Studying Youth in the Media City: Multi-sited Reflections[1]

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Youth, it seems, are everywhere and nowhere
(Sunaina Maira & Elisabeth Soep 2005)

This paper discusses the methodological challenges of studying youth in the contemporary media city. Cities and youth are both fluid phenomena that evade rigid definitions: youth, as Maira and Soep (2005) put it, are everywhere and nowhere in physical and virtual cityscapes. Therefore, when analysing young people's lives, a 'multi-sited' methodological starting point seems appropriate, famously defined by George Marcus (1995) as the study of social phenomena that cannot be accounted for by focusing on a single ethnographic site (see also Falzon 2009, 1). In our conceptualisation, young people's lives in media cities are organised around the complex and contested dynamic between physical and virtual spaces, a dynamic that— by definition—calls for a multi-sited approach to research. This requires an

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ethnographic approach that acknowledges the idea of space as intertwined and in constant interaction with social life: space as always socially built and experienced in a media city, and social as that built in certain spatial and geographical locations of a media city (cf. Massey 2005).

The paper is divided into three parts. First, we discuss our understanding of the media city as a spatially and discursively constructed context for the study of young people. Second, we identify two critical aspects of multi-sitedness in our study: the multiple boundaries of physical spaces, and the media, particularly social media, as a multi-sited virtual space. Our reflections are based on fieldwork involving young people in a variety of physical and virtual sites: street ethnography in Malmi, Helsinki and Tower Hamlets, London (2012–2014), and media ethnography examining mainstream media (mainly print news) and social media such as Facebook, YouTube and blogs. The empirical examples are used to illustrate methodological reflections; hence, there is no attempt to make strict empirical comparisons between the fields at this stage. Finally, we illustrate some of the challenges of multi-sited urban/media ethnography and discuss potential ways of tackling these challenges.

The Media City: A Multi-faceted Context for the Study of Urban Youth

Scott McQuire (2008) argues that the history of the 'media city' can be traced back to the mid-19th century. Modernisation, urbanisation and technological developments saw massive advertisement screens, street corner newspaper peddlers and, later, cinemas showing news and entertainment reels become part of the cityscape. However, rapid changes from the late 20th century onwards have changed this image. As McQuire argues:

> If the space of the city has historically been defined by the relation between (relatively) static structures and mobile subjects, this dichotomy is giving way to hybrid spatialities characterised by dynamic flows which not only dissolve the

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fixity of traditional modes of spatial enclosure, but problematic the unified

presence of the subject traversing their contours. (McQuire 2006, 4)

Today, when you step onto a bus, instead of people looking out the window, you see people staring at their mobile devices. The same is seen on the street and in public parks. With mobile smart phones, the city is experienced increasingly through private screens, and then recycled back into the public realm through image sharing.

We understand the media city as a dynamic spatial construction consisting of multiple and simultaneous physical and virtual elements (McQuire 2008; Georgiou 2011). Moreover, today's media city contests old dichotomies between public, semi-public and private spaces. The media city is constantly on the move; it is never finished. Yet, it is not a utopian space devoid of hierarchies and spatial injustices (e.g. Soja 2010). People of different ages, genders and social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds have different access to the media city, depending on their resources—cultural and social capital, if you will. Moreover, many competing interests and values shape the boundaries of the media city.

Youth are in many ways a symbol of the shifting meanings of the media city; they are the focal point for romanticising and pathologising images alike. On the one hand, they have the resources and competences that allow them to progress to the forefront of media and communication technologies, and as such represent the increasing hybridity of living in a media-saturated world. In commercialised visions of the media city, the youth represent a utopian future brought about by these 'digital native' prosumers, a neologism combining producer and consumer (see e.g. Sumiala & Tikka 2011). On the other hand, urban youth are the subject of spatial injustice and social control, associated with an increasing public governance of the media city (cf. Keith 2005). There are concerns over young people immersing themselves in virtual worlds to the extent that it is feared they could lose touch with physical reality, everyday sociability and a sense of community. At the same time, the presence of youth in physical spaces is a constant

source of worry regarding anti-social behaviour and violence, for example. Media technologies of control, such as CCTV cameras, are harnessed to monitor 'appropriate' uses of public urban space, such as streets, stations and commercial spaces such as shopping centres. The spaces that youth occupy in the media city are, in other words, constantly negotiated, controlled and governed. As the focus of moral panic, the youth represent a dichotomising source of anxiety regarding young people's vulnerability in the media city, but also concerns related to 'out of control' youth (Parkers & Connolly 2014, 131; Back 2007).

To get beyond *attributions* of youth in the media city, we need to consider how best to study young people's *identifications* and *uses* in the media city. This, as we argued above, requires paying special attention to the complex and contested processes of multiple spatialisations that occur simultaneously in different physical and virtual spaces (see also Shields 2013).

Since 'the city' sprawls beyond the capacity of any research team in terms of ethnographic study, we concentrated our efforts on two neighbourhoods in Helsinki and London. Malmi, a regional centre of North Helsinki, is one of the oldest neighbourhoods in the capital area. It is characteristically a crossroads between East and West, while a railway line divides the area into Upper and Lower Malmi. Historically, Malmi is a relatively poor, white, working-class area with a somewhat 'rough' reputation. However, the current socio-economic and ethnic profile of Malmi is more diverse, and the cultural life of the local neighbourhood is relatively lively, with its vibrant cultural centre, well-equipped youth club, sports centre and library, to mention a few. Malmi has a population of about 30,000, of which approximately twenty per cent have an immigrant background. In London, we concentrated on the borough of Tower Hamlets. Part of the historic East End of London, Tower Hamlets is a place of contrasts: it borders the City, London's banking centre, at one end and Canary Wharf, a recent business space development project, at the other. Between these centres, the borough's inhabitants include a sizable Muslim minority and one of the worst cases of child poverty in the UK.

With a 250,000+ population, it also differs significantly from Malmi in terms of density and diversity.

Physical Spaces

The modern city involves a combination of physical and virtual, public, semi-public and private spaces in a constant process of boundary negotiation. In her recent book *Media and the City*, Myria Georgiou discusses the relationship between media and city in a manner useful for our purposes. She explains:

> ...The city needs the media to help brand its global appeal but also to manage its diversity and communication landscape. From the mobile phone that helps tourists to navigate the city to the social media that help the protesters organise trans-urban action, this relationship is becoming more and more one of interdependence. ...it expands to and depends upon the urban street; where appropriations and uses of media and communications invent, become evidence and reaffirm the uniqueness of the city as a creative hub, as a consumer paradise, as a space of identity, community and even possibly political recognition. (Georgiou 2013, 3)

We argue that of all the spaces in the media city, the street is the most visible. It is the obvious avenue of transit in a material sense, but also, discursively speaking, the site of most media attention. 'Street crime' is an everyday topic in the mainstream media and a topic of discussion among the young people themselves. Gangs are a recurrent feature of discussion in both Helsinki and London, although much more visibly in the latter, and the image of dangerous streets is not completely unfounded. During our fieldwork, 16-year-old Ajmol Alom was stabbed to death in Tower Hamlets, causing widespread concern over the safety of young people in particular. In addition, issues of gendered youth violence were of concern in Malmi in the summer of 2013. *Helsingin Sanomat*, the largest daily newspaper in Finland, published an article on youth crime in Malmi, based on the fact that a group of boys had brutalised a 16-year-old girl in the neighbourhood.

The discussion soon turned to 'gang fights' in the area. With 'the street' representing such a central concern among adults and youth alike, we—perhaps somewhat romantically—assumed that 'street ethnography' would be a walk in the park, figuratively speaking. After all, one of the candidates for the post of 'Young Mayor' in Tower Hamlets had 'getting young people off the streets' as her campaign theme. If, as it seemed, the youth were ubiquitously present on the streets, the plan was to put on our walking shoes and hang around with them.

But they weren't there.

Logically, one would assume that the same factor that puts the street in the spotlight—crime, or rather, fear of crime—keeps young people off the streets. This is indeed a genuine worry. In Tower Hamlets, most of the young people we met had either personal experience of threat or knew someone who had experienced threat. In London's East End, the so-called 'postcode wars' are alive and well, and impact the everyday lives of boys in particular. However, the threat of youth-on-youth crime is not the only thing that keeps the young people off the streets. Many of the boys—and these were disproportionately boys with ethnic (Muslim/South Asian) backgrounds—had been stopped and searched by the police regularly from the age of 10. To them, the street was not ideal because it was *too* public, too controlled.

Therefore, the search for the elusive 'street' led us to semi-public spaces like youth clubs, libraries, parks and estate courtyards[2]. The youth clubs attract only a certain kind of youth of course; many of whom in Tower Hamlets said 'keeping out of trouble' was one of the motivations for spending time at such a club. A controlled environment provides shelter from the pressures of the street, although that required internalising the rules of the club. In addition, the clubs—unless targeted at particular populations, such as Bangladeshi boys—provided spaces where one could meet youth from different

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[2] We did observe conversations in semi-public commercial spaces, such coffee and dress shops, but ignored the bigger (but important) 'non-spaces', such as shopping centres. This was both a theoretical (shopping centre as 'street'?) and a resource question.

backgrounds and beyond the borough. Libraries, which mostly came alive during exam periods, again provided an adult-controlled environment where nevertheless some social boundaries could be crossed. Hence, it was common to find Muslim boys and girls cuddling on the sofas of public libraries.

Indeed, libraries, both in Tower Hamlets and Malmi, offered an interesting 'space of negotiation', revealing young people's subtle fight for their right to public space. In a media city, libraries provide a semi-public space that extends the spatial boundaries from the physical to an imaginary realm of a media city. Material objects such as books, newspapers, magazines, movies and computers provided a means for young people to make journeys from one space to another; from physical reality into a virtual world of stories, fantasies and dreams. Despite this, libraries could be seen as controlled spaces from the perspective of young people. In Malmi, the library is located inside the local cultural centre, Malmitalo, which is a public space controlled by security guards. The library provides a corner for youth literature, comics and public computers, which based on our observations, was well used by the local youth. While the corner was available to serve the needs of the younger library visitors, the rules were strict: appropriate behaviour and silent use was expected, such as reading and doing homework, while the use of computers was restricted. According to our informants, the library personnel were keen to control the behaviour of young people in the library, and to access the library, one had to bypass Malmitalo's security guards and then remain under the watchful eyes and ears of the librarians. Therefore, despite the apparent openness of the library as a semi-public space in a media city, the young people's experience of the library was that of a controlled space. Yet, this aspect of control could also provide safety and a sense of security, particularly for young people for whom street also meant potential violence and open conflict among different groups.

Consequently, the least-controlled of these semi-public spaces were the parks and estate courtyards in both Tower Hamlets and Malmi. In Tower Hamlets, when the sun went down the families left and the parks were taken over by groups of young men.

Similarly, groups of young men would hang around on estate grounds (Ocean Estate, the largest council estate in the UK, is located in the middle of Tower Hamlets) after dark. When approached, they would often disperse, but talking to some young people in different contexts validated the hunch that part of the appeal of the estates was that they were away from the eyes of the police on the street.

In addition to the emptiness of the streets—which was the other noticeable feature common to both Tower Hamlets' and Malmi's 'street ethnography—in Tower Hamlets the gendered and ethnic divisions in the everyday lives of youth were clearly visibly. The young people 'hanging around' at parks and on estate grounds were almost without exception young men. If young women were present, they were almost exclusively 'white' (the term used by both Muslim and non-Muslim young people). One Muslim boy offered a subjective account for their hanging around, stating that 'girls can always stay home and in the kitchen, we have no place to go'. Indeed, with the exception of the libraries during exam periods, and commercial spaces such as coffee shops, young Muslim women always seemed to be in transit. On the other hand, our female research assistant felt decidedly unwelcome while walking through estates in the evening.

In sum, the street is in many ways the crux of urban life for young people. If the mainstream media is the measure, it seems that the street has been taken over by a generation whose socialisation has utterly failed. The UK riots of 2011 were a special case, a spectacle, but the image of the street as the centre of youth life lingers. For the ethnographer, however, the everyday life of urban youth goes beyond the street. The physical spaces they occupy are diverse and require a multi-sited approach that also expands beyond the physical boundaries of the media city.

Virtual Spaces

One way of approaching the virtual dimension of urban life is to look at virtual spaces, such as media as places of imagination that encompass different practices of social life.

The term 'media' is in itself complicated, and its meanings have been debated in the field of media studies, media anthropology and communication research (see e.g. Postill & Pink 2012; Couldry 2012; Deuze 2012). The main focus in media studies just two decades ago was undoubtedly the mass media: television, radio, film, newspapers and magazines. Today, the word 'media', let alone distinctions between mainstream, mass and social media, is far less straightforward in meaning. The boundaries between different aspects of the media are shifting, and so are the categories and hierarchies associated with them. Thus, the term 'media' is increasingly used to refer to a hybrid mixture of old traditional mass communication and new online communication. These developments have consequences for our social lives and related values in a media city (Lövheim et al. 2013).

As pointed out by Georgiou (2013), virtual spaces in a media city are created in the crossroad of the different expectations and practices of the media business and producers who have certain ideals based on what people will and should do with media as a technology, and the actual actions and practices carried out by the people. These virtual spaces draw upon social and cultural conventions, explicit and subtle social norms and agreements of physical spaces, yet simultaneously they, at least in theory, may create possibilities for the emergence of new cultures, practices and conventions that expand the limits of physical social experience (cf. Boelstorff et al. 2012, 1; Jenkins 2006; Deuze 2012). However, in our fieldwork we found a relatively localised perception of a media city. In Malmi, we met with and talked to young people who mainly shared virtual spaces with their friends, hence imposing their local social networks and friendships from school and youth clubs. They posted on Facebook and Instagram and commented on their everyday lives with images and text, and texted friends and family members to organise mundane comings, goings and meetings.

When young people wished to expand their boundaries, they connected with the larger sphere of the media city, often via leisure time activities typically associated with different forms of popular and urban vernacular 'Do it yourself' (DIY) culture (cf.

Talvitie-Lamberg 2014). Some girls in Malmi followed certain teenage fashion bloggers; other young people shared virtual spaces with self-made celebrities such as vloggers. A group of boys we encountered were part of the particularly physical skateboard culture, which involved making and posting skateboard videos on the Vimeo website to share them with friends. Instead of 'only' consuming virtual spaces, these young people also actively participated in making those spaces. By doing so, young people created 'alternative public spheres of the city' (see Gilroy 1987) by reusing the virtual spaces in a novel way, i.e. by coding and decoding them with a youth cultural meaning alongside unconventional performances and soundscapes.

However, virtual spaces are also spaces of visible and invisible control and repression. Social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or Instagram provide possibilities for identity work and community building, but they also consist of hierarchies and are shaped by complex social, cultural, economic and political interests and control. These explicit and implicit mechanisms of control have particular relevance when discussing young people's ability to extend their spatial territories in a media city (e.g. Kallio & Häkli 2011; Keith 2005).

In Malmi, the informants negotiated the boundaries of virtual space with adults, such as parents and schoolteachers. For some, the question regarded age limit, as minors are only allowed to use certain applications once they reach a certain age. However, the relevant question was not restricted to the biological age, as negotiations related to the more social dimensions of age seemed equally important: whose voice dominates in different virtual spaces, and how can these spaces be conceptualised in youth cultural terms? Schools also controlled young people's access by setting rules relating to the use of online media at school. These everyday rules and mechanisms of control could be interpreted as attempts to manage and organise young people's participation in a media city, but they may also include intentions to protect youth as vulnerable members of a media city. As the aforementioned 'digital natives', young people represent both a prospect and a threat for a media city. Consequently, they need to be looked after,

educated and perhaps even 'tamed' before being allowed full access. Furthermore, our informants had to adapt to the rules and codes of conduct of the peer group sharing the virtual space. Everyday ethical decisions were constantly made and remade concerning which pictures to post and how to react to information provided by someone else.

In addition to social media, traditional mass media, including TV, radio and print news, occupy a significant public space in a media city. The mainstream mass media contribute to the mapping of urban social life according to their own logic and news criteria. In this media geography, different areas and agents are given distinct visibility. Mike Gasher (2009, ii) argues:

> In producing local stories, journalists traverse the coverage area, but most often they locate and identify those places judged to be the most reliable and plentiful sources of news—government offices, court buildings, police stations, and the other institutional hubs that comprise the public sphere (see Tuchman 1980)— and identify and give voice to community leaders. Their practice thereby draws a particular map of the social, political and economic sphere and, with it, a sense of local place to which audience members are encouraged to feel they belong. In determining which regional, national and international stories are worth coverage, journalists make connections between their community and these larger, more distant places. How are those stories relevant to "us," what is "our" involvement, how are they newsworthy? The answers to those questions assert links and associations—as well as gulfs—between "here" and "there," between "us" and "them."

The questions posed by Gasher were of great relevance when analysing young people as being easily depicted as the society's 'others', as objects for parallel care and control rather than active agents. Moreover, in the differentiated urban environment where both physical and social distances grow, people's perception of their city becomes ever more mediatised, potentially highlighting the gap between different generations, social

groups and territories. To give one example, in recent years Tower Hamlets has become a subject of increasing public concern in the English mainstream and mass media as an area of growing 'Islamification', and consequently social and religious unrest. These fears have been projected most strongly onto young Muslim men in the neighbourhood. On the streets of Tower Hamlets, the perception of this social reality was far removed from, and much more nuanced than, the one circulating in the media. While it is not uncommon for subjects to not recognise, nor agree with, their public image represented in the mainstream media, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge these imbalances between the public perception and the emic experience of the situation. To use Soja's (2010) lexicon, a media city is not innocent of spatial injustices, and the challenge for a multi-sited study of a media city is to recognise how these spatial hierarchies are played out in both virtual and physical contexts. On the other hand, non-recognition and invisibility could also be used as a tactic of urban exclusion, a perspective that should not go unrecognised as we study youth in a media city.

Multi-sited Methodological Reflections

In this paper, we have attempted to valorise some of the multi-sited aspects in the study of youth in a media city. This multi-sitedness as we understand it consists of several layers and levels. First, as pointed out by Falzon (2009), a multi-sited research design aims to recognise the inherently mutable character of the studied phenomena. Both youth and the media city are to be characterised as such. Youth, to quote Maira and Soep (2005) again, can indeed be seen to be everywhere and nowhere in a media city. We began searching for urban youth on the streets of Tower Hamlets and Malmi, but soon realised the boundless, amorphous and somewhat quasi-open character of street as a public space to encounter young people. Therefore, we expanded the idea of the 'street' and began to find other public and semi-public urban spaces that young people occupied.

As discussed earlier, libraries provided a particularly interesting illustration of the multi-sited dimensions of the media city. They appeared to us as spaces of organised structure and adult control, but also provided security and protection. Moreover, libraries opened up possibilities for young people to transcend at least certain boundaries between physical and virtual spaces, and provided youth (controlled) access to experience the media city via media and internet access.

Furthermore, ambiguous questions related to access appeared a key issue in young people's occupation of more personalised virtual spaces, such as social media. The ability to access these was partly reliant on the economic, cultural and social resources young people had in terms of using social media, but it was also a matter of negotiation with authorities and institutions, including families, parents, schools and teachers. In the virtual space, young people, particularly in Malmi, tended to share their lives with people they already knew, hence connecting local and virtual in their everyday experience of a media city. When they expanded their virtual territories beyond the local surroundings, the young people we observed and interacted with encountered the media city typically via different popular and vernacular forms of urban DIY culture (cf. Talvitie-Lamberg 2014, forthcoming). These activities consisted of following bloggers and vloggers, making videos and sharing news, posts and images. Sharing these virtual spaces also invited youth to not only consume but also actively participate in media city life by making and shaping it. How the boundaries and hierarchies inside and between different physical and virtual territories are negotiated is still to be tackled in more detail as we continue our work and analysis of these themes and topics we find particularly pertinent—and inspiring—in the cross-disciplinary field of media anthropology.

According to our tentative conclusions, the multi-sitedness of youth lives in a media city occurs not only in multiple physical and territorial locations (on the street, youth club or library), or different virtual spaces (mainstream and social media), but also *simultaneously* in physical and virtual spaces. This constant boundary negotiation,

embedded in the multi-sitedness of young people's lives, implies a particular methodological sensitivity thus far disregarded in the theoretical discussions of media and youth studies. According to our experience, not only young people themselves but also ethnographers must come across with *radically contingent physical, social and virtual boundaries* when exploring the multi-sitedness of urban youth life. The account of Doreen Massey (1992) is particularly pertinent with regard to youth, as she sees the dimension of multiplicity, a sort of simultaneous existence, as a fundamental element of the space.

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).

In an urban space like London or Helsinki, the researcher easily becomes fascinated with the multi-sitedness of the urban space. However, our ethnographic observations reveal that the right to use the media city is unequally distributed between, and experienced by, the younger and older generations, and to some extent among the young people themselves. For our informants in both London and in Helsinki, the multi-sitedness of the media city meant a paradox between the visible hanging around in public and semi-public places, both physically and virtually, and the invisible escape from the ever-present public gaze of governance.

This paradox includes a central, although often disregarded, ethical challenge to the multi-sited research design, particularly when it comes to young people. During the ethnographic field work, we were obliged to ask ourselves about the possibilities that young people, particularly those from the outskirts of the media city, had at their

disposal to formulate and politicise their experiences and broaden the existing knowledge about the youth in these urban spaces.

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.

This paradox also implies a particular ethical challenge for ethnographers studying young people in the media city, demanding a constant sensitivity with regard to the balance of when it is appropriate to search out dialogue with young people, and when their right to their own space should be respected. Therefore, this requires a serious rethinking of practical methods with which to make sense of young people's life in the media city, and means diverse forms of ethnography, such as autobiographical research designs, must be seriously considered.

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