlogs). But, as said, these are only preliminary mappings of certain spatialities occupied our informants and we need further analysis to build up a more profound and nuanced picture of these experiences.

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all the best,
Johanna, Titus, Leena & Minttu

Heather Horst (heather.horst@rmit.edu.au)   **Mar 13**
Dear Johanna, Titus, Leena & Minttu,

Thanks again for your interesting paper and the responses thus far to Elisenda, John and other's questions. Given that we are in the final hours of the seminar, I will confine my questions and comments to one area - the relationship between youth and space.

The fact that youth are moving relatively seamlessly between digital, mobile and online spaces and 'physical' spaces has been the focus of a great deal of attention in the past 5-10 years. For example Tripp (2011) argues for the importance of paying attention to domestic space given the relative safety of domestic space for young people living in areas plagued by violence and poverty. boyd (2008, 2014) has drawn attention to the problems of changing regulations and policing of youth movements in public and semi-public spaces (e.g. many malls in the US do not allow youth in under a certain age without a parent during specific hours) and there has been a great deal of work focused upon the importance of library, after school and community centres as spaces of out of school learning and literacy motivated by a variety of issues, including the de-funding of arts and music education (e.g. Sefton-Green 2013, Erstad and Sefton-Green 2013, Soep and Chavez 2010). In some cases, and as we argued in "Hanging Out, Messing Around and Geeking Out" (Ito, et al 2010), online and networked spaces reinforce the relationships, connections and identities at school, home or other place-based spaces (e.g. the use of Whats App to stay connected to friends 'on the street'). In other cases online spaces and sites including fan fiction sites, gaming communities and a range of others were spaces that enabled young people/youth to move beyond their place-based connections and identities. In some cases, youth (individually or in groups) may go to other spaces such as after school, library and community centres to move beyond or expand their place-based identifications.

While true youth can be seen as nowhere and everywhere, this work has revealed not just that youth are using social, mobile and online media to extend and amplify social spaces, but also the complexities of the relationship between youth and different spatial practices. It also highlights how these spatial practices are tied to broader structural issues such as neoliberal governance, the global economic crisis (especially in Europe) and related changes connected to the internalisation of domestic space, public education and lack of employment for (in some countries) an entire generation of young people. Given that the study focuses upon a comparison of two national and urban contexts, I would like to know in a more detailed way what, why and how different spaces are used in relation to the particular histories of the urban areas you selected for your study. For example you mention that you went to other spaces such as libraries, parks, estate courtyards, etc. but decided not to focus upon 'non-spaces' such as shopping malls and other spaces of commerce such as high streets and convenience stores or even spaces of transit such as

trains, tubes and buses. What makes places like shopping malls and other locations of commerce non-spaces in Helsinki and London? Why are libraries, as opposed to community or sports centres, important? What about that category of youth (a growing one) who have finished school but are at home unemployed or under-employed? Are online, mobile and social media used solely for meeting up, micro-coordination, sharing and hanging out or are there other ways in which they are being used? What are some of the differences between the use of different sites and social media like Whats App, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube? How might these be reconfiguring, reinforcing or recreating physical and online/mobile/social space? How are these changing over time? What are some of the differences between the ways in which online, mobile and social media are used in Helsinki and London? To what extent are dangers and risk associated with youth and youth gatherings a product of public discourse (e.g. see Lim 2013, Lim et al 2012, 2013)?

I know some of these questions might be outside of the scope of what you wanted and/or were able to do for this paper, but it's clearly a fascinating topic and I'm keen to hear more.

Best,
Heather

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Johanna Sumiala (johanna.sumiala@helsinki.fi)   **Mar 14**
Dear all,

Thanks Heather for your insightful comments.

As this is the final day of the seminar let us reflect on the issue of youth and space by discussing the limitations of multi-sited ethnography in a given context of this study. By doing that we hope to be able to answer at least some of the questions posed by Heather.

Perhaps, one of the most critical questions we've tackled in this project is the question of fragmented nature of the data attached to the multi-sitedness of the field. In our attempt to grasp various dynamics played out in a range of different encounters between youth and space, we've gathered material that can be characterized wide-ranging, but not so exhaustive in terms of depth. In both Malmi and Tower Hamlets the time spent in the field is about one calendar year. During that year, many choices had to be made. The decisions were a result of negotiating different, sometimes conflicting perspectives. To follow a certain path or a certain informant meant not to follow someone, or something else/other. This said, we are not denying the relevance of places discussed by Heather (such as Malls of Sport Halls), and acknowledge the limitations of our interpretations in this sense. The same goes with the kind and type of social networking sites we engaged with or did not engage with.
Perhaps, the most relevant question for all of us is; on which ground and how transparently we make these decisions – always incomplete and partial in some ways. Moreover, the classical idea of 'saturation' of the researcher's knowledge and the data becomes highly contested when the scientific approach and the field of study are

inherently multi-sited. And finally, a profound question is whether the multi-sitedness demands us to develop new modes of conceptualizing the field and analyzing the data.

To Heather's question on 'what, why and how different spaces are used in relation to the particular histories of the urban areas you selected for your study.' To contextualize our findings not only on a horizontal level (how young people occupy different spaces in the present, how they cross boundaries and create new spaces etc.) but also on a vertical level, is definitely a challenge. Titus in our research team already shared some ideas related to certain historical conditions in Tower Hamlets as a poor, working class area in London and how that might be experienced in different spatializations in young people's lives. But, much more work is needed here.

As a summarizing comment, in our view to develop multi-sited ethnography in a context of fragmented urban settings (including a complex web of physical and virtual connections and spatializations), not only multi-sited, but also multi-level research design is needed. We began with 'mapping the field' and developing our methodological toolkit as we moved on, our next step is to dig deeper into certain dynamics within of these spatializations. One tempting option could be to start from the 'virtual street' and its multple spatializations and see where that takes us in a study of youth in a media city.

All in all, we wish to thank all the commentators for insightful and inspiring comments and questions as well as many useful suggestions for further references. We certainly have had a lot to take home with!

Let's hope that this fruitful dialogue between media-anthropology and youth studies continues on this list and elsewhere also in the future!

With best,
Johanna & Leena

Veronica Barassi (v.barassi@gold.ac.uk)   **Mar 14**
Dear All,

This is to inform you that the E-Seminar is now closed. I wish to thank Johanna, Titus, Leena & Minttu for their paper, and all of you who have contributed with your questions and comments.

all the best
Veronica