

"A CERTAIN TYPE OF FREEDOM"

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DRAFT 3 - FINAL - 29-JUN-2015

<INTRO>

"I found myself staring into space a few times and simply thinking. The quietness made me think about my dog, who died a few months ago, as she was a husky and always howling. I found myself missing her and feeling much more upset about losing her than I had in a while. This made me realise how much I use media to distract myself from certain feelings and emotions. Turning on the television or going online is an easy way to disconnect from unpleasant feelings rather than dealing with them. I imagine this is probably something quite common. There is a lot of stress in daily life and perhaps one of the reasons why all forms of media are used so much is to enable people to disconnect from their daily worries and concentrate on something else. It would probably be healthier to deal with our emotions rather than disconnect from them" [Sarah, 'Unplugged' participant].

<MAIN TITLE SEQUENCE>

<ACT 1: DISENGAGING>

Media and electronic devices are often accused of making young people isolated; of disengaging them from their surroundings, and encouraging them to spend more time in their own private comfort zone. As televisions, personal computers and video games gradually infiltrated their bedrooms, it looked as if young people were withdrawing from the city, spending less time with family, engaging in fewer physical activities, instead preferring to escape to virtual realities.

The potential side-effects of heavy media use should certainly not be overlooked - in fact, an increasing body of research has shown a

link between problematic internet use and poor quality of life, especially amongst children (Jackson, Brown and Pardun 2008; Kittinger, Correia and Irons 2012; Mazer and Ledbetter 2012). The thing is - factors such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and lack of social skills may actually be some of the *causes* of such increased media use, rather than merely the *effects* (Kalpidou, Costin and Morris 2011; Weinstein and Lejoyeux 2010).

Media and the privacy of the bedroom provide young people with a safe space in which they can explore their identities, experiment, follow their personal interests, understand their bodies and develop their individual self away from the pressures of peers and family (Livingstone 2005: 170).

More importantly, we should ask ourselves whether it is, in fact, the condition of our cities and public space that has forced young people to withdraw, rather than the other way around. Why do they choose to develop their identities and seek self-fulfilment in the comfort and safety of a private, virtual space, as opposed to a public, physical one? What is it that is stopping them?

Privatised bedroom culture has developed partly because of the failures of a more public, outdoor leisure culture, in terms of access, cost and variety of activities (Bovill and Livingstone 2001: 17). Society offers young people "few alternatives" (Livingstone 2005: 167) and many "still view the private as the only space in which to imagine any sense of hope, pleasure, or possibility". (Giroux 2011: 20).

Even spaces that ought to be open and public - such as plazas and parks - are increasingly privatised, managed, demarcated, signposted, controlled... Teenagers are often treated as pests. The Mosquito alarm, used in transport hubs and shopping malls across Britain and in other countries, emits sound at very high frequency that can only be heard by young people, so as to deter them from gathering or loitering in specific areas. The concept of 'loitering'

itself is problematic. What does loitering mean? It means "remaining in a particular public place for a protracted time without an apparent purpose" (Wikipedia). In some circumstances this is illegal.

So the way our public space is both structurally and legally constructed makes it difficult to exist there "without an apparent purpose". And "in our classist, consumer society, those who can't be consumers of goods are forced to be consumers of control" (Pakosz 1998). The degradation of the urban landscape is not class-neutral; it does not affect everyone equally. Children and young people from poorer backgrounds depend on their local spaces for vital amenities (Leahy Laughlin and Johnson 2011: 453). Public space is not just parks and fields. It is also local libraries, swimming pools, youth clubs, museums, learning spaces, meeting points.

So, if our public space is hostile to young people, and if media and digital devices provide them with spaces for socialisation, learning and escapism, how can we help them re-engage with their physical surroundings? How can we enable them to take ownership of the urban landscape and imagine a different reality?

<ACT 2: UNPLUGGING>

Over the last few years, a global team of researchers at the Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change have been developing innovative ways of encouraging students to reflect on their relationship to technology and to use digital media to engage with the city.

We found that unplugging completely from all media, even for just a period of 24 hours, was a crucial first step - in fact, for most participants it proved to be a profoundly transformative and empowering experience.

Since 2010 thousands of students around the world have taken part in Unplugged - a voluntary experiment which requires participants to give up use of all digital media and devices, from TV and radio to computers, smartphones, mp3 players and video games, for 24 consecutive hours, and then reflect on that experience. The point of this exercise is not to demonise media or to reduce their use. The aim is to appreciate and celebrate the opportunities available to us, but also to reflect on the things that we may be missing out on, by restricting ourselves to a digital comfort zone.

Most of our participants felt shaken by the experience of being unplugged - they initially felt bored... lonely... isolated...

"I felt an eerie silence in the house. Instead of music playing or having the TV on, there was silence. It made me, and I think the others in my family, very aware of each other and it felt almost intrusive, without the noise, it felt like there was *less space* around you" [Amy, 'Unplugged' participant].

The lack of digital opportunities for socialisation and entertainment meant that people were forced to leave their comfort zone and engage - with others in physical space, but also with their own self.

"One possible benefit from the experience was the amount of thinking I did. It was strange how in what felt like such an empty stretch of time I was able to think about things completely uninhibited by any sort of distraction... I found myself contemplating thoughts and concepts that usually wouldn't have entered my mind. It was almost like experiencing a certain type of freedom. There were no objects that could have prevented the expansion of my thoughts, and moreover, the *depth* of my thoughts" [Rosie, 'Unplugged' participant].

This experience revealed that one of the reasons we shut ourselves from others using smartphones and headphones isn't that we *want* to

be rude or antisocial, but that, often, we're just *insecure*. We don't know whether we're supposed to speak, and what we're supposed to say. And we may even think that there's no point in engaging in small talk with someone we're unlikely to ever meet again - or with someone who seems to have so little in common with us.

Yet it is *precisely* those millions of tiny, seemingly meaningless, encounters that create the fabric of our social lives and of our communities. They practically *force* us to perform and to coexist, for the sake of being polite - of being *civil*. And it is through this process of coming out of our comfort zone that we learn about others and about ourselves.

Going unplugged, even for a few hours, can also help us observe and appreciate our surroundings.

"During the day, I saw the world from a more local perspective. I began to talk to people at the bus stop, rather than shielding them with my iPhone or iPod. In a way, it felt like isolation, but then I also felt more part of a local community" [Joshua, Unplugged participant].

While unplugging is a very liberating and enlightening experience, digital media can be a valuable tool of engaging with the city.

<ACT 3: REENVISIONING>

If we want to empower young people and enable them to engage with public space, then we should be prepared to listen to them and to their own ideas. And, these may well be different from the ideas of architects and urban planners. In fact, research has shown that young people emphasise *social*, rather than physical, solutions to urban problems. Their top priorities are accessibility, sense of belonging and the ability to be with friends (Leahy Laughlin and Johnson, 2011).

Rather than trying to remove young people from public space, we should "draw attention to their lives and generate opportunities for them to critically assess, revision, and re-create a portion of their neighbourhood environment" (Breitbart 1995: 35).

One simple way in which we have been encouraging our students to do that is by going to their community and taking a photo of something they perceive to be a problem facing their city or local public space. We then ask them to write a short note explaining why they chose that particular spot and reflecting on potential causes and solutions.

This simple act of mindful engagement produced a torrent of emotional narratives. It unlocked young people's imagination and allowed them to express their concerns.

"We live in cities that are essentially clones of each other. There is no longer room for diversity. We are mere replicas of the inhabitants of the neighbouring towns and cities. We wear the same clothes, eat at the same restaurants and drink at the same coffee houses... The possibility of independence is now just a fabrication of our imagination" [Jade, 'On Cities' participant].

Emerging disciplines and methods such as digital literacy and visual ethnography provide us with powerful ways of empowering and engaging not just children or young people, but adults as well. Public and community art, design, performance and environmental intervention- they all have multiple benefits both for the people involved and for the broader community (Breitbart 1998).

Interactive mobile apps such as the Museum of London's *A Hollow Body* (ahollowbody.com) enable city dwellers to immerse themselves in the architecture and history of the urban landscape.

Interviewing local residents to create oral histories showcases “the extraordinary quality of ordinary lives” and breaks the isolation many feel within their urban neighbourhoods (Breitbart and Worden 1994: 83).

The Human Library project (humanlibraryuk.org) acts as a mobile library bringing people from different backgrounds together in a shared public space so as to combat prejudice and stereotypes.

“Mobile media art invites citizens to take stock of their surroundings and ‘perceive urban spaces in a different way’” (Wilken 2008: 45).

As GPS, mapping applications and other “location-aware technologies” continue to expand in urban spaces, “the nature of spaces, and, in time, the nature of the city will change” (Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011: 101).

Engaging with others and with our surroundings will not happen automatically. If anything, our instinct often is to withdraw and to avoid the complexity and potential awkwardness of the unfamiliar. Technology provides us with the choice to withdraw and disengage or to experience and interact. How and when we do those things is entirely up to us. All it takes is a simple, conscious decision.

<END CREDITS>

Full Video: <https://vimeo.com/gerodimos/freedom>

Other resources: <http://www.romangerodimos.com/films/freedom>

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