

URBAN PLAYGROUNDS: THE ROLE OF MOBILE MEDIA IN TEENAGERS' CITY LIFE

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Abstract: This research explores the interplay between urban sociology, media studies, and the mobile media practices of teenagers in public spaces within the city. Over recent decades, urban sociology has predominantly focused on the impact of post industrialization, suburbanization, and mobility on urban experiences. In contrast, limited attention has been given to how mobile media and mediatization influence individuals' social connections to urban spaces. This study bridges these perspectives by investigating how teenagers utilize mobile devices like smartphones, laptops, and MP3 players in Dublin's urban context. As mobile media become increasingly integrated with the Internet, they offer both opportunities and constraints for individuals' interactions within public, semiprivate, and private spaces. Young people, in particular, are intensive users of mobile phones, using them not only for instrumental purposes but also for emotional and social connections. This research adopts a holistic approach, considering the interaction between the mobile media device, its content, and the surrounding urban context. Through this study, we aim to shed light on how teenagers navigate Dublin's cityscape while engaging with mobile media. By exploring the intricate relationships between technology, content, and urban life, we contribute to a deeper understanding of contemporary urban experiences and the role of mobile media within them.

Keywords: *Urban sociology, mobile media, teenagers, Dublin, urban experiences.*

Introduction

In urban sociology, the past few decades have seen a focus on the impact that post industrialization, suburbanization (Peillon & Corcoran, 2004), auto mobility, and mobility (Urry, 2002) have had on the experience of the city. In human geography, there has been a focus on globalization and migration and a move away from absolute conceptions of space toward more relational approaches (Lefebvre, 1974). With some exceptions—namely, Manuel Castells—few have focused on the influence of mobile media and mediatization on people's social attachment to, and understanding of, city spaces (Bull, 2000; Couldry & Hepp, 2013). In this article, we combine relational approaches to space with media and communication research to understand teenage media practices in public spaces in the city.

As mobile media become increasingly connected to the Internet, they both enable and constrain how people engage with public, semiprivate, and private spaces and other people. Mobile media such as mobile phones, laptops, and MP3 players in many countries create “miniaturized mobilities” and can be used not only for connectivity,

coordination, and planning but to deal with what Elliott and Urry (2010) call the technological unconscious, “the negotiation of sociabilities based on widespread patterns of absence, lack, distance and disconnection” (p. 5). Young people in particular are intensive users of mobile phones in both

instrumental and affective ways, mediating their peer and parental relationships, creating individual and collective identities, and entertaining themselves (Ito, 2005; Stald, 2008). Previous research has argued we need to consider the triple articulation between the object, the content and the context in understanding teenage mobile media use (Courtois, Mechant, Paulussen, & De Marez, 2012; Hartmann, 2009). In this article we explore how teenagers, who mostly walk the city, use mobile media in Dublin.

Dublin has a population of 500,000 and is home to many global technology, finance, and retail companies. These operations attract a mobile migrant workforce to the city, and city authorities have attempted to rebrand the city as a cosmopolitan and entrepreneurial European city. It is also a historical city dating back to the Vikings. We examine the north inner-city area of Dublin—and in particular, the Smithfield area, located within walking distance of the main retail streets.

Smithfield: The Regeneration of a Public Space

The Irish name for Smithfield is Margadh na Feirme, which translates as “farm market.” This name suggests the productive practices as well as the links to rural production that have shaped this space for centuries. The space has existed since the Vikings came to Ireland more than 1,000 years ago, and a market has been in existence since the 16th century. Although there were attempts in the 17th century to gentrify the space, it remained predominantly a working-class area with institutional buildings, including an army barracks and a court. Over time it became congested because of the construction of public housing (McCarthy, 1990) and suffered from urban decline. By the 1990s, a Historic Area Rejuvenation Project (HARP) was established to plan a local urban regeneration. Such projects afforded a role to local communities “at least in the rhetoric of regeneration” (Russell, 2001, p. 2). These types of partnerships between local councils, communities, and urban developers were initially encouraged through European funding initiatives during the 1980s. The HARP project included a range of public, state, and business stakeholders, but only four local community representatives and no representation of local youths.

The redevelopment of areas such as Smithfield followed U.S. models of “modernisation construed as commitment to the growth model of prosperity with its economic and social adaptation” (Soper, 2013, p. 249). During the economic boom of the late 1990s to the 2000s, a range of “property-based tax incentives” in Ireland led to numerous regeneration projects and the “character of urban spaces became increasingly generic” (McCarthy, 2005, p. 235). A focus on private housing and enterprise often fundamentally changed the socioeconomic composition of such spaces. Over a period of 10 years, Smithfield Square changed from a public space surrounded by wholesale food markets, derelict buildings, and low-rise public housing to a public space surrounded by semiprivate spaces of consumption and privately rented mid-rise apartments (see Figure 1).

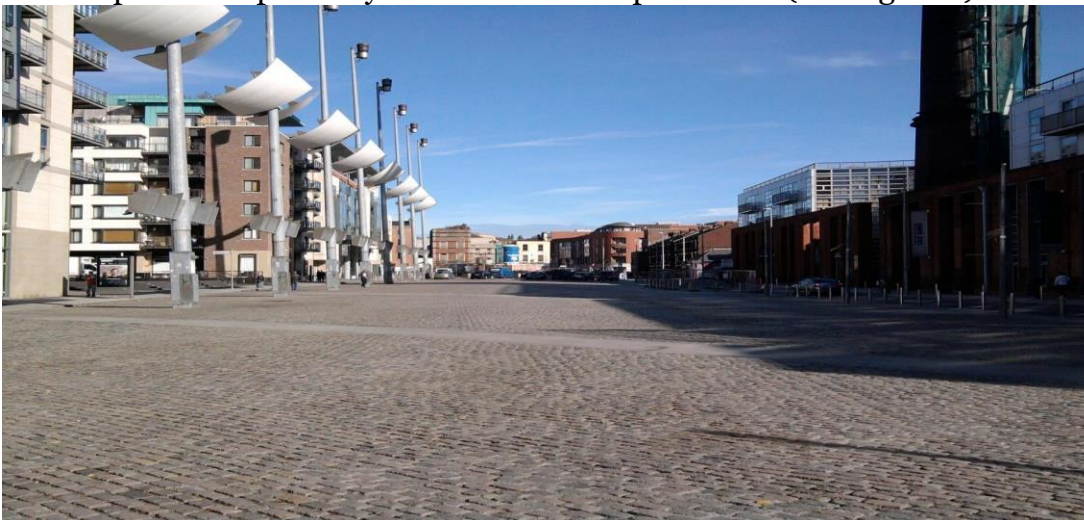


Figure 1. Smithfield Square, 2011.

Smithfield Square is officially known as Smithfield Plaza today, and public documents identify it as a “primary public space” and “tourist destination” (Dublin City Council, 2012, p. 52). Although Smithfield has a long history, the contemporary space is dominated by semiprivate spaces of consumption, including convenience shops, a heritage enterprise, pubs, betting shops, and an art-house cinema. Regeneration changed not only the visual appearance of the space but the local sounds that demarcate space (LaBelle, 2010). The local soundscape became quieter due to a loss of street-level housing and transport and the removal or downsizing of certain productive practices, including the fish and fruit markets. This reduced the pedestrian and commercial traffic in the area and the prevalence of birds that had been attracted to a ready food supply.

During the regeneration project, Ireland was hit by the global financial crisis, and when we conducted this research (2009–2013) many of the apartments were empty and businesses in the area were struggling. Single or shared households of working professionals living in private rented flats dominate the social composition of residents in this redevelopment. Most residents are aged 20–40 years with a small number of preschool children. Most are White Irish, or other Irish, and Polish is the second most spoken language after English. The surrounding areas have older apartments, more local authority housing, and a greater age, social class, and socioeconomic mix (Central Statistics Office, 2011). The redevelopment changed the visual and aural landscape of Smithfield Square and the social composition of the area.

In examining urban regeneration projects, one must also look at ways “in which regeneration policies impact on the lives of socially excluded groups” (Degen & Rose, 2012, p. 3273). No teenagers were consulted in planning this redevelopment project, and few teenagers currently live in the redeveloped square. Yet teenagers are users of the space, walking through it on their way to school, church, or nearby shopping areas to hang out. This is particularly the case for teenagers from workingclass backgrounds who live and play in the city and walk to school. This period of mobility between home and school is as an important time for teenage socialization, because the teens are free from direct supervision and able to develop their social identity and peer relationships (Curtin & Linehan, 2002; Travlou, 2003). Public spaces should provide an accessible space for teenage socialization given that private and semiprivate spaces are often inaccessible for reasons of finance and age. However, Smithfield has been designed to both explicitly and implicitly exclude certain activities and behavior, particularly hanging out by teenagers. Mobile media provide one means of negotiating these designs and afford alternative representational and social spaces.

In the following sections, we provide an overview of the literature on public spaces, sound, and their medicalization by mobile media. Using a range of qualitative research methodologies including sound walks, sound maps, focus groups, and interviews, we explore how teenagers use, understand, and mediatize space. In the conclusion, we reflect on how teenagers’ mobile media use is individualized or socialized depending on the sociospatial and sonic contexts of use.

Public Spaces, Sound, and Media Use

Public space has been defined as low cost, accessible to all, not having requirements to enter, and not socially excluding (Akkar, 2005; Banerjee, 2001; Sennett, 2006). The concept of a public space conjures images of public parks, city squares, and public cultural institutions such as museums. In Dublin, these spaces are free to enter, and, although there are norms of socially acceptable behavior and cultural knowledge, they are not seen as exclusive. These contrast with private spaces such as one’s home and

semipublic spaces such as cafes, bars, and restaurants. However, public spaces in the city are under threat from marketization, privatization, and austerity. Membership, rules, and gatekeepers increasingly regulate access to pitches in public parks. Billboards display rules that are policed by video cameras. The ubiquitous “no games allowed” signs signal the need to move on rather than to hang out. Contemporary public spaces are often peppered with semiprivate spaces offering licensed services for sale to those who can afford them.

Public spaces exist because of the historical development of places where inhabitants could assemble and get fresh air (Holland, Clark, Katz, & Peace, 2007). A public space is a political space, a place in which people can gather to debate, dispute, even become active in political dissent, as well as a space for leisure (Cele, 2013; Houlstan-Hasaerts, Tomine, Nikšič, & Goličnik Marušić, 2012; Lefebvre, 1972). Harvey (2008) argues that the right to the city as a public space is “a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization” (p. 23). In the redesign of public space, these freedoms often disappear, because the desires of public planners rarely “match the requirements of the fulfillment of the right to freedom of assembly” (Parsa, 2012, p. 33). Augé (2009) argues that a place “which can no longer be defined as relational, or historical or concerned with identity will be a non-place” (p. 63). He suggests that supermodernity produces nonplaces that do not integrate earlier identities and memories—they are spaces designed with ends in mind (e.g., transport, transit, commerce, leisure) and often interact with users only through signs and orders.

If we think of public spaces only in terms of buildings and squares, we are adopting a geometric approach to space. Lefebvre’s (1972, 1992) work provides a more relational and social approach to the production of space. His triadic approach to space as the relationship between representations of space, representational spaces, and spatial practice proposes that even when designers and architects design public spaces to suggest particular ways of living (e.g., representations of space), there is still scope for alternative ideas and spatial practices to develop from the lived experiences of inhabitants and citizens. For him, “representational spaces” are the space of ideas and imagination that users experience. They are spaces as “directly lived through its associated images and symbolisms” (Lefebvre, 1974, p. 39). Representational spaces can include, we suggest, users creating their own soundscapes, content, and practices to reinterpret or blur their experience of space. For Lefebvre, the triad of perceived–conceived–lived spaces is interconnected, and thus spaces can be understood only by bringing all three together. Lefebvre contends that the production, reproduction, and representation of space need to be explored from a historic and a contemporary perspective. This is a key part of this study, which explored two different generations of users of the Smithfield area: those who lived there as teenagers during the 1940s to 1950s and contemporary teenagers. For the teenagers in this research, mediation practices have allowed them create acoustic bubbles, which allow them to overlay their physical world with a virtual aural space. In this way representational space is the space “imagination seeks to change and appropriate” (Lefebvre, 1974, p. 39).

Similarly, de Certeau (1988) argues that, although users might not be able to change the overall physical design, purpose, or governance of a public space, they can develop strategies to negotiate and adjust their engagement with it. For teenagers, mediatizing space is one way of negotiating and appropriating space as they walk. This allows them to claim a form of ownership through an ephemeral layer of digital information, which sublimates the adult city. By walking and mediating public spaces, they take control

of spaces, which they may be able to both enjoy and modify. They can change the spatial meaning of a space and, in turn, create a place (Carter, Donald, & Squires, 1994).

Sound Spaces

One important aspect of understanding how people engage with spaces in the city is the city's soundscape. A soundscape can immerse a person (Schafer, 1993), and removing it can fundamentally change a space's meaning. Sounds can be distinctive markers of spaces and places and evocative reminders of past places, events, and practices (Cain et al., 2008). Lefebvre (1992) writes about the "polyrhythms" of the city, and Bull (2008) suggests that sounds both move and remove us. Yet redevelopment plans and city policy are preoccupied with sound as a physical and scientific object and with measuring its amplification. Both Thompson (2004) and Bijsterveld (2004) have argued that the drive to measure sound levels in cities is located in political and social constructs of the working class. Noise was associated traditionally with working-class areas, and quiet with middle- and upper-class areas.

Sound studies often explore how technologies enable those with sufficient resources to sound away from, or filter out, urban soundscapes, noise, and other people. People can create personal soundscapes and neutralize the chaos of urban space by using cars and headphones (Bull, 2000); at the very least, they can "tune out" (Beer, 2007). In the 1970s, Raymond Williams (1974) noted that broadcasting seemed to encapsulate both the virtual mobility of modern life and the more atomized urban domestic life of families. He used the term "mobile privatization" to capture the social phenomenon. In the 1980s, this concept was applied to a study of the Sony Walkman (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997), and in the 2000s, it was the mobile phone and mobile music technologies (Bull, 2008, 2011).

Whereas the Walkman and the iPod were largely seen as individualizing technologies of privatization, recent studies have shown that mobile technologies such as smart phones can be used to create "networked individuals" (Castells & Cardoso, 2006), new forms of networked sociality (Lee, Leung, Qiu, & Chu, 2012; Papacharissi, 2012), and "networked publics" (boyd, 2007). This might be at the cost of privacy, time, and attention/money, but studies of mobile media use note that they are used to create a sense of inclusion, "warmth" (Bull, 2008), and agency within what are seen as exclusionary spaces. Mobile sound technologies are used to create alternative spaces and temporary places. They are used to fill sonic gaps and filter particular sounds. Mediated listening alters the experience of space and time, transforming how we engage with the social world (Bull, 2000; Hagood, 2011). Mobile technologies are used to deal with anxieties, absences, and disconnection (Elliott & Urry, 2010) as much as they are used for the creation of individual and collective identity. Whereas the mobile aspect of such technologies is important, they can be deployed similarly in stationary settings such as homes or schools (Fortunati, 2006), and for "immobile socialization" (Bakardjieva, 2003; Ito, 2005). For most urban teenagers, mobile media practices are inherently responsive to their experiences of public and private spaces (Yang & Kang, 2005). What is crucial is to analyze how mobile media are used and how they change the experience of public, semiprivate, and private spaces.

The rapidity with which mobile media have become normalized and domesticated in Western industrialized youth culture is part of the broader mediatization of everyday life (Couldry, Madianou, & Pinchevski, 2013). Globally, mobile media is increasingly prevalent among young people, though we do recognize that certain social conditions can limit availability and access within certain communities (Agar, 2005; Beger & Akshay, 2012; Scurato, 2012). Media technologies provide teenagers with new

sensorial experiences, which fundamentally change how they perceive space and time (Couldry, 2008). They also shape everyday rituals and practices.

Thompson (1995) uses the term *mediatization* to capture the influence that media technologies and institutions had on “patterns of communication and interaction” and on the development of social formations more generally (p. 46). For Couldry (2012), mediatization is about not only the influence of media in all spheres of life but the emergence of new types of complex causality. Mediatization is a metaprocess that focuses attention on how media are an important dimension of social processes. Mediatization takes us beyond the technology to focus instead on wider processes of social change. Mobile media can be used to mediate public and private spaces and to challenge forms of control, but they also can be used to trace, identify, and target users. To understand how people engage with public spaces, especially ones we walk through, we argue that one needs to examine not only designed spaces but how people navigate and create their own representational spaces. In this article, we focus on how teenagers use mobile media to negotiate public spaces. If everyday mobility between home and school is an important socialization time for teenagers (Cele, 2013; Curtin & Linehan, 2002), do public spaces encourage any particular forms of communication, socialization, or mobilism (Stald, 2008)?

Qualitative and Mobile Methods

This project combined conventional qualitative methods such as focus groups and interviews with more mobile methods from the fields of art and sound research, including sound walking, sound mapping, and the use of participant-generated image and audio recordings. The project underwent university ethical review and adhered to professional best practices in working with teenagers and data.

Three distinct strands of qualitative research inform this article:

1. A mobile autoethnography of the Smithfield area by one of the authors, who conducted sound walks at different times of the day, took photographs, and made extensive field notes;
2. A weekly one-hour session over one academic year with 84 teenagers (ages 15 to 16) from four local secondary schools. These included 12 accompanied group sound walks in Smithfield and 13 focus group discussions as detailed below;
3. Five semistructured interviews with older participants (ages 55 to 70) who lived in the Smithfield area in their youth.

All participants in this project were chosen for their relatively close connection to, and knowledge of, the Smithfield area. There are four schools within a three-kilometer (about two-mile) radius of the Smithfield area in the north inner city of Dublin, and all four agreed to participate. The researchers negotiated access with the principals of each school and gained parental and participant consent. The researchers ran the weekly sessions with the teenagers without teacher involvement. No compensation was offered to participants.

The sample included three public schools and one private school, and all were gender segregated. The private school charged fees and was attended by middle- to upper-class teenagers. The private school had good facilities, and some students traveled from the suburbs of Dublin by car or bus to attend. The public schools were free to attend and had a more mixed class and racial profile. Most of the students in the public school walked to school. The three public schools had prefabricated classrooms (which allowed external sounds into the classroom), overcrowding, and large classes with students of mixed abilities. The students were all in “transition” year and therefore had no state exams. Transition year is sometimes used as an entry point for children with weak language or academic skills.

The weekly sessions with the teenagers included a series of modified sound walks (Westerkamp, 2007) lasting about 40 minutes and designed to pass through shopping, market, and housing areas, en route to the Smithfield area (see Table 1). The aim of these sound walks was to encourage the teenagers to become active participants in the project through media documentation. The first sound walk sought to examine what young people listen to while walking the city and to understand what the experience of listening to the environment meant to them. The next walk involved the students working in pairs to visually document with disposable cameras sound-producing objects (e.g., cars, people, and animals). The final sound walk involved again working in pairs and recording the soundscape using a digital recorder.

Table 1. Overview of the Sound Walks, 2011–2012.

School type	Sex	N	General sound walk	Photographic sound walk	Audiorecorded sound walk
Public	Girls	23	March 8, 2011	March 16, 2011 (a2)	March 23, 2011 (a3)
Public	Girls	20	September 23, 2011	September 30, 2011 (b2)	October 7, 2011 (b3)
Private	Boys	21	January 18, 2012	January 25, 2012 (c2)	February 1, 2012 (c3)
Public	Boys	20	January 19, 2012	January 26, 2012 (d2)	February 2, 2012 (d3)

A series of 13 focus groups were conducted with participants to discuss their media use (see Table 2), the sounds that they heard in different parts of the city, and their understanding of the differences between noise, silence, and sound. These focus groups took place once a week and lasted 45 minutes. During the discussions, the group created sound maps and sound pyramids and discussed mediated listening practices and the soundscapes of their homes, neighborhoods, schools, Dublin city, and Smithfield. They also explored the differences between noise and sound as well as what constituted positive or negative sounds. These discussions highlighted what impact certain soundscapes had on their mediated listening practices.

Table 2. Focus Groups, 2011–2012.

Group	Number of students	Date
Group A girls		

13	19 ^b	March 16, 2011
14	5	April 6, 2011
12	5	April 16, 2011
Group B girls		
10	5	October 7, 2011
11	5	November 14, 2011
8	5	November 25 2011 (1)
9	5	November 25, 2011 (2)
Group C boys		
1	5	February 9, 2012
3	4	February 23, 2012
2	4	March 22, 2012
Group D boys		
6	5	March 15, 2012
7	4	March 16, 2012
4	5	March 29, 2012 (1)
5	5	March 29, 2012 (2)

^b The size of the first focus group occurred as a result of miscommunication between the researchers and school staff. Although too large for a focus group, the discussion was recorded and proved useful. Finally, we conducted five in-depth semistructured interviews with people who had lived in the Smithfield area and environs as children and as young adults. The participants included two women and three men between 55 and 70 years of age. These interviews focused on their sonic memories of the social, cultural, and economic practices in the area and their use of media technologies as youths.

Smithfield as a Public Space: The Meaning of Noise

This section presents our findings about space, place, meaning, and mediatization practices based on data gathered from the younger participants. We include findings from focus groups, sound walks, audio and visual documents, and everyday experiences. Lefebvre argues that, although top-down designs play an important role in the creation of spaces, we can only understand social spaces by examining lived and perceived spaces by inhabitants. For example, streets, pathways, housing, and businesses are built to move people and goods through spaces in particular ways. However, as communities develop, their response to such planning is often to counteract these through minor acts of spatial rebellion—for example, gathering at street corners instead of parks. Residents may mark a space either through physical means such as graffiti or sensory means with sounds and noise. In this way a *space* becomes a *place* to locals.

Many urban studies rely on photographs, maps, and transcriptions of individual and group experiences. To this we added an explicit focus on the urban soundscape. During the focus group sessions, the students created both sound maps and sound pyramids to represent the varying soundscapes they experienced in the city. The sound pyramids allowed the students to develop alternative representations of Dublin city and to explore city sounds in terms of layers. The students were asked to see the bottom layer of the pyramid as the space for sounds that are constantly around them, and the top layer as sounds that are heard less frequently. Their description of the sounds of the city highlighted an

awareness of the impact of architecture, roads, people, construction, parklands, and so forth on the production and consumption of sound.

The Teenage Ear View: Dangerous Sounds and Silent Spaces

The teenagers noted that the main retail streets in the north inner city of Dublin contain the sounds of traffic, music from shops, seagulls, shoppers, walkers, buskers, street sellers, and beggars. Sounds that are more intermittent include emergency vehicles, the tram, and church bells. Pedestrianized streets have less traffic but can still be noisy spaces. The center of the city has a rhythm punctuated by deliveries, rush hours, shopping hours, work, leisure, and emergencies. This rhythm is localized by street. For the teenage participants, natural sounds as well as electronic and mechanical sounds are analogous to one another in the Dublin city soundscape. LaBelle (2010) argues that traffic sounds become their own rhythm, weaving in and out of other sonic entities in the city. They are not simply background sounds, but “overlapping singular spatialities that are neither wholly random nor neatly discreet” (p. 132). For our teenage participants, traffic sounds do not dominate the largely pedestrianized city center where the sounds of consumption and street performers mix; rather, they surround the city in an appropriate soundscape. When walking through the main shopping streets of Dublin city center, the participants described the area as filled with music playing from shops. These sounds are the synthetic music-mediated spaces of shops; what Sterne (1997) has referred to as apparatuses, designed not to disseminate music but to encourage consumption. There was a general sense that a city is noisy and that one must adapt to it and that the sounds of a city are necessary; they give a city meaning—the louder it is, the busier and more productive. Teenagers from the private school in particular noted that noise signaled productivity and sounds that one must adapt to. For most participants, mechanical, electrical, technological, and synthetic sounds are seen as a phenomenological projection of the productive and consumptive practices of the city space.

The redeveloped Smithfield Square is a largely pedestrianized public space of modern cobbled stones surrounded by six- and seven-story glass-and-brick-fronted apartment blocks. In comparison to the city center, the lack of activity and people means that it has a low-volume soundscape. Any loud sounds, such as voices shouting or seagull’s cries, are amplified in this relatively quiet space. Most of the young participants found the space uncomfortably quiet.

Participant 2: I’d rather a bit of noise, a bit of excitement, rather than just quietness all the time.

Participant 1: I’d rather something happening.

Participant 2: I like something like happening, not just boring and everything, like dead. (Group 2)

When walking the Smithfield area to document it for the research project, most of the teenagers kept close to the edge of the space, preferring to keep away from the quiet center of the square. They remarked after their walk that they found that because there were no sounds in the center, there was no point in positioning themselves there. In fact, they remarked that, although they were familiar with the area in general, they were surprised at how quiet it actually was when they actively listened. They reflected that the lack of business or community was emphasized by this silence. For the young participants, the quiet of Smithfield was not a city sound; it offered no information on how to behave in the space. Because the square was so big, with large walls of concrete and glass, sound bounced off various sources, making it difficult to locate. The audio recordings that were made during the sound walks do, however, reveal more key observations of sound than when they walked in the busier parts of the cities. Because they had to listen and look harder for sounds and their sources, the participants actually recorded more detailed sounds in Smithfield than in the city center. The quiet of Smithfield

led them to describe the area as not part of the city, and as having no function. If one can hear individual sounds within a space, then that space is too quiet; this quietness is associated with no activities, social or productive. For the young participants, a city is a space filled with sounds. A space without loud and continuous sounds is defined as not part of the city, or as having no meaning or purpose—a nonplace in the sense defined by Augé (2009). Loud or “buzzy” soundscapes create a larger space of protection in which the young participants feel safe, particularly if they are alone.

Interviewer: So, then, do you find town noisy?

Group: Yeah, no.

Interviewer: No?

Group: You don’t notice it, but when I think about it, it is very noisy, especially the amount of cars on the road.

Interviewer: Do you think that it should be?

Group: Yeah, I’d rather it noisy, ’cause then you feel safe, you really do.

Group: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: Really?

Group: Yeah, and do you know if you’re out late, there’s still sounds in the street of cars, there’s no quiet area, it feels safe. (Group 9)

This concept of safety appeared throughout the research, particularly as it relates to sound. The presence of large groups of teenagers in public areas and the sounds they produce act like a protective net around the group. If they cannot meet in large groups, the participants stated that they would, instead, use their homes and bedrooms to socialize. With no defined spaces for teenagers within Smithfield or the surrounding area, they would instead hang out in the in-between spaces, such as doorways of public buildings, laneways, and street corners, using sound to create both an acoustic barrier and an architecture of enclosure. These spaces allow for the close reflection of sounds, or discreet echoes; their sound is not lost or amplified as it is in big, empty spaces. Several CCTV cameras are in Smithfield Square, and teenagers had a sense of constant surveillance. Any loud sounds produced by teenagers had the potential to attract both technological and human attention.

Although teenagers occupy in-between spaces to “create their own identities,” they are always in danger of being moved on “as adults’ spatial control becomes stronger” (Travlou, 2003, p. 8). In this way, aside from graffiti as a way of demarcating space, sound becomes a significant factor in demonstrating teens’ use and even ownership of space, even if it is only temporary (Lefebvre, 1974).

Interviewer: When you go out with your friends outside, do you tend to stand in places?

Participant 3: No.

Interviewer: No?

Participant 2: We don’t really like, we were standing at, right the church wall.

Participant 1: We go on a walk or something.

Participant 2: Yeah, you just walk around like, but we were standing at the church and the Garda [Irish police] some of them like, and we were deciding like, standing on Church Road, whether to go up to the playground or go to the park, and all you’re doing is standing there and a Garda goes by and he tells you to move and you don’t even be doing anything. (Group 11)

The “moving on” of teenagers and their exclusion through the design of public spaces has meant increased use of media technologies as a means of socializing (Ito, 2005).

Teenage Tactics for Mediating Urban Soundscapes, 1950s–2000s

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Interviews with a small sample of older people provide some insight into spatial practices and sounds in Smithfield from 1950 to 1970 and how noisy the local soundscape was. They also provide some insights into teenage use of early mobile media technologies. The social and economic conditions of 1950s Smithfield meant that our older interviewees lived in tenement flats with no insulation and with large households. Their flats had thin walls, which meant that the soundscape of the local community was always present in the home. The contemporary mobile music technologies of choice for teenagers were radios and record players, and these altered not only the way teenagers related to music but how and where they listened (Couldry & Hepp, 2013). Having a record player represented the potential to shape or change public and private soundscapes. Having access to one's own music device meant having listening autonomy.

Interviewer: When you got your record player that was yours?

Interviewee: That was mine, yes. That was a special thing to me like, and I would sit for hours listening to the music.

Interviewer: And did you feel that was private for you even if people could hear it?

Interviewee: Yes, yes.

Interviewer: It was just yours?

Interviewee: Yes, I'd say, "Da, are you putting on the radio?" and he'd say no, so can I put on my record player, and I'd sit there listening to the records. (2nd Interviewee)

All the older interviewees had left school at age 13 or 14 and began to purchase records or transistor radios out of their wages. For the older participants, purchasing records or transistors was a large financial investment, often paid for in installments out of their wages. For them music was a reprieve from the shared soundscape of the community. It allowed them an autonomous acoustic space within and outside the home—spaces that were controlled by parental figures, the state, and the church. These media allowed the teenagers to transform aspects of their social world. They gave the teens some local autonomy and also connected them to international music trends; music was both cultural commodity and cultural capital (du Gay et al., 1997). Being able to purchase records gave these teens not only access to contemporary pop music but a form of cultural capital. This form of immaterial cultural capital was converted into a type of knowledge capital (Bourdieu, 1993; Czerniewicz & Brown, 2012), whereby the owner of music had access to lyrics and information, which they exchanged for other lyrics and band information. Teenagers would gather at street corners, at the side of a canal near Smithfield, or on stairwells in tenement blocks and listen to music and audio from international radio stations.

After the record player was a little transistor, so I would go out to the hallway and sit there and pick up Radio Caroline and Radio Luxembourg on the transistor. But you couldn't just pick it by sitting there; you had to put it up against a piece of steel so it earthed and gave you an aerial system to pick up the signal, . . . it was great. (2nd Interviewee)

Castells and Cardoso (2006) explore how contemporary mobile technologies come into conflict "with existing customs." Our interviewees would suggest that this is not a new issue; mobile music technologies in the 1950s afforded new forms of mobility and autonomy from crowded noisy spaces. They enabled our interviewees to negotiate family boundaries, create new forms of face-to-face socializing, and control their local soundscape. Similarly, the contemporary teenagers in our study used mobile media to create local representational spaces and to mediate spaces that they found exclusionary, threatening, or too quiet.

For most of the contemporary teenage participants, Smithfield today is too quiet, and the quiet amplifies intermittent sounds they consider negative. During the focus group discussions, the teenage participants defined Smithfield as “nothing” and “real quiet” in comparison to the rest of the city. One participant described local sounds as threatening, and these included emergency service sounds, drug addicts shouting, and children from enclosed flat complexes crying. Mediating this silence with mobile technologies created a sense of safety for them. Audio technologies are used to bridge spaces that had no relevance. In contrast, their homes (most of the public school teenagers lived in council flats) were defined as quite loud or noisy with “my next-door neighbor has two kids you can hear them screaming sometimes” (Participant 5, Group 7d). Equally, the sounds of emergency services were a constant for these inner-city teenagers.

Participant 5: I hate ambulance and police.

Participant 3: Aw yeah.

Participant 2: I hate that.

Participant 1: Yeah.

Participant 2: Like in the middle of a nice day and if you're asleep and it's deafening and the police just fly past my window.

Participant 1: I hate that, I like the noise of town, but I hate when addicts are shouting. (Group 10)

One of the tactics available to teenagers to respond to noisy domestic spaces, transitory spaces, or quiet public spaces is to mediate through them and create their own representational spaces. When the participants place earbuds in their ears, they add a new wall of sound to an existing soundscape, and this sound encloses and immerses them in a continuous, often musical, soundscape into which only certain sounds intervene. Blesser and Salter (2009) call this “an acoustic bubble.” This enables the teenagers to change their spatial experience and create personal soundscapes and individualized representational spaces.

Interviewer: Do you put on your headphones and listen to music anywhere in particular?

Group response: If you're walking somewhere.

Participant 5: When you're walking.

Participant 2: I don't know, it just gives you a sense of, you're not on your own or something [nervous laughter]. (Group 9)

Putting on music and headphones allows teens to create an acoustic bubble that removes them from the everyday soundscape. The surrounding area of Smithfield contains few economic activities, so apart from the discreet loud sounds mentioned by the teenage participants and the local light rail system, there are few meaningful consistent sounds. Lefebvre suggests that the rhythm of a place is connected to work practices, community, or socializing and that this makes a *space* a *place*. When a space no longer contains these types of rhythms, there is little meaning. Mobile media enables teenagers to create their own meaningful spaces.

The private school students stated that Dublin city was just one soundscape, where it is not possible to easily access “the beach or fields or anything” for a different, more “enjoyable” soundscape (Group 4d). For these teens, access to quiet spaces was important, and they argued their home soundscapes were quiet. On the other hand, the “noise” of emergency services in the city was something that people just adapted to. This contrasted with the views of the public school teenagers. While there are clear problems defining a social class by the type of housing they live in, the material experiences of our participants varied considerably. Wright (2004) argues that class is “defined in terms of material standards of living,

usually indexed by income or, possibly, wealth” (p. 3). Our participants had different access to education resources, housing, and material goods, and their use of different technologies highlighted these material differences.

These material differences shaped their descriptions and relations to the urban soundscape and their media practices. All the teenage participants had mobile technologies, but the importance of these technologies to the public and private school participants differed. The public school boys did not like talking on phones or taking and sharing pictures; instead, they texted a lot and used music as a way to kill time before meeting friends. The private school boys always downplayed the importance of their mobile technology, with some stating that their phones or mobile media devices such as MP3 players were not that important in their everyday lives. All stated that on long journeys and in quiet spaces within the city music helped pass the time or make them feel safe. The public school girls stated that their mobile phones provided a safety link between them and a parent and a communication link with friends.

Otherwise, they would be “afraid that I’d be missing out on too much information” (Group 9b).

The contemporary teenagers consider public parks in Dublin city as spaces for little kids and families, and they are prohibited from gathering in some public city parks. Their mediation was mostly privatized and individualized. They would listen to music to mediate away from spaces they considered threatening. The relative silence of certain areas of the city amplified sounds considered threatening, such as “robbed cars,” “car crash(es),” and “junkies screaming.” This reflects the types of housing and the positioning of their homes within public housing areas, where most of the public school participants lived. The teenagers would mediate away from these “silent” spaces until they reached the busy shopping center full of sounds of people and music from shops. They rarely mediated in the center of the city; for them, the city soundscape is a positive noise.

Conclusion

This research project found that teenagers engage in various mobile and immobile media uses to negotiate public and private boundaries and create new forms of cultural capital and meaningful spaces. For contemporary teenagers, mobile media use of smart phones not only affords the creation of acoustic bubbles of individualized and privatized listening experiences but offers the safety of synchronous communication with friends and family. Smart phones enable new forms of mediated sociability that coexist with face-to-face interaction, even in relatively localized contexts. These uses are shaped by material standards of living.

Using audio technologies to mediate space is not a new phenomenon (Sterne, 2003). Both the older and teenage participants from working-class backgrounds used mobile music devices to respond to local noisy urban environments. They variously used record players, transistor radios, and mobile audio and communication media to reappropriate space and negotiate spatial boundaries. They used them to negotiate their sense of exclusion from public spaces and the constant presence of sounds entering their private spheres. Unlike the older participants whose mobile music experiences were often a shared social event, the young participants often listen to music in isolation to create a sense of being occupied, immersed, or removed. Bull (2008) suggests that mobile listening cultures provide a sense of “communicative warmth” in spaces of “urban chill,” and this chill is the inability of social structures or structured forms to satisfy a desire for “proximity and warmth” (p. 6). However, the teenage respondents constantly defined the noisy, loud, and busy city soundscape as a positive, warm space. It

is the chill of urban silence and exclusion that pushes contemporary teens toward mediated socialization and individualized listening, which they conceive of as “warmth.”

These findings further emphasize that context, as well as object and content, is intimately related to mobile media use (Stald, 2008). The urban soundscape is both a positive and negative influence on media use. Teenagers have adapted to the presence of technological sounds in the city, arguing that these sounds—predominantly the sounds of consumption or traffic—are synonymous with the urban. Nevertheless, mediated listening is a tactic used to maintain the “buzz” of the urban soundscape. Participants use audio media technologies to create acoustic bubbles. In so doing, they create new symbolic or representational spaces. These spaces, as argued by Lefebvre, are mobile, and this is important, because it allows teenagers the flexibility to constantly reshape their spatial experiences.

Participants described Smithfield as a space under constant construction but that offers few meaningful cues for teenagers. This does not necessarily mean that young people are explicitly excluded, but that the conception of public space that underpins many urban regeneration projects does not consider their needs and wishes. Mobile media afford them a way to make such spaces meaningful. By placing one’s own soundscape over a physical space, one temporarily creates a meaningful spatial triad, even if this is temporary and individualized. For these participants, when and where they mediated was tied to spatial context. If a space lacked meaning or sounded dangerous (danger was often equated with quietness), listening to music offered a sense of safety and presence. In the space of their homes or schools, mobile mediation offered a sense of autonomy from rigidly controlled spaces and times. For the younger participants (both public and private school participants) mobile technologies allow them to remove themselves from any space, public and private, in the home or outside. However, in their schools and homes, their media use depended on the time of day, the presence of other family members, and their mood.

For Lefebvre (1974), space is defined as having meaning through use; bodies within a space give space this meaning. The habitual presence of bodies within a space “shift from things in space to the actual production of space” (p. 37). In other words, the presence of people, communities, and so on in a space constantly challenge spatial predispositions and notions of temporality. In Dublin, the architecture is both new and old, and there is a history of use and meaning. Rejuvenation projects often attempt to erase this history and create a universal cosmopolitan postindustrial city of business, banking, consumption, and entertainment. Teenagers must battle to define their own meaning and difference in these increasingly homogeneous, controlled, and surveilled spaces. Public space, as in the space between buildings and objects, is open to the introduction of new forms of sound or sonic architecture. These sonic gaps are places to be filled in by people, including teenagers. Young people must fight for “the right to difference, to be different, against the increasing forces of homogenization, fragmentation, and hierarchically organized power” (Lefebvre, 1974, p. 35). Mobile media provide one way for teenagers to negotiate access to public and private spaces and to make them meaningful, if only for a short period of time.

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