City of Bits: Young People, Cyberspace and the City

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This paper aims to explore the relationship between young people, public space and cyberspace. There are arguably a group of people who have the 'right' to the city (Mitchell 2003) and young people rarely fall into this category. In the case of a group of young people congregating in the recently regenerated Millennium Quarter in Manchester (Massey 2007) they have had to legitimate their presence, by establishing a peer youth worker scheme. Mitchell (1995) states that civic legibility is eliminated in cyberspace. This indicates there is a distinct difference in terms of legitimacy in physical space and cyberspace. The specific question here is what are the differences between geographies of public space and cyberspace for the teenagers in question? It is anticipated that there is more freedom in cyberspace and that public urban spaces are more challenging and limiting for young people.

Introduction

This paper will discuss the differences between the experience of young people in urban physical space and cyberspace. Initially we shall look at the experience of young people in urban space, using a case study from an area in Manchester city centre known as the Millennium Quarter as an example. The young people here struggled to gain their 'right to the city' (Mitchell 2003??) but now have legitimacy in this space.

There has been much debate (Turkle 1996, Abbott 1998, Bennett 2004, Jenkins 2006) regarding the internet as an important space for the creation of identity for adolescents. This literature will be explored and we will look briefly at a forum set up by the young people from Manchester discussed earlier. Finally some initial conclusions will be drawn and possibilities for further future research highlighted.

Onground Experiences of Urban Space

There has been much debate about the legitimacy of young people in public spaces (Mitchell 2003, Massey 2007 INSERT REFS). Questions have been raised re. how democratic the city is as a site for the creation of identity for young people. Indeed Heitmeyer (2002) asks

"are we facing a trend toward a "misuse of the city", whose real social purpose has been lost (Feldtkeller 1994: 13)" (Heitmeyer 2002: 94).

As urban space is increasingly controlled and regulated (Mitchell 2003, Coleman 2004, Massey 2007) young people are viewed as more problematic and penalised for their presence in public space. Arguably young people have just as much right as any other group to be present in the city and it is important that citizenship is extended to the young, in order that they feel a sense of belonging and are not marginalised. In addition young people are entitled to feel safe in urban space (Earls and Carlson 2002). The notion that young people should be involved in any rational discussion about citizenship and democracy is hindered by not some adults being apathetic about such discussions. Therefore the notion of including youth in these debates is viewed as even more preposterous (Earls and Carlson 2002).

Such changes in the way public space is subject to regulation, surveillance and control have resulted in what is known as a 'privatisation' of public space (INSERT REFS??). The city is ordered in such a way that control mechanisms ensure that only some have access to certain areas (Mitchell 1995). Whilst the space of the shopping mall is private in terms of ownership it is generally seen as a public space. However, security guards in shopping centres often place restrictions on or even ban teenagers form entry (Shields 1992). When observing definitions of public space Mitchell (1995) notes that

"But urban public space is not merely un-private – what's left over when everyone walls off their private domains. A space is genuinely public, as Kevin Lynch once pointed out, only to the extent that it really is openly accessible and welcoming to members of the community that it serves. It must also allow users considerable freedom of assembly and action. And there must be some kind of public control of its use and transformation over time" (Mitchell 1995: 125).

In addition your actual location within the physical city has significant bearing:

*"In the standard sort of spatial city, **where** you are frequently tells **who** you are (and who you are will often determine where you are allowed to be). Geography is destiny; it constructs representations of crisp and often brutal clarity"* (1995: 10)

Therefore there are certain parts of the city that are created for or cater for certain groups, such as the gay village in terms of sexuality, or betting shops in terms of gender etc. This was the case in Manchester city centre which underwent significant rebuilding as a result of the IRA bombing in 1996. Developers were keen to attract a certain type

of person, i.e. the affluent consumer (Atkinson 2003,Raco 2003) and this did not include large groups of teenagers with little disposable income and a penchant for listening to alternative music and dressing head to toe in black. Let us now turn to the particular case study of Manchester and the youths involved in the legitimisation of their presence in this space.

Gaining Legitimacy in the City

The group of people who congregated in the newly regenerated area of Manchester known as the Millennium Quarter belonged to an alternative youth culture broadly known as Goths[i]. The Goth movement emerged in the early 1980s and merged elements of punk, glam rock and early new romanticism into a new dark and androgynous style. Whilst the movement gained much media attention in the 1980s and the popular music chart featured music from the likes of The Cure, Sisters of Mercy and The Mission, this genre of music has been largely absent from the popular music scene with the exception of Marilyn Manson who draws largely on Goth style (Hodkinson 2004). More importantly for this group of teenagers they often experienced bullying or discrimination at school due to their appearance, thus congregating once a week with their peers in the Millennium Quarter was an important support mechanism for them (Massey ????). Unfortunately Manchester City Council were unsympathetic to such issues and saw large groups of youngsters gathering in the area at weekends and school holidays problematic. Their concerns were couched in terms of anti-social behaviour, drug use, alcohol consumption, though as there was little evidence of such behaviours it is more likely that they were responding to pressure from local traders who felt that the teenagers were bad for business. Manchester City Council sought a

dispersal order on large groups of youths in the city centre, though the police did not agree to this due to resourcing issues.

In response to the threat of a dispersal order youth workers collaborating with young people in the area set about the promotion of pro-social rather than anti-social behaviour. This involved engaging young people in activities such as litter-picking and offering support and advice on issues such as drug and alcohol use, sexual health, running away from home, self-harming and bullying. This programme was formalised as the Peer Youth Worker Scheme whereby young people acted as youth workers for their peers after receiving training. The fact that they were peers was an important aspect of the scheme both in terms of gaining trust from their peers, gaining legitimacy within the city centre (Massey 2007) and viewing themselves as equals to others within the city (Heitmeyer 2002). The question here though is do young people have to work so hard to gain equality and legitimacy in virtual space?

Online Experiences of Cyberspace

There is a generalised anxiety around young people's use of cyberspace usually founded on concerns of access to adult material, issues around vague ownership and regulation (Sefton-Green 1998), exposure to paedophiles, recipes for building bombs (Sternheimer 2003) or bullying from peers. In actual fact young people are more likely to e at risk from people they know re. issues such as sexual abuse, thus 'Cyber-Stranger Danger' (Sternheimer 2003) is less pervasive than the media portrays. In addition some have questioned whether online communities are real communities "with

hearts and souls" (Jenkins 2006: 183). However, Abbott (1998) argues that young people publish on the web due to a desire to be part of a community and air their opinions:

"the Web is clearly offering the young people who use it for publication a highly sophisticated and complex means of speaking to their peers, to others interested in the same topics and to those they seek to influence. It is extending their voices" (Abbott 1998: 103).

In this sense it is much easier for young people to have their voices heard on the web than in the physical space of the city as they have more net knowhow than most adults and their age need not be an issue as it is not visible online (Turkle 1996). Online communities also serve as important socialization agents for young people (Thomas 2007).

This leads us onto the issue of identity and how much of our identity we wish to reveal online. In one sense this is a source of danger for youngsters (paedophiles lurking in chatrooms) but can also be a great source of liberation and confidence building for teenagers. Whilst our identity and others' perceptions of it may be limited by our physical appearance offline (mannerisms, hairstyle, clothes, tattoo, piercings), online we can reveal as little or as much of our physical characteristics, or 'semiotics of identity' (Thomas 2007) as we wish.

"In the digital world however, the performance of identity is divorced from a direct interaction with these cues from the physical, and instead relies upon the texts we create in the virtual worlds we inhabit. These texts are multiple layers through which we

mediate the self and include the words we speak, the graphical images we adopt as avatars to represent us, and the codes and other linguistic variations on language we use to create a full digital presence" (Thomas 2007: 5).

Thus it is more about what we say rather than how we look online, indeed we may even have multiple online identities (Turkle 1996). It is possible for a loner to have many friends on the internet or someone who is typically shy to behave in an extrovert way in cyberspace. Increased anonymity online also allows for less responsible behaviour, or rebelliousness with fewer consequences on the internet, dependant on how much of the user's true identity is revealed (Thomas 2007). The key point here is that our physical features are not immediately apparent online, the most famous example of this being the New Yorker cartoon showing a dog at a keyboard with the caption 'online nobody knows that you are a dog' (Mitchell 1995, Maczewski 2002). This offers an advantageous means of interaction for those who struggle with shyness or are unhappy with their physical appearance:

"The internet is a medium with unique qualities. Some of these qualities, like anonymity, may make cyberspace a particularly intriguing place for young people, who tend to be both socially awkward and eager to connect with others" (Wolak et al 2002: 455).

Interestingly though most young people's online and offline worlds are not dissimilar. Young people tend to meet and communicate with the same people they do offline as online, thus the two worlds are seamless.

"For children, there is no such dichotomy of online and offline, or virtual and real – the digital is so much intertwined into their lives and psyched that the one is entirely enmeshed with the other" (Thomas 2007: 163)

Research conducted by Wolak et al (2003) found that certain types of youths were more likely to form close online relationships, namely those who have high levels of conflict or low communication with their parents. The youths did tend to meet onground also and reported that people often looked different to their expectations, which suggests that young people do have a tendency to masquerade online (Wolak et al 2003). The study found that those who are troubled are at more risk online highlighting the real risks that exist for young people, however they conclude that

"Cyberspace is an actual, active and eventful place for youth, and should be treated as such" (Wolak et al 2003: 117).

Internet chat rooms are an important site for the creation of identity, indeed Bennett (2004) argues that internet chat rooms can be viewed as subcultural spaces.

"Thus we can no longer take it for granted that membership of a youth culture involves issues of a stylistic unity, collective knowledge of a club scene, or even face-to-face interaction. On the contrary, youth cultures may be seen increasingly as cultures of 'shared ideas', whose interactions take place not in physical spaces such as the street, club or festival field but in the virtual spaces facilitated by the internet" (Bennett 2004: 163)

Clearly the internet is an important place for identity formation, expression, interaction and helps young people gains confidence and acceptance from others (Maczewski

2002, Valkenberg and Peter 2008). It also has the added advantage of being more accessible and less costly thus

"convenience, funds, mobility, friends, activities online or lack thereof onground, are reasons for young people to prefer online activities over onground opportunities" (Maczewski 2002: 119).

It is important to note that there are clearly issues of access re. cyberspace as whilst spatial cities have elaborate organising and controlling access structures (e.g. surveillance, security) security is present online albeit it to a much reduced extent in the form of passwords and some sites use moderators (Mitchell 1995).

Online Forum in Manchester : urbisunderground

One of the outputs of the Peer Youth Work Scheme was the establishment of a web site www.urbisunderground.com which includes a forum for young people. The site is moderated and the young people in question must register their details to use the site. This is to reduce any risks of harm discussed earlier in the paper such as 'cyber-stranger danger (Sternheimer 2003). Young people using the site do use it as a means to express their views and opinions on what is happening with the urban space they use at the weekend, which points

"to a whole set of issues about the political and social dimension of virtual community. These young people feel they have no political voice, and they look to cyberspace to help them find one" (Turkle 1996: 241).

At this stage very little primary research has been conducted on use of virtual space as the aim here is to establish and summarise the existing literature on young people and the internet. It is envisaged that research into this issue will be carried out early in 2010 by analysing discussion on the forum and possibly by carrying out an online survey using survey monkey.

Conclusion

It is apparent that there are fewer restrictions on young people's use of space online and onground. To be accepted as legitimate and to have their voices heard the young people in Manchester had to create a peer youth work scheme, online they had to just set up a web site which involves negotiating fewer hierarchies and power battles. An influencing factor here is that there are no land values online, thus the presence of youth there offers less of a threat to capitalism. In addition the internet is anti-spatial, the only address you have is your email and you can have many aliases /email addresses on the internet so civic legibility is eliminated . Cyberspace is less contested than physical urban space so it is arguable that as long as everyone has access to a computer virtual space can be truly public re. this definition (Mitchell 1995). The internet also has the added advantage of not revealing one's identity immediately

"when online, one's gender, culture, lifestyle, clothing, voice, body size, age and identity are no longer bound by the confines of the embodied reality" (Thomas 2007: 17).

In terms of future research it would be interesting to see how much of a young person's identity is created by online use and to investigate whether this group of young people feel more accepted in physical or virtual space. There are also the downsides of internet use which require exploration; is the internet addictive (Maczewski 2002), what are the risks of overuse of the internet in terms of isolation or non-development of social skills in the physical world? Is having multiple personas/identities healthy? Undoubtedly though the literature points to the importance of the internet as an everyday part of the teenager's life:

 "One could surmise that when onground experiences so not allow for a young person to feel powerful, respected and accepted with all of her or his identities, the online virtual environment provides for a further life space in which young people's interests, self and identities can be explored in interaction with others" (Maczewski 2002: 122)

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[i] There were other categories such as emo, metal head and scene within the more general category of goth.