

Young Men's Media Participation

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Project summary

This research project studied the gendered social mechanisms and structures governing the media use of Finnish young men, and the values and discourses young men themselves attach to media culture. The project was based on the findings and questions from earlier research projects in research centre COMET and aimed at producing new insights for the current debates around the “men’s issues”, as well as providing new knowledge about young men as a target audience for journalism. Thus, the project participated in the contemporary discussions in the fields of gender studies, cultural studies, media education and social work concerning young men.

Research questions:

- What are young men’s media routines like? What kind of values they attach to media routines?
- What kind of social processes govern these media routines?
- How does media participate in dealing with the emotional processes of growing up as a man?
- How do young men experience their opportunities for media participation?
- What kind of internet communities stand out in the young men’s media culture?
- How are young men addressed as citizens through media?

The empirical material for the project was manifold. The central part of the empiria was formed by the four focus group interviews and four individual interviews with young men of 17 to 25 years of age, conducted in different parts of Finland. Another important empirical material was gathered through media-ethnographic observation and analysis of six internet communities especially popular among boys and young men, between spring 2013 and autumn 2014. A particular focus was on the Brony phenomenon, ie. the adult male fans of the children’s animated television series *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, and on the public discussions surrounding this fandom. Empiria of “young men’s voices” was also provided by the data gathered in collaboration with Väestöliitto (The Family Federation of Finland) and their Center for Boys and Young Men: this data consisted of detailed notes of boys’ phone calls for the Telephone Service for Boys. These notes were analyzed in collaboration with the counsellors working for the telephone service. In addition, two former editors-in-chief of men’s lifestyle magazines were interviewed to provide insight about the attempts to address young men as a target group.

This qualitative empirical research design sought to locate and analyze the discourses around young men’s media culture, participation and social belonging. The findings support the notions made also by several earlier studies on young people’s media use: the connection with the society and the public is increasingly formed via multi-faceted use of the internet, through “being online” (cf. Nick Coulry’s concept of “the myth of the mediated centre”).

Online, the public and the private are intertwined, and personal and mass communication get mixed on the screen of the computer or a mobile device. Media texts get articulated in connection to each other: the social media environments, Web TV, online journalism and all kinds of entertainment websites used simultaneously, circulating same contents and commenting on each other. This media palette is constantly monitored and participated in in order to stay informed about what is “going on”.

Television and print media are only secondary media routines for young men. However, fairly traditional views of the “good citizen’s media routines” prevail: newspaper journalism and television (especially public service) current affairs programmes are repeatedly mentioned as something that one should do more. Journalistic professionalism seems to hold its value, but the role of personal activity and critical reading is central for young men’s conception of following the news. Different sources are used to follow different topics, and opinions are pieced together on the basis of the media manifold rather than trusting on single sources.

Consequently, seeking information and keeping up with the surrounding society are closely tied to social networks (and their gendered discourses). Whereas the traditional media are often treated quite critically, e.g. questioning the possible ideological backgrounds or level of expertise, the peer media of the internet communities appear simply as “other people”. It can be argued that in the young men’s media culture, this peer-driven internet culture forms a new kind of “mythical centre” aside the traditional media publicity.

The dominant discourses of the popular internet forums are connected to social conventions typical to young men. In media studies, aggressive talk and sarcastic “politically incorrect” humor have been recognized as central building blocks of masculinity in media culture. Also in studies of school boys’ social hierarchies and value-systems the role of irony, humor and social play have been emphasized. In the networked media culture, this social play and sardonic humor maintain communality and guide young men’s habits of circulating, commenting and interpreting current discussions and other media texts.

The public talk about social and cultural position of the male gender has increased during the new millennium, and in Finland several organizations with diverse political and ideological backgrounds have been founded to represent “men’s issues”. The arena for these debates has been found mainly on the internet; in Finland, for example lifestyle magazines for men have not been able to form a cultural sphere for the construction of masculinity. The talk about men has focused on blogs and discussion boards, where the masculinist, anti-feminist discourse has managed to take a foothold and has become very visible. However, this masculinist discourse is only one of the gender landscapes among which young men navigate in the networked media culture. The empiria of this research project portray a diverse array of mediated communities, fan cultures and other sites that become important points of personal attachment. These sites provide space for negotiating one’s masculinity and male identity, taking a stand in relation to cultural gender norms and stereotypes, questioning and ridiculing them, but also drawing positive resources from them.

Publications:

Hautakangas, Mikko (2015): "It's OK To Be Joyful: *My Little Pony* and the Brony Masculinity", *Journal of Popular Television* Vol 3. No. 1 (in press).

Hautakangas, Mikko (2015): "Pojat ja nuoret miehet mediakansalaisina", *Media & viestintä* (in process).

Hautakangas, Mikko (2015): "Iloiset pojat ja värikkäät ponit". In Lauha, Heikki (toim.): *Verkko nuorten kokemana ja kertomana*. Verkko- ja nuorisotyön kehittämiskeskuksen julkaisu (in press).