

Dipping into the cultural barriers to 'social' media

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For the past two years, and with support from the UPGOAD project, Dr Koen Leurs has been interviewing young Londoners to generate data about how the social media generation deals with cultural differences.

With racism being a particularly worrying trend in recent times, observing youth's relationship with multiculturalism is probably as close as experts can get to crystal ball predictions about where racism is heading. And what better way to do that than to focus on the communication channels they are most fond of?

Young people are known to be the primary target of major social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, where they can easily voice their opinions to friends and followers. The more they do, the

closer they get to the much-envied status of [social media](#) influencer. What is less documented, however, is that a closer look at who follows who can actually reveal valuable information about how [cultural differences](#) are perceived among digitally-active youngsters.

This observation is what led Dr Koen Leurs to move from the Netherlands to London, a city well known for its social media appetite. For the past two years, and with support from the FP7 Marie Curie project UPLOAD (Urban Politics of London Youngsters Analyzed Digitally), Dr Leurs has been interviewing 84 Londoners from 12 to 18 years to generate valuable data about how the social media generation deals with cultural differences.

What are the main objectives of this project?

UPLOAD seeks to understand how young Londoners engage with cultural diversity using social media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. More specifically, the main aim was to investigate how young Londoners (aged 12-18 years) digitally negotiate living together with racially and religiously different people. Developing a comparative approach together with Dr Myria Georgiou, I conducted fieldwork in three London boroughs—Haringey, Hammersmith-Fulham and Kensington-Chelsea—among working class, middle class and (upper) middle class families respectively. Methodologically, the goal was to innovatively mix in-depth interviews with participant observation and creative, digital methods.

What led you to do this research in this area?

When I began conducting research for UPLOAD, urban encounters and multiculturalism on social media were yet to be put on the scholarly agenda, and we needed a better understanding of two entangled

processes: living together with difference in urban environments and the socio-political relevance of everyday internet use among young people.

As social media and mobile devices have become an important part of young people's everyday lives, there is an urgency to gain greater insights into whether their use of internet applications corroborates pan-European sentiments of failed multiculturalism and ethnic segregation or whether their experiences instead foster intercultural dialogue and cosmopolitan understanding.

What have you learned from your research so far? Is it any different from what you expected?

In the figure I have given you, you can see the Facebook friendship network of Xavier, a 13-year-old London-born Portuguese boy. A few of his contacts live in Portugal, others are Portuguese people living in London, however, the majority of his contacts are local friends of various backgrounds. When discussing these various contacts with him, he said: 'The thing is, especially in a country like this, there are [people from] so many different countries. You can't really discriminate. I prefer to learn.'

We interviewed 84 young Londoners like Xavier. We have just completed transcribing the audiotapes of the interviews and we are currently coding the transcripts to develop theories. As little is known about the topic of digital multiculturalism, we seek to develop new theories and methodologies grounded in the everyday experiences of our informants. Two related insights are worth sharing here, one conceptual and one methodological observation.

Methodologically, we quickly realised that a meaningful study of social media would entail using digital tools to gather data. But we also wanted

to have informants involved in gathering data. So we chose to visualise the Facebook friendships of interviewees active on Facebook, and used this visualisation to have them research their own network. As Xavier's narrative illustrates, this new technique is useful for triggering strong reflections among the informants, as they can participate in making the visualisation and have a say on their own representations.

Conceptually, we found that both white British as well as young Londoners of migrant descent predominantly use social media such as Facebook to connect with fellow young people who live locally. Thus, we realised it is problematic that previous studies on internet use among ethnic minorities mostly focused on transnational communication and encapsulation with co-ethnics and contacts overseas. Social media seem to be a place where [young people](#) befriend other youth who live in their surroundings. A diverse racial or religious composition of their neighbourhood and school is for example reflected in an equally diverse social media friendship network. People commonly post about their cultural background, and social media thus provide a meaningful way for users to learn more about diversity.

What were the main difficulties you faced in your research?

Two main difficulties can be mentioned. First, our plan to conduct interviews with roughly 90 informants was very ambitious. In contrast with the working class area of Haringey where we were greatly assisted by parents, local councils, youth workers, youth clubs and libraries, upper middle class families in Hammersmith-Fulham and Kensington-Chelsea were reluctant to get involved. It is important to reflect on the implications of an apparent reluctance in richer families to participate in research.

Secondly, and although very exciting, this research project illustrates the tough balancing acts required when pursuing an academic lifestyle. My wife and I took up the challenge to move to London so that I could start the study only five weeks after we welcomed our son into our family. Luckily my new colleagues, my family members and my friends were very supportive.

You chose to focus on London. Why? Do you think your results are likely to apply to the rest of Europe?

As more than half of the world's population live in cities, empirically-grounded insights into multiculturalism in the city are important, especially given the recent upsurge of racialisation, discrimination and religious extremism across Europe.

London is an illustrative case in point, as more than 50 % of the population are from ethnic minorities. Although London has its own particular dynamics, our findings are illustrative for larger urban cities across Europe and they can inform policies around cultural diversity and migration.

What do you think could or should be done to turn social media channels into real platforms for cultural exchange?

Our study shows that young Londoners already use social media as platforms for cultural exchange. Like in the offline context, ethnic strife and violence is an exception to the rule. When the 2011 BlackBerry Messenger London riots happened in Tottenham, newspaper headlines such as 'Is technology to blame for the London riots' and 'These riots were about race. Why ignore the fact?' indicate that the two issues of race and digital technologies were singled out as key drivers of the riots.

New technologies and race however do not lead to chaos. Nor can social media platforms themselves drive intercultural understanding. It is the users themselves who choose to use social media as loci for cosmopolitan encounters. It is up to us researchers to be attentive to this dynamic, and in their everyday social media use young Londoners bridge racial and religious differences by maintaining intercultural friendships.

Now that the project is getting close to its end, what would you like to do next?

A small group of the young Londoners interviewed came to the UK as asylum seekers. Hearing their experiences about using the internet to carve out a livelihood in London, I realised there was a lot to learn about the European social media/forced migration nexus. In future research, I aim to explore to what extent digital practices of young asylum seekers reflect their human rights, and especially their digital communication rights. Also, and of particular urgency for the EU, I will seek to better understand in particular how asylum seeker youth engage in informal networked learning to gain the cultural capital needed for successful migration and acculturation.

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