

**Urban space, friction and youth media scenes:
Learning, dwelling and imaging in the city**

by

Stuart R Poyntz, July 22, 2016

Media culture is centred in cities. Media and cities are in fact wound together in a “web of relations” (Arendt). What we understand and feel for cities is increasingly something we grasp through the media, and yet the media itself is dependent on cities, for workers and creatives in the culture industries, as the centre for consumer markets, as the apex of global communication flows, and as site and symbolic universe for stories and images in film, TV and news headlines. This binding together of the urban and media isn’t new. Since the 19th century the histories of consumerism, media and cities have been wound together, the one forming the spectacle through which the other is made light and mirror of our lives. Youth and youth culture are intimately tied to this history, but today, I want to explore the specific ways community youth media creation practices are now contributing to culture and urban space, and ask what this means for the ontologies of media cities.

Urban youth media production scenes have become part of the ‘throwntogetherness’ of contemporary urban living. Throwntogetherness is Doreen Massey’s phenomenologically rich term to describe “the whirl and juxtaposition of global diversity and difference in contemporary urban life” (Massey, 2005; qu in Amin, 2007, 9). Here, I use Massey’s term to draw

attention to the way community youth media groups are contributing to forms of friction in both large and small urban centres, a kind of friction that is generated from a rich mixture of practices, institutions and people that serve to territorialize space and contribute to the work of advancing urban democracy.

To make this argument, in what follows, I begin by addressing the nature of the global media city. I then introduce a notion of vernacular cosmopolitanism to think about how productive forms of urban friction are enabled by our conditions of throwntogetherness across urban sites. The emergence of a remarkable diversity of youth media production initiatives in cities like Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver in Canada are tied to these developments, and are part of a series of cultural resources that have emerged in recent decades to address the risk conditions young people face and are engaged with today. Drawing on online, policy and interview research about how youth media actions are situated in the city, by way of conclusion, I'll suggest the complicated and contradictory ways these initiatives are situated in cities and how they produce forms of vernacular cosmopolitanism that are helping to thicken up and enrich public life.

The global media city

While more than half of the world's population now lives in cities, most of what we know about the city is a consequence of the media. Media foster

and construct the symbolic power of the city, offering images of futurity that shape our imagined horizons of utopian and dystopian possibility (think for instance of the dystopian horizons portrayed in *Children of Men*, *Night Crawlers*, *The Hunger Games* or more distantly, *Blade Runner*. Utopian dreams are harder to find but appear in various installments in the *Star Wars* franchise and really across the sci-fi genre). The media also need the city. The synergies between corporate media and cities in fact “play a strategic role in the reproduction of economic and symbolic power [today], precisely because neoliberalism depends on symbolic forms – information, communication systems and perceptions” to foster market-led growth. Couldry and McCarthy (2004) use the compound term, MediaSpace to capture this dynamic, to draw attention to the way urban space is now constituted through acts of representation and global communication flows.

Within the inequitable scapes of contemporary globalization, there are particular cities – London, New York, Tokyo, Paris, and now, Shanghai, Seoul and Hong Kong – that are the most global of urban centres. They gather within their boundaries the most powerful and concentrated corporations that dominate cultural industries and communication networks, while providing the images, stories and headlines that impact imaginaries around the world. This produces a sense of a common worldly condition today, a global space of

shared time shaped by global brands and their allies in the entertainment industries, wherein notions like the global teen and globalized versions of childhood become an imposing reality.

Of course the conjunction of cities and media has been of intense interest among policy makers and others. It has fueled discourses about the information city, creative cities, talk of a new, imaginative class of actors in the city, and a host of policies and actions that aim to deepen the technological mediation of economic, political and social life. Canadian cities are hardly immune to these developments. Since 1991, for instance, Vancouver's Central Area Plan has aimed to foster a knowledge intensive, information and service-oriented cultural economy focused on the production of 'semiotic outputs' and experiential commodities (Murray and Hutton 2012, 313). In large measure, realtors and developers, technology companies and new media firms have been the beneficiaries of these developments. But the intense mediation and concentration of social life in urban centres has not only produced benefits for corporate actors and their allies; it has also fostered the emergence of a host of efforts that aim to socialize technology for progressive ends.

I mean by this that the power of media in cities is not only as industrial and corporate bodies directly linked to economic power and communication networks. The accumulative power of life in cities means that mediated

experience is realized and calibrated through a complex array of forces that sometimes mitigate and contest the homogenizing, unifying power of corporate, consumer culture and the surveillance structures with which it is linked.

Throughtogetherness, surplus energies and democratic friction

I argue such because to live in cities is almost inevitably to be confronted with difference in a manner that contributes to the stickiness of urban living (Amin, 2007; Georgiou, 2013). Gated communities, excessive surveillance and policing, the privatization of urban space and massive increases in real estate costs all serve to mitigate and control how friction and connection operate in cities. Nonetheless, urban life continues to be defined by our proximity and closeness with others and with a vast array of symbolic practices that are never exactly the same, but in fact are thread through with the fullness and diversity of transnational and more localized forms of difference.

Ulrich Beck refers to a world of enforced cosmopolitanism to describe the inevitable encounters and relationships we now have with a whole host of people, demands and symbols in cities. He means by this that we can't avoid having to account for difference among our shared conditions of urban living, even when we try. Rather, difference is an inevitable feature of daily life and it can be experienced as something enabling and exciting, filled with possibilities

and novelty, or as something deployed merely in the service of consumer markets and brand appeal. Powerful forms of neoliberal cosmopolitanism, linked to global media corporations, international communication networks and transnational elites have in fact all too often come to define how difference is understood to operate in urban communities. And perhaps this shouldn't surprise us. These same forces depend on the production of certain forms of difference as a component of diverse consumer markets and complex global mediascapes. But there is no reason the field of difference and friction in cities need only operate in the service of global markets and capitalist logics.

Active and highly diverse forms of public space have in fact long been thought coterminous with the development of dynamic and rich urban cultures, as though our conditions of throwntogetherness in cities could have a normative dimension. This association has fostered a range of movements over the 20th and 21st centuries, including the 'city beautiful' and the 'garden cities' movements in urban design, and media democratization and community media initiatives amongst those concerned with media cultures and political futures (Amin, 2007, 6). Across these actions, it is the circulation of multiple bodies, stories, images and imaginaries in a shared physical space that is thought "generative of a social ethos with potentially strong civic connotations" (Amin 2007, 9). Where spaces of throwntogetherness include a situated surplus,

‘spaces with many things circulating in them, many activities that do not form part of an overall plan or totality’ but are part of a diversity of “actants ... [that] have to constantly jostle for position and influence” (Amin 2007, 9-10). Within and amongst this jostling I and others argue we encounter the affective edge conditions and material frictions that enable publics to emerge.

Now, youth community media practices aren’t often thought part of the conditions of throwntogetherness that nurture urban democratic cultures. But such practices are producing participatory cultures with a political edge across a surprising number of cities today. Small players though they may be, they depend on and enable diversity, creativity and innovation in cities. Youth community media initiatives produce forms of friction that serve to territorialize space and bolster the future of democratic urban cultures. In this way, these groups contribute to the emergence of the vernacular cosmopolitan in cities (Georgiou, 2013). Vernacular cosmopolitanism is a mode of action that emerges “at the fringe of the ‘experience economy’” (44). It includes practices of plurality and difference that become part of a messy context of ‘throwntogetherness’ in everyday life. Vernacular cosmopolitanism is a kind of minor note within the enforced cosmopolitan life Beck draws our attention to. Nonetheless it is the result of contradictory and yet novel practices, including

those associated with community youth media organizations that I believe are critical for the future of urban public spheres.

Vernacular cosmopolitanism, youth media groups and friction in the city

Now in making this argument, it's noteworthy that the past decade has been witness to an outpouring of social change practices enabled and knit together by digital media networks that have played a tremendous role in feeding a new logic of youth participation in public life. This is perhaps most obvious in that wave of bottom-up 'communication for social change' practices now identified with the Arab Spring, and student actions in Chile, Quebec, Spain, the United Kingdom, Israel, Turkey, and so on (Tufte 2013 p. 21). But it is also evident in a whole host of participatory media actions and interest networks that are part of a new and emerging logic of participation among youth in which culture and politics weave together with practices of citizenship and collective action.

Symptomatic of these developments, the range and diversity of community youth media initiatives has expanded around the world in recent years. Such groups are part of a response to the risk conditions that shape contemporary life. They are crucial in negotiating citizenship in highly mediated cultures and are vital for addressing digital divides to equip young people with the resources and networks necessary to manage and respond to the way violence, uncertainty and opportunity now operate across our lives.

In Canada, the expansion of community based, youth media production organizations has been facilitated by and managed through policy actions, including more than 100 policies, legislative acts and reports produced since 1995 that bear on the funding relationships and other priorities and practices within youth media communities. These include arts funding policies, youth employment schemes and acts that aim to promote risk management and citizen development among a diverse range of youth. These actions have been key drivers of this sector. Amidst these developments, however, in what follows, I want to draw attention to how the youth media sector has impacted the shifting ontologies of cities, including who is in the city, where they are, the symbolic acts youth media groups enable and the productive tensions they produce.

With this in mind, in the second half of my talk, I describe the characteristics of the youth media scenes in Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal and suggest how these emergent scenes are contributing to a form of vernacular cosmopolitanism in the city. This work is part of a four-year research project on *Youth Digital Media Ecologies Project in Canada*, which explored how not-for-profit youth media initiatives are changing the public culture of Canada's three largest cities. Here, I am going to talk about all three cities, but I begin with Vancouver, the city and youth media scene I know best.

Vancouver, the edge city

Vancouver has a habit of looking outward, to its edges for public space. There is no central city square, and while the city's art gallery has long been a traditional gathering place for public protests, it is Vancouver's beaches, its sea walls and parks that have traditionally been common ground for people to gather.

The absence of a city centre has a peculiar parallel with the history of community youth media production in Vancouver. Like the city itself, Vancouver has long lacked an institutional hub around which the project of alternative media production might unfold. The absence of a dominant centre for teen media creation hasn't however, undermined the emergence of a robust youth media scene in Vancouver. Indeed, with more than 40 community youth media groups in a city of over 2 million, youth media production is part of a new media ecology in Vancouver, a media ecology in which a novel set of practices, networks, and technologies, are generating various modes of expression woven together with the throwntogetherness of the city itself.

To be sure, not every youth media group in Vancouver is creating a bridge between young media producers and urban democratic cultures. Some programs and initiatives are burdened with tasks and limits that tie their work to modern practices of power that privatize experience and fit easily with the

biases and demands of a market-driven, consumer culture. In particular, a number of youth media groups face immense funding pressures to tie their work pretty squarely around skills training for labour markets. They also face tremendous pressures to create programs that manage risky bodies and develop individuated, socially rationalized subjects who are responsible, skilled and readied for life in neoliberal digitized societies. Yet this isn't all that's going on. Rather, youth media groups are also producing significant forms of cultural friction that are shaping the feel and function of the city.

I would make a similar claim about what is happening in Toronto and Montreal. Both cities have a complicated relationship with public space. While both are deeply multicultural cities, Montreal is divided between the English Westside and the French eastern districts. Toronto, on the other hand has long had a contentious relationship with the development of public space and public infrastructure. Yet where the emergence of youth media production scenes is concerned, a remarkable vitality and range of practices seems to be underway today.

It's a scene: community size and demographics

I argue thus to begin with, simply because of the number and range of young people now involved with media programs in Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal. Conservatively for instance, Vancouver's youth media scene annually

touches the lives of 12,000-15,000 young people (which represents more than 15% of the 15-24 year olds in the city). In Toronto, such groups reach nearly 35,000 young people and in Montreal, nearly 17,000 participants are involved in such organizations. Media groups also bring together an impressive diversity of youth. In Vancouver, for instance, 86 per cent of organizations work largely with low-income youth, while young people of colour make up the majority of participants in almost 60% per cent of organizations. 52 per cent of media groups do at least some work with LGBT youth, and while gender participation is about equal across programs, 11 per cent of local groups – about the same number that prioritize skills training – produce media with young people who lack citizenship or permanent residence status, and so are often living in the most vulnerable and precarious of conditions.

Beyond these numbers, youth media groups in all three cities are also addressing a range of objectives, including: media education and film literacy; youth violence prevention; urban aboriginal youth; at-risk and recently immigrated youth; global education and democratization; participatory digital policy; queer youth; peace activism; and health and risk prevention.

This schematic view is helpful, but it's also useful to get a closer look at organizations that reflect the character and shape of media initiatives. So in Vancouver, for instance, we find:

Check Your Head, a youth-driven organization that began in 1998 to provide education and media training about issues of media democracy, corporate power, globalization, and climate change.

OpenMedia.ca, a wildly successful advocacy group developed and driven by youth that is now one of the foremost Internet freedom organizations in the world, with more than 600,000 supporters.

Access to Media Education, more than two decades in operation and leading programs in arts-centred activism for a range of youth. Most recently, their work has focused on aboriginal youth, intercultural dialogue and arts-based storytelling.

I might mention other groups, including, Regent Park Youth Media in Focus and TakingITglobal in Toronto, or the Girls Action Foundation, Leave Out Violence, or Wapikoni, a Montreal-based mobile video and music studio that brings together urban and non-urban aboriginal youth to address identity and community development issues. But my point is that together these organizations collectively mark the presence of alternative youth media scenes organized around non-profits and non-market forms of production, where different styles of address, minority or ignored behaviours, and diverse lifeworlds are adding friction, and complicating and contesting the way creative youth expression mediates urban space.

Stayin' in the city: Frictional sites and youth media scenes

More than the number and diversity of participants, the location of many groups, the networks operating among them, and the kind of media they produce underline a new and emerging role for organizations in cities. Again, I'll use Vancouver as my example.

Canada's third largest city is often called a city of glass, because glass-skinned office and residential towers dominate the city's core. This is a relatively recent phenomenon, associated with processes of development and gentrification that have broadly reshaped the city over the past twenty-five years. These tendencies are hardly unique to Vancouver, but an important consequence has been the migration of professionals, helping-industry workers, and other homeowners into the downtown and East side of the city. This process in turn has led to rising real estate values, the out-migration of working-class and lower income peoples from downtown and East Vancouver, and a general tendency toward the homogenization of space and populations in the city.

Similar tendencies are apparent in Toronto and parts of Montreal, but in all three cities, youth media is complicating and sometimes contesting these developments by producing novel forms of friction in the service of a kind of vernacular cosmopolitanism.

In Vancouver, for instance, most youth media projects – see map – are concentrated in the downtown and Eastside of Vancouver. I note this because the current patterns of gentrification make it difficult for non-profits and other social service agencies to survive in these neighbourhoods. But survive they have, and as the number of youth media organizations has doubled in the 2000s, their growth has nurtured a particular kind of throwntogetherness in the city that’s helped to ameliorate the diffusion of low income, recently immigrated youth, and other young populations to the suburbs, by providing places and resources where a diversity of youth can feel ‘at home’ in Vancouver.

Adding to this sense of belonging in the city is the fact that the presence of youth groups in the downtown and east side has enabled informal connections and networks to develop among organizations. It’s also facilitated more formal connections: in fact, 67 per cent of groups share partnered program development; 44 per cent share funding resources; 59 per cent of groups share equipment and space; 41 per cent share staff and participants; and 48 per cent share staff. Nearly one quarter of groups share all these resources, and often with a small group of organizations.

Beyond the networks that bind Vancouver’s youth media scene together, the scene also helps foster a dynamic sense of public life by encouraging the

public use of cameras and other media by teenagers. Although the use of screens by teens is hardly unusual these days, when teenagers become visible producers and not just consumers of media, their use of cameras and other media in public can mark the city in interesting ways. The lens de-centres our everyday movement through urban space, not only because a camera provides a frame through which to see people and spaces anew, but because others see an authorial order among those producing mediated scenes. The author may be dead, in other words, but the materiality of the camera can still underpin an authority that complicates the mediated geographies of urban space, by shifting how teenagers understand themselves or are understood by others (as threat, victim, or passive subjects). What results is a new script for writing or marking urban scenes.

We see evidence of such scripts and scenes in the remarkable diversity of work produced by youth organizations. The quantity of media produced and circulated by 40 some odd groups in Vancouver is difficult to measure. The same is true in Toronto and Montreal. But neither media production nor media policy are in general taken up as functions of the marketplace among youth groups in any of the three cities. Rather, media creation and policy activism are addressed with an eye to explicitly social, cultural and sometimes, political objectives, including: media justice, community development, creative

expression, and the articulation of youth voice. It's in this sense that we might speak of such groups contributing to a sense of vernacular cosmopolitanism – a street-level sense of digital friction and difference rendered in image, sound and gesture circulated by and from youth media groups across urban space.

Youth media groups also work across a range of technologies and genres, including narrative fiction, documentary, PSAs, photography, news journalism, and community radio. This work in turn is circulated and shared across platforms and places, including film and youth art festivals; organization websites; group 'channels' on YouTube and other sharing platforms (for example, Vimeo); stand-alone media screenings for families and friends; and school and community-based screenings made possible because videos and other media have been turned into education packages. Together, these practices constitute an emergent field of media learning and innovation that is fostering diverse discourses, stories and images, which seep into the fabric of city life and contribute to the worldliness of the youth media scenes in Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal. In fact, when media creation becomes a part of how throwntogetherness functions in cities, a potent context is produced for fostering and incubating the actors and cultures vital for democratic urban cultures.

Limits and contradictions

Of course the situation in Vancouver, as in Toronto and Montreal, is hardly without deep tensions and limits. Most pressing among these are the financial limits and the state of precariousness faced by many organizations in all three cities. In Vancouver, among the 40 or so groups in the city, more than half have budgets of less than \$100,000 – and most are much less than that figure. More than 70% include fewer than 5 full time staff, and most organizations operate with 1-2 staff members. Funding for groups is largely project-based, rather than operational, and as a consequence, projects tend to be short-term, and subject to constant reinvention so as to appear ‘new’ for public and private funders.

If personnel is a challenge, so too is the limited availability of time and resources to build and sustain organizations. This complicates the sustainability of youth media practices; nonetheless, a range of organizations continue to foster novel modes of performance and expression that create a social economy of production which bears on the future of democracy in cities. Indeed, this is really the heart of my argument.

Gateway projects and democratic urban cultures

Various youth programs have in fact become gateway projects, places of articulation through which youth participants become involved with other

organizations, projects, and campaigns that are significant for the broader project of democracy. I note for instance that in Vancouver:

With the specific aim of developing young people as civic leaders, *Check Your Head* developed the *Next Up* program six years ago to train and connect young people committed to social and environmental justice with public policy activists and communication strategists and researchers.

- . Beyond producing a wide range of media themselves, *Reel Youth*, *The Cinematheque*, *Access to Media Education Society*, *Leave Out Violence*, and formerly, *Peace it Together*, all now act as network hubs through which youth discover and often pursue post-secondary degrees in critical media studies, filmmaking, and journalism.
- . In addition, I would mention *Gen Why Media*, which played a leading role in a recent public campaign called, *Rethink CBC*, that aimed to re-imagine the role of Canada's public broadcaster
- . Finally, while becoming one of the most successful media policy advocacy groups in the country, *OpenMedia.ca* has produced new and innovative models through which the media reform movement can use social media to protect, promote and promulgate the public interest.

All these examples are different and suggest complex alliances and networks among progressive advocacy groups, that link youth media production with the resources and actions central to expressions of vernacular cosmopolitanism. These networks break down, the youth media scene is a precarious and vulnerable ecology, and what is learned in the assorted youth media projects isn't always as rich and interesting as we might hope. But my point is youth production in Vancouver – as in Toronto and Montreal - is now part of a new media scene, which is contesting and sometimes altering the geographies of mediation in the city. This process in turn is producing a new and compelling ontology of the media city that is contributing to the nature of our throwntogetherness in Canada through practices we might describe as part of a vernacular cosmopolitanism.

Conclusion

To conclude, let me add: across much of the global north there has long been a tendency to see non-school based learning communities as mere supplements to formal schooling. In contrast to this conception, it appears to be the case today that the size, density, and range of media practices unfolding in youth media scenes is changing how we think about the future of urban democratic cultures. Indeed, more and more it appears as though without durable things – like youth media groups and the scenes they help constitute –

the world can retain a leanness and hardness for many youth. Cities become less public when they afford fewer and fewer spaces through which the actors and cultures central to media democratization can develop. What young people – like the rest of us – require is ‘a stage’ on which public life can emerge. In Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal the collection of community youth media organizations presents a complex, varied, and rich stage in which media expression and belonging are under way. Together such projects are producing a kind of throwntogetherness of people, practices, and stories that serves to thicken up public life. These developments are, as always, threaded through with limits, nonetheless the point I’ve tried to make is that such learning spaces are contributing forms of friction to urban settings that is vital for the future of urban democracy.