

## **Studying youth in the streets of the media city – Field notes on a relational perspective**

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### Abstract

How to study the youth in the media city, where the physical and the digital lives of young people often intertwine and overlap? What kinds of spatial entitlements and forms of control young people experience in a media city? How to grasp those issues in fieldwork, in a condition in which, 'the street', is constructed as a conceptual and empirical locus for ethnographic research. This article attempts to reflect upon these questions by providing some theoretical and empirical reflections based on media and street ethnographic fieldwork among youth in two contemporary media cities of Helsinki and London. The article draws its inspiration from the scholarly crossroads of sociology, youth studies, urban studies and media studies, and applies the concept of relationality to that framework. We examine aspects of relationality (among and between people, spaces and the media), which researchers confront when studying young people's lives in the media city ethnographically. In order to understand the complex meanings that the street acquires when approached from the perspective of the youth in the media city, the issues related to the boundaries, (in)visibility and control connected with the idea of relationality are discussed in more detail. Our reflections are based on the project titled *Youth Street Politics in the Media Age*.<sup>1</sup>

Keywords: media city, fieldwork, relationality, street, youth.

"We can no longer agree on what counts as a city. The city is everywhere and in everything"  
(Amin & Thrift, 2002, p. 2).

### **Studying youth in the streets of the media City – a relational approach**

In the introductory article "Young people's im/mobile urban geographies" published in a special issue of *Urban Studies*, Tracey Skelton and Katherine V. Cough (2013, p. 455) point at an intriguing paradox: "Although young people are ubiquitous in cities, often with very visible and vibrant presences, they are relatively absent in the academic work that attempts to understand, decipher and explain the city." They

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<sup>1</sup> The *Youth street politics in the media age* project was a collaboration between The Finnish Youth Research Society, University of Helsinki and University College London. The research project (2012-2014) was funded by the *Helsingin Sanomat* Foundation.

maintain that even though more than half the world's children and young people live in cities, understanding how their lives are shaped by urban dynamics and how they themselves are significant actors in, and creators of, the city, is still relatively limited. Although some relevant inroads have been made into connecting youth and urban life (see e.g. Chawla, 2002; Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010; Malone, 2010), recent developments that encourage us to think of urban life in terms of the media city call for further refinement of the youth/city/media connection.

The concept of the media city perceives the contemporary urban space as consisting of multiple and simultaneous physical and virtual elements (Georgiou, 2011; McGuire, 2008; Massey, 2005; Thrift, 2006; Soja, 2010; Hjelm et al., 2014). According to Myria Georgiou:

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, p. 3).

The contemporary media city seems to require a serious rethinking of the existing lexicon for research. Allen, Massey and Cochrane stated already some time ago (1998, p. 43) that the contemporary city should be approached as "open, discontinuous, relational and internally diverse". This is even more the case with the media city. Following Jane M. Jacobs (2012, pp. 412–413) we may distinguish at least two main lines of arguments trying to explain relationality in the framework of the media city. One approach argues for a relational perspective among and between the young people studied, the spaces they occupy and the media they use. The key aspect in this line of thinking about relationality is the interplay between the material and virtual dimensions of the media city, and claims that these relationships are in constant flux. This idea challenges scholarship to look *beyond* the media city as 'physical territory', in order to grasp the complex set of virtual and/or digital socio-spatial entitlements in the contemporary extended urban context. According to this argument, the idea of the media city as a space is to be seen as being in constant interaction with physical and digital social life of young people carried out in and via a variety of mediated environments (cf. Georgiou, 2013).

Another approach refers to a more radical rethinking of contemporary urban socio-spatial condition. This implies a need to *deconstruct the very idea of territory itself*. According to this line of argument, territory in the context of the media city is understood not as a physical object, nor as a social space but as a relational *act*: "something one makes vis-à-vis others", as stated by Andrea Mubi Brighenti and Christina Mattiucci (2013). In this frame of thinking, the media city is formed in the *interactions* performed by young people as they gather and assemble around their gadgets and media devices. This requires a need to give closer and deeper attention to concrete conditions of *interrelationality* in young people's daily life in contemporary urban contexts – whether these contexts are conceptualized as mediated, networked, hybrid, or digitalized. Both these approaches (i.e. media city as a spatial expansion and act of performing relations), seem highly appropriate when young people's lives in contemporary media-saturated urban

contexts are at stake.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the concept of relationality, as it is applied here, does not imply the loss of tangible structural conditions to the advantage of 'global cyber-spaces', nor is the relationality in question about any one-dimensional or neutral relationship between the actors occupying and acting in different spatialities (cf. Skelton & Cough, 2013; Fraser, 1990; Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). Edward Soja's (2010) discussion of *spatial injustices* reminds us of the persistency of the urban hierarchies and novel stratifications based on age, gender, social, cultural and racialized backgrounds and related resources – not only cultural, social and economic capital but also spatial entitlements. Gaye Theresa Johnson (2013) has used the concept of spatial entitlement when studying everyday acts of resistance and survival in Los Angeles. Johnson refers to the ways in which marginalized communities have created new collectives based not just upon eviction and exclusion from physical places, but also on new and imaginative uses of technology, creativity, and spaces. We apply the term *spatial entitlement* (Johnson, 2013) to capture young people's *struggles* over the right to the media city, thus updating the classical conceptualizations of the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1968). We argue that the task of a researcher interested in youth in the media city is to explore the ways in which young people's relational experiences are embedded in the material conditions and in new kinds of boundaries, going beyond rigid dichotomies of 'physical' and 'digital'. Understood in this way, spatial entitlement entails occupying, inhabiting and transforming physical and digital places but also imagining and enacting discursive territories that open up new belongings and boundaries. This leads us to reflect upon the complex processes of boundary marking and re-marking that occur simultaneously in the streets of the media city (see also Shields, 2013; Ilan, 2013).

This take on contested relationality, with its daily socio-spatial struggles demands a radically cross-disciplinary research orientation as no single research tradition can fully grasp the multiple dynamics of young people's relational encounters in the media city, with its extended spatial flows. Thus, the article draws its inspiration from a scholarly crossroads of sociology, youth studies, urban studies and media studies and it applies multi-sited fieldwork in the empirical analysis of youth in the streets of the media city. More specifically, the article explores the diverse implications that the quest of (inter)relationality has for fieldwork among urban youth, with a special focus on the concept and phenomenon of the street. In particular, we point out the contingency of the street, both as a research field and as a socio-spatial environment of young people's daily life. In order to understand the complex meanings that the street acquires when approached from the perspective of the youth in the media city, the issues related to the boundaries, (in)visibility and control are discussed in more detail.

In more empirical terms, we ponder upon how to make sense of the spatial entitlements of young people, or more precisely, how to grasp the contingent interrelationships between digital and physical, public and private, or visible and invisible. For us it seems evident that there is a need for a multi-sited research design, combining ethnographic 'hanging around' on the street and online, with diverse forms of discussions among young people (cf. Postill & Pink, 2012; Hine, 2005; Horst et al., 2010; Horst & Miller, 2012; Howard, 2002; boyd, 2014; Pyry, 2015). Hence, we hung around on the streets, in parks and at

youth centres in Malmi,<sup>2</sup> Helsinki and Tower Hamlets, London, and in media environments frequented by young people, such as Facebook, YouTube, and different blogs and vlogs. In addition, the corpus included mainstream media material on the neighbourhoods in Malmi and Tower Hamlets.

It is important to acknowledge that in the fieldwork we did *not* look for any particular youth groups per se characterized for example by certain age, gender or ethnic background. Instead, we chose an exploratory approach, more appropriate, we argue, for the research design that acknowledges the street as a central locus for the media city. The street, hence, was put to the very centre of our empirical fieldwork. Consequently, the young people who we met and discussed with while hanging around and wandering in the streets of Tower Hamlets and Malmi were not first and foremost categorized as representatives of any larger identity group, but as by-passers in the media city.

And yet, the question of background could or should not be totally ignored either. What can be said about our informants is that the young people we interviewed in London had a rich variety of multicultural roots, with a strong presence of Bangladeshi and Pakistani Muslims, but also children of East European migrants, and West Caribbean parents. The core group of informants were young people visiting a youth club in Tower Hamlets, about ten people with whom we conducted pair or group interviews and observed them at the club and at a park. Overall, we conducted single, pair, or group interviews with fourteen boys and nineteen girls. Twenty of the interviewees were from a Bangladeshi background. This bias is partly explained by one focus group interview with eight girls of Bangladeshi background. All except four of the interviewees lived in Tower Hamlets, and two of those who didn't had lived there earlier.

Unlike in Tower Hamlets, the Finnish youth in Malmi were not locals, but visiting the neighbourhood for some particular purpose (hobby, friends). In Malmi we had fourteen informants with whom we co-operated more or less intensely. With some of them we conducted several interviews. Some of them also filmed their everyday life with a video camera we provided for the purpose of the research project. Eight of these informants were girls and six boys, all aged between 15 and 23. One of the boys was an immigrant from Bangladesh and another boy had Arab roots. In addition we met and discussed informally with several young people in the field e.g. at the youth club, bowling hall, shopping mall.

Furthermore we also encountered several adults working with young people.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Malmi, a regional centre of North Helsinki, is one of the oldest neighbourhoods in the capital area. 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.

<sup>3</sup> 'The politics of translation' demand our attention. While the interviews in Tower Hamlets were carried out in English, the interviews in Malmi were conducted in Finnish. The translation of the interview quotations from the Finnish to English language was conducted in a manner to retain the original discourse of the informant. In cases of excessive usage of expletive words, these have been removed from the quoted interviews.

### Interpreting 'the street' – Negotiating boundaries of relationality

The street has for a long time occupied an important place both in the lexicon of urbanism and in representations of urban youth lives (i.e. Keith, 2005; Park et al., 1967[1925]; Skelton, 2013; Ilan, 2013). This is also true when discussing the street in the context of the media city. Of all the spaces in the media city, the street is arguably the most visible. It is the obvious avenue of transit in a material sense, but also, discursively speaking, the site of constant media attention. Concepts such as 'street crime', 'hanging around on the street', or 'dangerous streets' are everyday topics in the mainstream media and the topics of discussion among the young people themselves. Where the home block corner is an experientially familiar place to hang out, street corners further away are known by mediated knowledge and reputation (cf. Georgiou, 2011). In every city, there is a neighbourhood with a bad reputation that is – implicitly at least – constructed as a space *non grata*. Naming a neighbourhood a 'slum' is a common discursive tool but much less commonly used as a self-designation by its inhabitants. The contested interplay between gangs and the supposedly meaningless phenomenon of 'hanging around' in the streets is a recurrent feature of discussion in both Helsinki and London, although even more visibly in the latter.

During the fieldwork we observed the everyday lives of young people in the streets of Tower Hamlets and Malmi and asked them about their experiences of their own neighbourhoods and other urban areas close by. In those conversations multiple, but also contested types of physical, discursive and imaginary boundaries were brought up.

Our empirical data highlights young people's interest in reflecting their relationships with the urban street life in their area. We recognized reactions towards certain negatively marked discursive boundaries regarding to their 'own' neighbourhood. In times discussions touched upon the role of the mass media and circulation of stories of certain 'bad' neighbourhoods. In this line of thinking those negative media representations became to be perceived as an integral part of young people's urban citizenship and their daily struggle for spatial entitlement in the media city.

Often, we observed that young people were also eager to give new (and perhaps more positive) discursive meanings to their own neighbourhood. In some cases this was associated with not so pleasant, even rude comparisons, with certain neighbourhoods nearby. A sort of contest over reputation was particularly intensive among the young people we met in Tower Hamlets.

Although it was often acknowledged that Tower Hamlets had its own problems too, it was also common to note that neighbouring Hackney was where the 'real' problems were. As a prompt to get people talking about areas they frequent and places they try to avoid, we gave our interviewees maps of Tower Hamlets. A blank area on the map, north of the borough, designated as Hackney was which most of the youth we talked to crossed off as a no-go zone. When asked about their memories of the riots of 2011, two boys (ages 16 and 17) returning from school on a summery day at Mile End Park exemplified this belief:

*I: So why do you think that [the riots] didn't quite happen in this area [Tower Hamlets]? I mean Hackney isn't that far away it's, it's quite close.*

P1: It is kind of close but then...

P2: This area's not that popular, it's not really...

P1: And it's also because of the community, we have a different community than Hackney, so..

P2: Hackney's a very deadly community...

P1: They didn't do anything here...

*I: Sorry?*

P2: Hackney's a deadly community

*I: Deadly?*

P2: [laughs] It's because in Hackney there's a lot of fights, crimes

P1: So that's why that's the place that they picked

A young woman from the same neighbourhood had a much more critical view of the media image of the area, but even she thought that it was the neighbouring Hackney rather than Tower Hamlets that was the true problem of the East End. Although critical of how the area is publicly depicted today, she still reproduced the stereotypical 'anti-social youth' subcultural trend also known as 'chav'.

I think it's completely warped and unfair. I think London itself all over is very ageist anyway, but particularly in Hackney the media went mad a couple of years ago with Hackney youths. I went to this quite posh school in Hertfordshire, and my brother went there five years before me. When he first went, he would say to people: 'I'm from Hackney', and they'd be like, we actually don't want to talk to you because they just thought that everybody – from the newspapers, from what their stupid, idiotic parents had read in the newspapers, and believed – they just thought that everybody from Hackney was a chav who carries a knife and wears a hoody and mugs people just for fun. Obviously that's total bullshit. But then I guess at the same time it wasn't that much bullshit ten years ago, and now it is a lot better because of like the art scene, and now young people are all like 'Hey I go to Brick Lane and recycle'. That's what being cool's about these days rather than like wearing tracksuits and carrying a knife.

This young woman did not agree with the public image represented of 'her' neighbourhood in the media. And, she acknowledged a certain imbalanced relationship between the public perception and her subjective experience of the neighbourhood. To use Soja's (2010) lexicon, a media city, as we observed it, is not innocent of injustices related to spatial entitlement, and the challenge for a study that acknowledges the complex relationality of a media city is to recognise *how young people experience these spatial hierarchies* in both digital and physical contexts and how they interrelate them in their own lives.

### **Street as an arena for relationality and a quest for (in)visibility**

Another question posed during the fieldwork concerning the idea of the street was "What makes the street visible", or more precisely "What makes young people visible in the streets?". This question proved to be far more complex than we thought in the beginning of our study. Young people's daily life in the media city seemed to be based on a contested interplay between recognition and anonymity, making young people simultaneously blatantly visible and invisible in the streets of the media city (see e.g. Back, 1996; Keith, 2005).

As the prevailing media discourse about the youth in East London, and to some extent also in Malmi, overemphasises gang activity and youth violence, our first, perhaps rather 'romantic', plan was just to go

out and hang around in the street, in order to update and deepen our knowledge of these neighbourhoods as local contexts for the young people's media-saturated life. It was no small surprise to find that despite walking through several different areas at several different times of the day, the youth were nowhere to be seen – at least in the form of easily recognizable and concentrated groups. There were young people in transit, often in pairs or small groups, but it was hardly the gangland that the mainstream media exhorts. Instead, the young people tended to gather in groups in estate courtyards, or in parks, hidden from the view, experienced often as rudely racializing and gendered. One of our male informants in Tower Hamlet summarised the views of many others we talked to:

P1: Well there's places, we call it chilling spots so like if someone calls us we just say yeah come here, and when they come here they'd find all of us there, and it's mainly corners like out of sight, so whatever we do people can't complain and all that, because mainly when we're hanging around in groups in the benches and all that people feel scared. When they're walking past they make comments or something, sometimes they call the police on us, even though we're not doing anything we just talk loudly, that's it.

I: Really?

P1: Yes, it's intimidating

I: Has that happened to you?

P1: It's happened a lot.

In research literature, the quest for visibility has often been seen as a quest for recognition and the right to use the city – and even more, as a sign for spatial entitlement (Soja, 2010; Back, 1996; Keith, 2005; Skelton, 2013). Likewise, being invisible has been considered as a sign of the lack of recognition. When looking at the interplay between visibility and recognition in current media-saturated circumstances, it is easy to notice that the contemporary media city does not only overvalorize visibility, but also leads to the rise of new forms of exclusion, discursively constructed i.e. as the young underclass who inhabits the margins of the hybrid media city. Our observations support the claim that young people have pushed themselves – or they have been pushed – over the upper threshold of fair visibility, to a zone of super-visibility, where everything they do becomes gigantic to the point of being paralyzing. (See Brighenti & Mattiucci, 2013; Keith, 2005.) Media representations of young migrants as perpetrators or victims of street crimes are a brutal sign of this kind of super-visibility, as are many other forms of moral panics selectively focused on actors deemed to be representative of moral minorities (Hall et al., 1978). Les Back (2007) talks about absolute moral categories attached in particular to those groups of people, who seem to need parallel care and control from 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 suburbs imperceptible.

The young people we studied in Malmi and Tower Hamlets seemed to be searching for words to express themselves in unspectacular ways about the locations in which they were living, and thereby against a certain sort of territorialized moral panic, produced around the youth in the suburbs, in particular. The stratified nature of urban spatial entitlement became apparent for us, even more in London than in Helsinki (cf. Skelton, 2013, pp. 468–469). The relational element of young people's urban life is significant

in this context as well. The attention to young people's mobility, understood here as the entitlement to move around autonomously, should not be restricted only to the geographical spaces but should also be seen as a question concerning a multitude of spaces including digital spaces and the relationality embedded in and between them (cf. Brighenti & Mattiucci, 2013, p. 3).

Consequently, our observations in the media city, both in material and immaterial terms, problematize the truism of the street as a simple public domain. The very concept of the media city – with a whole series of private interests, applications, advertisements and control mechanisms – may imply that the public domain is lost (cf. Cronin, 2010). At the same time, the public dimension of the street can be considered more pervasive than ever since it no longer needs any physical articulation. Indeed, this kind of interrelationship of the physical and digital has been interpreted in contradictory ways: some claim that mediatization and digitalisation have led to an expanded private sphere, whereas others say the opposite, arguing that it is public culture that has increased its presence through the media (see McQuire, 2006; 2008). Either way, the public/private distinction has lost much of its clarity when media city is at stake.

During our fieldwork, we became convinced that the street – in its conventional meaning – can hardly be regarded as an open, and as such public, place for young people. The more time we spent in the field, the fuzzier it appeared to us as researchers (cf. Ilan, 2013). The interrelation between visibility and control is of special relevance here as well. We began to think about specific *visibility regimes*, to adapt the concept of Andrea Mubi Brighenti and Christina Mattiucci (2013), in relation to the media-related environments young people occupied both in Helsinki and London. The same element of visibility that puts the street in the spotlight – crime, or rather, fear of crime – seemed to keep young people off the streets. 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 young people in Tower Hamlets and Malmi – and these were disproportionately boys with ethnic markers – had been stopped and searched by the police regularly from the early age of ten. To them, the street was not an ideal place to hang around and meet the people because it was *too* public, too controlled – and therefore not perceived as open nor safe.

This led us to think about young people's possibilities to create and occupy 'alternative public spheres' in the context of the media city (cf. Gilroy, 1987). The following example is from an interview we had with two boys (age 15 and 16) whom we first met in a graffiti workshop organized at Malmi Youth Centre. Later, we hanged around with these boys in Helsinki and asked them to show us places where they made their graffiti. This example illustrates how our informants negotiated their roles as active makers and creators of the media city:

The discussion turned to illegal and legal walls and their meaning for the graffiti culture:

I: Do you feel that more legal walls would be needed?

P: Well, I'm sure that beginners would come here (legal wall in Suvilahti) rather than in some semi-legal places where you feel anxious. Those kinds of chilling spots where you can hang such as Pasila's gallery (abandoned railway tunnel) nearby could be legalized. It's a bit stupid that pieces are buffed, there could be a spot where one could paint so no one wouldn't mind. Police



and cops could come and visit once in a while. Of course it's everyone's own... people have different opinions but I think it should be so that you could go there. Legally. No one should mind.

These kinds of observations of the young people encouraged us to come back to the idea of regimes of visibility with its diverse forms of urban stratification. Re-thinking the classical idea of the urban scholar Henri Lefebvre (1968), media city as a 'lived space' for young people seems to contain contested elements of mundane emancipation, active contestation, but also alienation.

During our fieldwork it became increasingly apparent that young people's use of the city can be also considered as a reaction to the restricted access to traditional 'public' urban places, the use of which was regulated and controlled, thus making them closed rather than open in the eyes of young people we met and talked to. In Malmi the stories told by young people were not as harsh as in Tower Hamlets. However, the clear relation between the imposed visibility of young people – often based on gendered or racialized markers – and the feeling of insecurity in the city could also be observed in Helsinki. According to a recent survey, perceptions of oneself as visibly deviant (youngsters with migrant background in particular) increase the sense of anxiety both in one's own neighbourhoods, in the city centre of Helsinki and on public transport. (Tuominen et al., 2014.) Experiences of insecurity are often linked with certain places – traditionally seen as 'public' – not with the media city as a whole, which leads young people to avoid these places. According to the survey, it is exactly the physical street, conventionally regarded as a youth cultural locus per se, that is perceived not only as unsafe but also as something to be avoided.

In both local contexts where we hung around with the youth, libraries seemed to provide a semi-public space that extends the spatial boundaries from the physical to an imaginary realm of the media city (see also Mickiewicz in this volume). Material objects such as books, newspapers, magazines, movies and computers provided a means for young people to travel from one space to another, from physical reality into a virtual world of stories, fantasies and dreams. They were also seen as safe, cosy places of daily sociability – a place to spend time with friends in material and virtual meaning of the word, and to meet girl/ boy friends.

The reputation related to the safety of the libraries is interlinked with the dynamics of control. 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 were 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, the young people's experience of the library was that of a controlled space. This may be interpreted as an example of hierarchic relationality between the young people and the so called adult society. Yet, this aspect of control was seen as an element providing a sense of security, particularly for those young people for whom street also meant potential violence or open conflict.

### **The ordinary digital life in the media city – Maintaining local relationality**

As discussed above, in today's media city, daily dynamics embedded in the young people's spatial entitlement cannot be studied only by exploring their attachment to the physical streets, shopping centres, transport hubs, youth centres and cafes, but also through the digital spaces made available by the social media and its numerous applications such as Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube or Instagram. The term 'digital' in this context refers to virtual space organized around computerized communication. Digital spaces can be created around mobile communication, different screens and applications. These are spaces not primarily restricted by physical location, but by technological resources. Today, the boundaries between different aspects of digital spaces are shifting, and so are the categories and hierarchies associated with them. Thus, the term 'digital' is increasingly used to refer to a hybrid mixture of mass communication and new online communication. These developments have consequences for the relational engagements of young people in a media city (cf. Couldry, 2012, p. 2).

Moreover, digital space, in a view that follows Massey's (2005) idea, can be seen as an ongoing social construction where multiple physical and digital dimensions intersect. It is dynamic and full of ruptures, produced in social relations, increasingly between the global and the personal. McLuhan's (1964) famous idea of media as an extension of people becomes an embedded part of lived reality when young people experience the city with its media-saturated representations through mobile technology and social media. Now, thanks to wireless technology and 4G technologies, young people's own role as co-constructor of urban space becomes relevant in new ways. Photos, videos, check in updates and tweets produce, reproduce and transform urban street digitally to grasp new type of interrelations (cf. Ling & Campbell, 2011).

However, our fieldwork in Malmi and Tower Hamlets contest any suggestions regarding putatively 'borderless' digital sociabilities. On the contrary, what we found was a relatively localised perception of a use of digital space in the media city, or local relationality, if you will. In Malmi, we met with and talked to young people who mainly shared digital 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. The following excerpt between the researcher and her informant illustrates the ordinariness of the social media in young people's lives and how they used those spaces to maintain their local relationships between their peers.

I2: Do you have foreign (Facebook) friends as well or what's the standard?

P2: Well, friends and the classmates usually ask you to become a friend.

P3: We have these kinds of groups here (Facebook), so one can ask for example to which lunch we go.

I2: So it is that kind of local communication?

P2: I think so.

When our informants in Malmi wished to expand their boundaries, they connected with the larger spheres 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; others shared digital spaces with self-made celebrities such as vloggers. A group of boys we encountered were engaged in the physical skateboard culture, which involved making and posting skateboard videos on the Vimeo website to share them with friends. Instead of 'only' consuming digital spaces, these young people also were actively engaged in making those spaces their own. By doing so, young people performed a sort of peer relationality, in which they reused together digital space in novel ways.

The digital dimension of the media city is equally a site of visible and invisible control and repression – a site of unjust relationality. Social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or Instagram provide possibilities for young people to create new types of socio-spatial relationships as they also provide significant contexts 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 and agency in a media city (e.g. Kallio & Häkli, 2011; Keith, 2005).

In Malmi, the informants negotiated their digital spatial entitlements in a complex network of individual relationships. Parents at home and teachers at school controlled young people's access by setting rules relating to the access and use of online media. 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. Media representations related to young people as 'digital natives' entails contested elements where young people are depicted both a prospect and a threat for the media city. Consequently, they need to be looked after, educated and even 'tamed' before being allowed full right to the media city. In addition, our informants had to adapt to the digital rules and codes of conduct maintained by the peer groups, outside adult control. Everyday ethical decisions of profound relational character were constantly made and remade. Often, young people had to make these everyday ethical decisions when facing dilemmas such as which images and messages to post and how to react to sensitive knowledge of different kind shared in the digital spaces.

### **Relational sensibilities – A way forward?**

In this article, we have discussed how to study young people in the streets of media city from a perspective of relationality. We have discussed the relational approach as a possible way of connecting multiple socio-spatial aspects embedded in media city into one research design. It invites us to think about media city consisting of a variety of relations not only between physical and digital spaces, but also intertwined social relations acted out between different actors in media-saturated urban contexts. These relationships are never neutral, let alone inconsequential, instead they consist of different types of hierarchies and struggles for spatial entitlements, and thus, are embedded in a range of different types of spatial injustices, to rephrase Soja's (2010) famous lexicon.

We have illustrated how young people negotiated those relationalities by framing them as negotiations over boundaries, issues of (in)visibility and control – all of the being key elements of their spatial entitlements. In many cases the dynamics around these three perspectives of spatial entitlement –

boundary making, a quest for (in)visibility and freedom from or to control in a media city – are anything but simple and straight forward. Instead they are played out in a complex web of social, cultural, political and material conditions. Consequently, researchers interested in the media-saturated urban environments of young people have to learn not only to recognise these relationalities and the related hierarchies and boundaries, but also to understand them from the perspective of young people. This calls for a particular sensitivity towards reflectivity on the researcher's own position and related participatory ethics as suggested by Sultana (2007), Tani (2014) and Pyyry (2015), among others.

Our theoretical and methodological choices were directed by the assumption that much of the everyday urban life of young people consists of mundane practices and tacit knowledge. Because of its taken-for-granted nature, this knowledge cannot be approached by any simple research design. This called for a cross-disciplinary research orientation in which sociology, youth studies and media studies were brought to a theoretical and methodological dialogue together. It also called for a fieldwork approach that was open to physical (e.g. which territories and spaces to observe and participate in) and conceptual (what to observe in those spaces) exploration and tolerated uncertainty. The starting point hence, was 'the street' as a conceptual and empirical locus for research.

In discussing the role of knowledge and the knowing subject, Patti Lather (2009) has talked about the 'methodology of getting lost', in which researchers reconstruct their relations vis-à-vis the field during the process of discovery (Suurpää, 2011). Unlike fieldworkers who hang around with a particular subcultural group, or fieldwork that takes place in a designated space (school, youth centre, sports venue, shopping centre, etc.), we approached the media city as less fixed and more open-ended site of research putting a special emphasis on the question of *the street as a contingent locus of contemporary mediatized urban life*. In particular, we were challenged to ask, how the street can best be studied in its physical and virtual dimensions, what type of relational aspects do the researchers confront when studying young people's lives in the media city by conducting fieldwork in the streets. When the field itself becomes increasingly contingent, as in our case, the significance of fieldwork as wandering and coincidental relationships between the researcher and the informants in the field increased as well.

In his book titled *The art of listening* (2007) Les Back, a pioneer in the study of urban young people in Britain, exhorts researchers to see, hear, and talk about that which is left unsaid or that which people don't want to talk about. For Back, this means tracing counter-knowledge, counter-discourses and counter-action among the people studied. This kind of ethos of listening – focusing on when and why some voices get heard while others do not – goes well with the study of media cities as well. When the field to be studied is blurred and multi-sited by nature, as in our given case, also the fieldwork approach applied demands a sort of hermeneutics of suspicion. Instead of being content with official knowledge and concepts (whether this is produced by the research, media, or policy makers), the researcher is demanded to be attuned to constant conceptual fluctuation.

This claim can also be understood in terms of research ethics. In other words, the issue that needs to be addressed is not only how to get access to the streets of media city, but how to establish and maintain a sensitive touch to young people and the urban spaces in which they construct the dynamics of entitlement and encounters? This also is an issue of relationality between the researcher and his/her informants and related research environments. From the point of view of research ethics, the media city can be seen as a valuable field for an adult researcher to observe young people's action and hear their multiple voices. At

the same time, the media city with its extended modes of surveillance and control demands the researcher to equally think about the right of young people to privacy – even from well-meaning youth researchers. As Finnish youth researcher Sirpa Tani (2014) pertinently states, when young people's use of public space is at the core of research interests, there is a call for flexible and context-sensitive solutions. This type of sensitivity towards relationality, we argue, should affect all phases of the research starting from the choice of the research design to contacting the informants and the publishing the conclusions.

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