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Scrolling down the line – a few notes on using Instagram as point of access for graffiti research

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Abstract

This article discusses using social media, here Instagram, as a point of access in studies on subcultural graffiti, so as to provide an established arena for initiating contact with a variety of participants. Drawing from an ongoing ethnography of Swedish graffiti writers, the approach presented here works to mitigate the often so major hurdle within ethnographic work on sub-cultural groups: that of access, not only to the field, but also to the diversities and peripheries of that field. Actively exploring diversities and interactions through social media as part of a larger methodological frame opens up an innovative investigation of plural subcultural scripts of what and how and where the subcultural should be, that can then be assessed and explored through other methodological means. As such it also provides the researcher with the means to ground parts of the analysis in how and where the participants themselves present their subcultural activity.

Keywords: Ethnography, Access, Instagram, Graffiti, Subculture,

It started by coincidence. Of course it did. Most creative ventures do. In late 2013, as I was preparing for an research application on how graffiti writers in Sweden conceive of, and make use of, urban space, I started posting more and more pictures of graffiti on my Instagram account. Initially for the sole reason that it was all I Photographed during that time: I was riding my bike to tunnels and walls along the lines, went to hall of fames, started mapping and analyzing tags in the city center, and spent a lot of time benching at the local train station waiting for newly painted panels to roll by. The direct consequence of this was that the thirty friends who originally followed my personal account for the most part unfollowed me, and close to a thousand graffiti writers started to follow me instead. Still, there was no plan behind it, besides childishly basking in the small amount of attention I got. Plus it was fun to follow writers back, and see their work. Instagram is today an integrated part of the graffiti subculture. In many ways it has surpassed graffiti magazines as the major media for consuming graffiti (Jacobson, 2015:102). More so, graffiti on Instagram is not just a representation of graffiti, as in merely consuming it, it constitutes a vital part of producing graffiti: Writers do graffiti, Photograph it, and even if they themselves do not post it on Instagram, someone else often will (Glaser, 2015). It has come to the point that some writers

openly discourage others from posting pictures of their work without asking them first. In many ways, Instagram is a perfect medium for graffiti, its image-based flow and short comment feeds stimulate discussions between participants who sometimes know each other and at other times do not. It features discussions on style, risk, frequency, visibility, but also encouragements through ‘likes.’ The service itself is sort of a digital equivalent to the subcultural ride-through gallery of trackside graffiti. Only that it is vertical in its flow rather than horizontal: Scrolling down your Instagram flow is in many ways similar to riding the train and keeping track of the pieces, throws, and tags passing by. More so, similar to seeing trackside graffiti from the train, your visual perception is bounded by a framed screen, making close inspections and different angles limited – all in all, blurring the line between the online and offline dimensions of graffiti.

Which brings me back to the coincidence. As usual when doing qualitative research on subcultural groups, things do not exactly work out the way you originally had planned. The aim of my research project is to explore whether there are structured differences among graffiti writers in regard to how the ‘where,’ ‘what,’ ‘how,’ and ‘why’ of graffiti are defined, communicated, and acted upon by writers.

Subcultural heterogeneity within graffiti has been addressed before (cf. Castleman, 1982; MacDonald, 2001; Halsey and Young, 2002; Shannon 2003) but has been done so from either a demographic perspective, or in terms of stages of subcultural development, or as a dichotomy between the legal and art-oriented on the one hand, and the illegal and vandalizing on the other. Less focus has been on whether there are plural structures of meaning providing multiple subcultural authentications and emplacements (Hannerz, 2015). If there are indeed plural subcultural structures of meaning within graffiti then what are the consequences for how writers interpret and act upon these structures? Accordingly, I wanted to follow and interview different kinds of graffiti writers on the basis of spatial differences, as in where they predominantly write, so as to investigate whether they enacted similar perceptions of what and where graffiti should be.

Enter the dilemma. For when I started preparing for interviews I reluctantly had to admit to myself that despite my initial fieldwork I was going to have problems of access to the field – especially so if I wanted to explore plural subcultural notions of authenticity, as that would inevitably require plural access points. Now, even though ethnography is somewhat obsessed with access – most handbooks for example start by discussing it at length – ethnographies on subcultural groups are less so. Access is too often assumed as self-evident due to the researcher already having a relation to the field, most often as a prior participant (cf. Hodkinson, 2005:144; Haenfler, 2004b:788; Force, 2009:294; Hancock and Lorr, 2013:325f, too name but a few). This is a highly problematic stance that I have discussed at length elsewhere (Hannerz, 2015), what will suffice for now is to say that access must not be taken for granted, as it refers to a multi-layered negotiation of proximities and distances, as well as trust between the researcher and the researched. Which brings us back to my initial problem, because graffiti writers are different to the punks I had previously studied. Mainly because what they do is often illegal. It was not that easy that I could go to a new city visit a few shows, identify different kinds of participants on the basis of their hair styles, shoes, and band shirts, and then start from there. Despite the official information provided by Swedish police authorities, transit companies, and local officials on how graffiti writers look (Kimvall 2012), most writers do not fit the stereotype of

the hip-hop clad paint-stained youth. Surprise. Rather most of the time during my fieldwork it has been nearly impossibly to spot who is a writer and who is not. For the most part, I did not even know where to look for participants in the first place (cf. MacDonald, 2001:55). As one of informants later noted in relation to security guards trying to catch writers red-handed along the train tracks:

I mean even if I as a writer would go out along the line to find someone who painted along the line I would never succeed in doing so, even if we tried to make it to a place that we know gets painted a hell of a lot. I mean, and we do have a lot of knowledge and insight. (GAS1-2015)

Seeing this problem of finding participants I could of course focus on the few writers I had already met in relation to my fieldwork and then go from there. For example I frequented different open walls, participated in graffiti workshops, and went to jams and gallery shows. Yet it did little in terms of granting me access to different subcultural settings, especially access that lasted beyond those temporary meetings. And to be honest, even at such events I had problems of spotting who was a writer and who was not. I guess I could have just started writing intensively myself, but still, as I wanted to access different groups of writers even that would have been restricting in terms of access.

The solution struck me as rather evident when one graffiti writer contacted me through Instagram to ask for a Photo I had posted: Would it not be a good idea to simply make use of already established contacts I had with writers on Instagram, and contact writers through it? By then my followers had grown way beyond 800, and I exclusively posted different kinds of graffiti that I had come across during my fieldwork and journeys. More so, writers commented on my pictures and I commented on theirs, so contacting them seemed like a small step to take. Come to think of it, I already had access to multiple settings, yet it was only when I moved my feet that I could see the ground I was already standing on. So I began communicating with writers through Instagram based on my field notes on how writers distinguish and define subcultural categories: At first, on a spatial basis, contacting those who seemed to mainly paint trains, walls along the track, or those who mainly bombed the inner city. I did so through personal direct messages in which I introduced my research

and myself, as well as what I was interested in. In turn, this provided me with richer fieldwork, and as I expanded the different settings that I wanted to investigate I could then use Instagram once again to access these. The fun pastime had suddenly turned into a valuable methodological tool.

Looking back through my field notes, I never thought of my Instagram habits initially as more than simply just a way to pass on some of the graffiti that I encountered when doing fieldwork. Reflecting upon it now however, I realize that it has had numerous advantages. First of all, it has provided me with a subcultural identity. When I meet writers, they almost immediately ask me, or they the person who introduces me, what I write. Lacking a proper tag, I began telling my Instagram-nick and noticed that increasingly writers seemed to already know something about me through my account. In lack of a proper tag, it gave me a subcultural status, not as a writer, but more as a chronicler (Kimvall, 2014:39). Such a position has helped a lot in approaching writers both off-and online providing me with a liminal subcultural position that transgresses the boundary of inside and outside, as well as across multiple subcultural settings. Second, the shift to using Instagram as a way to access different parts of the subculture and initiating a first contact, has transformed this previous role of a chronicler into one of, what Martin Berg (2015) has called, a participant producer. Even though my nick remains, I am now also Erik the researcher, on the one hand documenting graffiti on Instagram, on the other hand researching it. At the same time, this role of participant producer makes it possible for the prospective interviewees to immediately check up on me in relation to both of these roles. Making the ongoing negotiation of access rather obvious. They can either scroll down my flow, judging me on the basis of a chronicler, or they can google my real name as a researcher. Third, Instagram has provided me with a subcultural equivalent to the—to me, all so familiar—punk show: here is an arena in which many writers openly participate, and where I can easily make contact with writers within different contexts. The first message I send to prospective interviewees is short, presenting myself and my research in a few lines and then asking them that if interested they can just simply type an answer. If not they can just ignore it. So far none has. The second step is then providing information of the study, what the data will be used for and how I will treat their anonymity. As part of this, I can quickly

address their questions and concern. After this we can agree to meet somewhere and I can send them a Photo of me so that they can check up on me in person, before approaching me at the meeting point. And they sometimes do, watching me from a distance together with their friends, or so they have told me. Fourth, and in direct relation to the above, this way of using Instagram as a point of access means that most often I only know my informants' nick and their tag, I do not have any phone numbers, addresses, email-addresses, or any idea of who they are. Thus I can avoid having to explain from whom I got their number or email, but also the risk of revealing them to the outside is minimal. It is a simple and rather evident way of making an initial contact, similar to introducing myself to a writer at an open wall. Fifth, given Instagram's image-based flow, as well as the possibility to easily explore what people like and follow, it constitutes an interesting means to explore subcultural spatiality and authenticity. It does not only give an insight into the different wheres and hows of graffiti, the comments and hashtags also provide interesting roads into the many whys and whats.

Having said that, I want to end this essay by pointing out that this approach, similar to seeking out punks at punk shows or writers at an open wall, of course has its disadvantages. As Kathy Charmaz (2006:20) so importantly notes, methods are a tool through which we can see some things yet that makes us blind to others. It is important not to take writers on Instagram as a representation of the graffiti subculture as a whole. Not every writer is on Instagram, nor do those who are post all of their graffiti. Needless to say, I also interview and follow writers who are not on Instagram, and I also do extensive fieldwork beyond the sometimes so restricting screen. My sampling of participants for example, including those who are contacted through Instagram, is based on a combination of all of these ways of exploring subcultural differences. My access to the field is thus always worked: it relies on what I do and say, as much in the field and during interviews, as on what I post on Instagram. Accordingly it is a never-ending methodological project. My point here is rather that as used as part of a larger methodological frame that involves fieldwork and interviews, using Instagram as a point of access does provide an established arena for contact that should at least be further considered and developed in research on subcultural groups. The approach

presented here works to mitigate the often so major hurdle within ethnographic work on subcultural groups: that of access, not only to the field, but also to the diversities and peripheries of that field (Hannerz, 2015). It opens up an innovative investigation of plural subcultural scripts of what and how and where the subcultural should be, that can then be assessed and explored through other methodological means. As such it also provides the researcher with the means to ground parts of the analysis in how and where the participants themselves present their subcultural activity.

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